

The Heart of the Gospel: Gethsemane to the Burial of Christ

Chapter 24: Christ's Side Pierced

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The Jews therefore, because it was the preparation, that the bodies should not remain upon the cross on the sabbath day, (for that sabbath day was an high day,) besought Pilate that their legs might be broken, and that they might be taken away. Then came the soldiers, and brake the legs of the first, and of the other which was crucified with him. But when they came to Jesus, and saw that he was dead already, they brake not his legs: But one of the soldiers with a spear pierced his side, and forthwith came there out blood and water. And he that saw it bare record, and his record is true: and he knoweth that he saith true, that ye might believe. For these things were done, that the scripture should be fulfilled, "A bone of him shall not be broken." And again another scripture saith, "They shall look on him whom they pierced." (John 19:31-37)

Introduction

The account of what occurs after the death of Christ, before he was removed from the gibbet and given to Joseph of Arimathea is peculiar to John. The beloved disciple's record completely ignores the phenomena and reaction to our Lord's death and instead focuses our attention on the Jews' desire to be rid of the three crucified men at Calvary and the discovery that Jesus was already dead. By recording things omitted by the other evangelists, things he saw with his own eyes, John gives us precious information: the soldiers found the Savior already dead; none of the Savior's bones were broken; and, one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear out of which came blood and water. "John describes here a series of Providential facts, omitted by his predecessors, which occurred in quick succession, and which united in impressing on the person of Jesus, in His condition of deepest humiliation, the Messianic seal."¹ As we study John's narrative of these events we will consider: (1) the historical circumstances of the soldier's actions; (2) the main point of the narrative—Jesus is found dead and proved to be dead; (3) John's parenthetic comment as an eyewitness; and (4) the apostle's application of prophecy to these events.

The Historical Circumstances

This scene at Calvary is set up by the Jewish leadership's concerns about ceremonial pollution and the Sabbath day. Because it was the day of preparation (lit. "the preparation"²) the Jewish leadership wanted the Romans to take action so that the bodies of Jesus and the criminals

¹ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:434.

² "The Greek is *paraskeue*. It is identified here as 'the day before the Sabbath.' This is all one word in Greek, *prosabbaton* (only here in the N.T.). Since the Jewish Sabbath was from sunset Friday to sunset Saturday, this was definitely Friday afternoon. It is of interest to note that in modern Greek the sixth day of the week is still called *Paraskeue*. All of this seems clearly to indicate a Friday crucifixion" (Ralph Earle, *Word Meanings in the New Testament*, 49).

could be removed and disposed of before the Sabbath began at sunset on Friday (sometime around 6:00 pm). This was a special concern because not only was the Sabbath approaching, but this Sabbath was a “high day.” This was the Sabbath of Passover week, and thus it was regarded as “very great,” as extra special in the eyes of the Jews. This concern was rooted in Deuteronomy 21:23: “his body [i.e. the corpse of a person executed] shall not remain overnight on the tree, but you shall surely bury him that day, so that you do not defile the land which the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance; for he who is hanged is accursed by God.” If the bodies were not removed the land would be defiled and all the pilgrims who entered the city by walking on the road by Calvary would see that Deuteronomy 21:23 had been disregarded. Therefore, both ceremonial pollution and the reputation of the Sanhedrin were at stake.

Interestingly, once again we see the scrupulousness of the Jewish leaders with regard to the minute details of the law relating to ceremonies and ritual, while the moral laws relating to the just treatment of men are completely disregarded. The consciences of the Sanhedrinists were not pricked at all by the illegal arrest of Jesus, His unjust trial with false witnesses, or the Redeemer’s brutal torture and murder. Their great fear was that the land would be ceremonially polluted by allowing dead men to hang overnight. They were “blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel” (Mt. 23:24); who “neglected the weightier matters of the law” (Mt. 23:23). Their behavior is proof that unregenerate, wicked men may be very careful in the external performance of religious duties. How ethically perverted that they cared for the treatment of the dead but not for the living—what hypocrites!

As a result of this concern, certain representatives of the Sanhedrin went to Pilate to officially request that the legs of those crucified would be broken to hasten death. The Roman practice at that time was to let men die a very slow, lingering death (sometimes taking days) and then leave their bodies on the cross to rot and be devoured by birds.³ This cruel and grotesque custom served as a warning to all criminals and insurrectionists. In the Jewish areas, however, the Romans did allow the Jews to remove victims before sundown for burial (see Josephus, B.J. iv.v.2). Even, in other parts of the empire on special occasions such as the emperor’s birthday, bodies would be taken down and “handed over to the relatives of the condemned for burial.”⁴ Given the fact that Pilate had already condemned an innocent man to death for the Jews and that Jerusalem, at that time, was crowded with Passover pilgrims, the governor was immediately willing to grant their request.

The method used for hastening death was called by the Romans the *crurifragium*. It involved using a heavy iron mallet to crush the legs of the victim. The word used (Greek, *skelokopia*) rendered “break” in most translations “means literally, ‘shiver to pieces.’”⁵ “(It is of interest that the bones of a man crucified in this period, discovered in the area north of Jerusalem, had been broken; one leg was simply fractured, the other was smashed to pieces...).”⁶ Thus, what the Jews requested and Pilate granted was akin to a crushing mutilation of the legs. This would hasten death in at least two ways. First, the use of the legs to push the body up to catch a full breath of air would come to an end. Without the ability to breathe properly the body

³ In England, until the early nineteenth century, the bodies of criminals condemned to death were left hanging by chains on walls or places of execution to rot and be consumed by animals. In Scotland, the heads and hands of prominent Covenanter martyrs (1680-1688) were affixed near city gates for all the citizens to observe.

⁴ J. H. Bernard, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John*, 642.

⁵ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3:368.

⁶ George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 354. Murray references N. Hass, “Anthropological Observations on the Skeletal Remains from Givat ha-Mivtar, IEJ 20 (1970) 38-39.”

would be starved for oxygen and the brain would soon cease to function.⁷ Second, the pulverizing of the bones in the legs would cause severe blood loss and shock.

What is particularly interesting regarding the Jewish leadership's request is that it demonstrates that the signs which accompanied the death of Christ had no effect upon them at all. It is safe to assume that the representatives did not approach Pilate during the three hours of darkness. Further, the Sanhedrinists who made the request of the governor were obviously unaware that Jesus was already dead. Therefore, it is likely that the leaders did not stay for the whole crucifixion, but at some time had departed. The fact that the Savior was already dead when the soldier approached Him indicates that, in spite of the darkness, the torn veil, the great earthquake, the rending of rocky cliffs and the opening of the tombs, the Sanhedrin went about their business as if nothing unusual had happened at all. They assumed the Nazarene was still alive and, even after the amazing signs, were determined to increase His pain and expedite His death. Their opposition and hatred of our Lord was still strong; as far as they were concerned, the more pain and shame they could bring upon Him the better. God's power blocked the sun and split the rocky cliffs, but His Holy Spirit did not split their rocky hearts and turn them into hearts of flesh.

Another noteworthy point is how God used the wicked Jewish leaders to fulfill His sovereign purpose. The Jews' desire to be rid of Christ before the Sabbath resulted in our Lord's burial on Friday, the day He died. If our Lord had not been buried until Sunday or Monday then His famous promise, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (Jn. 2:19), could not have been fulfilled. "How true it is that the wickedest enemies of God are only axes and saws and hammers in His hands, and are ignorantly His instruments for doing His work in the world. The restless, busy meddling of Caiaphas and his companions was actually one of the causes that Christ rose the third day after death, and His Messiahship was proved. Pilate was their tool: but they were God's tools!"⁸ "The Lord needs not miraculous ways and actings whereby to fulfill his purposes, but he may bring about his especial providences and purposes in a very common way, and in the ordinary actions of men; for this purpose of God is fulfilled of their own free accord, upon a clear and rational ground."⁹

Jesus in Found Dead and Proven to Be Dead

After Pilate had granted the Jews request, a soldier was immediately dispatched on horseback or by foot (Golgotha was right outside the city) to notify the centurion of Pilate's orders to expedite the deaths of Jesus and the criminals by crushing their legs. After receiving their orders the soldiers began with the criminals on each side of Jesus.¹⁰ The hammer blows to

⁷ Alfred Edersheim asserts that the breaking of the bones was not for the purpose of hastening death, but rather was "a sort of increase of punishment, by way of compensation for its shortening by the final stroke that followed" (*The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, 613. He cites, *Friedlieb*, *Archaeol. D. Leidensgesch.*, pp. 163-168; but especially *Nebe*, u.s.ii. pp. 394, 395). In this scenario the soldier would come and pulverize the bones of the legs for the purpose of causing excruciating pain. Then, immediately after hammering the legs, he would use a sword or spear to deliver the death blow (the *coup de grace*). While this scenario is possible, there is no mention of the use of a spear in connection with the criminals crucified with Jesus. Further, the spear is used on Christ not to deliver a death blow, but to make sure He was already dead (Jn. 19:32-34).

⁸ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3:367.

⁹ George Hutcheson, *John*, 406.

¹⁰ This interesting detail raises the question: Why did the soldiers approach the Savior last? Some scholars have suggested that perhaps they already knew that Christ was dead. This view is disproved by the simple fact that verse

the legs of these men, no doubt, would have resulted in hideous, blood-curdling screams on the part of these men. We must not forget that the very purpose of crucifixion was cruelty and agony. The soldiers could have dispatched these men with far less pain and horror by means of a sword or spear thrust. But, the Romans wanted their victims to feel themselves die. Note, “The tender mercies of the wicked are cruel” (Prov. 12:10).

It is noteworthy that the criminal who converted to Christ still had to go through terrible suffering before he entered paradise.¹¹ The fact that Jesus forgave his sins and that he was justified before God did not eliminate the civil sentence against him or alleviate the severe bodily pain associated with that sentence. From the penitent criminal’s experience, we should learn two things. First, forgiveness from the Redeemer does not eliminate a person’s responsibility to make restitution, even if that restitution involves the death penalty. When many prominent evangelical leaders recently attempted to have the death penalty overturned of a notorious murderer in Texas who had converted to Christ, they were violating Scripture. Anyone that commits first or second degree murder (regardless of repentance at a later point) must be put to death (Gen. 9:5, 6; Ex. 21:12-14; 23-25; Num. 35:31). Second, when the Savior redeems a believer, He does not deliver him from the pain and suffering commonly associated with the process of dying. A great many notable saints have died horrible deaths as a result of persecution, disease, and the infirmities of old age. Our bodies will be delivered and glorified only at the final resurrection when Christ comes again. If we go through such pain, we must remember that the “extremity of dying agonies is no obstruction to the living comforts that wait for holy souls on the other side of death.”¹²

After the soldiers finished breaking the legs of the criminals, they came to Jesus and saw that He was already dead. Consequently, they did not need to break His legs (v. 33). One soldier, however, decided to thrust a spear deeply into the Savior’s side to make sure that He was dead. As a result of this deep wound, blood and water flowed out our Lord’s side (v. 34). These two verses present three distinct proofs that the Redeemer truly died on Calvary. Each proof is stronger and more irrefutable than the one which precedes it.

The first proof is the trained eye of the soldiers who examined Jesus. These men were professional executioners. It was their job to know when a victim of their work was dead. They examined the Mediator from only a few feet away and could see that He was not breathing or moving at all. He was dead. The second proof is the soldier’s spear thrust deep into the Savior’s side. Since the purpose of the spear thrust was to make sure that our Lord was dead, one can safely assume that the wound inflicted was intended to be a fatal wound. The soldier, who was an expert at dispatching criminals, thrust the spear directly into Christ’s heart. The third proof is the blood and water that flowed out of this wound. The phrase “blood and water” is significant

33 says that they discovered He was dead when they approached Him to breaks His legs. Others have argued that perhaps the criminals’ crosses were set forward, in front of our Lord’s cross. Therefore, the soldiers approached them first. The problem with this view is that even if it was true, a difference of walking a few feet more is not a good explanation of why the Nazarene was approached last. The most logical explanation is that after being terrified by the miracles that attended the Redeemer’s death and proclaiming Him to be the Son of God, the last thing they wanted to do was smash His legs. They dreaded the thought of having to inflict excruciating pain on the One they now regarded as divine.

¹¹ “Scott remarks that those who broke the legs of the penitent thief, and hastened his end, were unconscious instruments of fulfilling our Lord’s promise, ‘Today shalt thou be with me in Paradise’” (J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3:368).

¹² Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:1202.

because it indicates that the Redeemer's heart had already stopped, allowing the red blood cells to descend under gravity.¹³

These irrefutable evidences of our Lord's death are necessary and important because: a) A real death is required for Jesus to be a propitiatory sacrifice unto God. b) Proof of the Mediator's death is necessary in order to prove His resurrection from the dead. Unbelievers, skeptics and heretics throughout history have denied Christ's death on the cross in order to reject His bodily resurrection on the third day. Modernists have developed the idea that Jesus did not really die, but had only passed out (the swoon theory). Then, when He was placed in the cool tomb He revived and recovered enough to escape and show Himself to His disciples. The nature of the crucifixion, the spear thrust, the water and blood, the stone weighing over a ton on the door of the tomb, and the armed Roman soldiers guarding the sepulcher renders all such naturalistic explanations of the resurrection as absurd and impossible. c) The spear thrust and the blood and water refutes all the heretical ideas that plagued the early church that Jesus did not have a genuine human body but was only a spirit being or phantasm.¹⁴

Excursus on the Flow of Blood and Water

Throughout the history of the church there has been a very wide range of opinion regarding the meaning and purpose of the phrase "blood and water." There are many who agree with the present author that John is simply presenting a case to his readers that Jesus, according to His human nature, really died. Therefore, the blood and water is not to be interpreted as a miracle with mystical or allegorical meanings. Many others, however, see deep symbolic meaning behind these words. Some of the most common views are as follows.

(1) A common view in the ancient church, which is still very popular with sacramentalists, is that the idea that the blood and water symbolize the two sacraments: the Lord's supper and baptism. There are a number of problems with this view. First, there is nothing in the immediate or broader context that suggests John is making a symbolic or allegorical connection to the sacraments. Thus, this interpretation is arbitrary and speculative. Second, "the term 'blood' is never *by itself* used in the NT as a designation of the Lord's Supper."¹⁵ Third, this interpretation is largely founded upon an erroneous sacramentalist concept

¹³ "The flow of 'blood and water' has been variously explained. Ordinarily dead bodies do not bleed because there is no action of the heart to produce arterial pressure. One suggestion is that since the body was erect, the flow was due to gravity and that the *crassamentum* (the heavy, red corpuscles) and the serum (the yellowish-white aqueous part) of the blood had already begun to separate. Another is that either the stomach or the lungs [or the cavity around the heart] contained water that flowed with the blood" (Merrill C. Tenney, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 9:185). The apostle does not say whether a large amount of liquid or only a little flowed out of Jesus' side. While many commentators see a miracle in this outflow, there is no textual or medical reason to regard it as supernatural. If John's sole purpose was to prove that our Lord was a real man who truly died, a miracle is unnecessary. Further, if it was meant to be a miraculous sign then it was an obscure sign, which is unlikely.

¹⁴ "One of the earliest extant comments on John 19:34, is that of Irenaeus, who takes this view of the evangelist's purpose. To show the true humanity of Christ, Irenaeus calls attention to His being hungry at the Temptation, to His being tired (Jn. 4:6), to His tears (Jn. 11:35), to His bloody sweat (Lk. 22:44), and lastly to the piercing of His side, when blood and water flowed forth.... (c.Haer.iii.xxii.2; cf. iv.xxxiii.2). It will be observed that Irenaeus has no thought of a miracle here, nor does he proceed to find any mystical meaning in the incident" (J. H. Bernard, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John*, 2:647-648).

¹⁵ George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 357. Murray references A. E. Brooks who writes, "'*aima* [blood] is never found in the New Testament as a designation of the Eucharist" (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Johannine Epistles* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark (1912) 1980], 132). Brook goes on to point out that 1 John 5:6, "This is He who

of baptism and communion. Once the sacraments are biblically understood, the presuppositions behind this allegorical interpretation fall to the ground. Fourth, the use of water as a metaphor in John's gospel points directly to the regenerating, sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit, not to the water of baptism (cf. Jn. 3:5; 4:11-14; 7:38). The sacrament view derives its support more from its antiquity than from biblical principles of interpretation.

(2) Augustine viewed the wound in Jesus' side as symbolic of a door of salvation. He compared it to the door in the side of Noah's ark where eight persons and the animals entered to be saved from the flood. Similarly, George Hutcheson says, "his side was pierced and a passage opened to his heart, so by his suffering we may look into his heart wounded with love for us, and pouring out itself for us; and that as a hole was made in Adam's side to take out a wife, so a hole was made in his side to take in his beloved bride to his heart."¹⁶ While this view may have poetic, devotional or contemplative merit, it is not what John had in mind when he recorded these verses.

(3) Another view is that the flow of blood and water is a symbolic fulfillment of Zechariah 13:1: "In that day there shall be a fountain opened to the house of David and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem for sin and for uncleanness." J. C. Ryle writes, "The moment He was dead this fountain was opened and began to flow. Over the bleeding side of our Lord there might have been written, 'Behold the fountain for all sin.' It is no small evidence to mind, in favour of this view, that this famous prophecy occurs only five verses after the text immediately quoted by St. John in this very chapter, 'They shall look on Him whom they pierced' (Zech. ii.10)."¹⁷ While there is no question that the "fountain" refers to the cleansing power of Jesus' blood to forgive sin, there are no solid exegetical reasons to connect the flow of blood and water to a fountain. The word "fountain" indicates the continuing, inexhaustible abundance of grace that flows to God's people through the merits of Christ.

(4) A common view is that the "blood and water" "signified the two great benefits which all believers partake of through Christ—justification and sanctification; blood for remission, water for regeneration; blood for atonement, water for purification.... To Christ crucified we owe both merit for our justification, and Spirit and grace for our sanctification."¹⁸ While there is no way to know if this thought was in John's mind as he wrote these words; nevertheless, this view is certainly an excellent application from what John observed. The Savior's sacrificial death eliminates the guilt and penalty of sin and the Holy Spirit applies the Mediator's work to our hearts in regeneration and sanctification. The Redeemer saves us both from the guilt and power of sin. "That 'blood' was the symbol of atonement, and 'water' of cleansing, every careful reader of the Old Testament must know. The two things are brought together by St. Paul in Heb. ix.19."¹⁹

came by water and blood—Jesus Christ; not only by water, but by water and blood," refers "to definite historical facts in the life of Christ on earth which could be regarded as peculiarly characteristic of the Mission which He 'came' to fulfill" (Ibid).

¹⁶ George Hutcheson, *John*, 406.

¹⁷ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3:371.

¹⁸ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:1203.

¹⁹ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3:372.

John's Parenthetical Comment as an Eyewitness

After John describes the events in verses 33 and 34 (i.e. Jesus is found dead and the spear is thrust into His side, followed by the issue of blood and water), he does something very unusual and remarkable. He stops the historical narrative for a moment to address his readers personally, assuring them that his testimony as an eyewitness is completely true and reliable. He writes, "And he who has seen has testified, and his testimony is true; and he knows that he is telling the truth, so that you may believe" (19:35). Although, some commentators do not think this witness is John himself, we are confident that it is for the following reasons.

First, John was indeed an eyewitness at the cross and was just mentioned in verse 26. He was the only eyewitness from among the twelve at Golgotha. Second, this verse perfectly reflects John's style as a writer who likes to appeal to himself as an eyewitness. Note for example John 21:24, "This is the disciple who testifies of these things, and wrote these things; and we know that his testimony is true" (cf. 1 Jn. 1:1). None of the other gospel writers stops to personally address the reader. Third, the personal assurance that he knows this eyewitness is telling the truth clearly points to himself as the eyewitness. In other words, he knows the testimony is true because he saw the events with his own eyes. He appeals to his own consciousness that knows absolutely that he is indeed stating the truth. Fourth, "The use of the perfect participle rather than the aorist is evidence that the writer himself is the person who saw. If he were appealing to the witness of another person he would almost certainly have written, as the A.V. [KJV], 'he that saw.'"²⁰ "John the apostle was there and saw this fact (still sees it, in fact)."²¹ What the beloved disciple saw was burned into his soul and to him these events were always still before his mind.

If we remove the third person and paraphrase John's statement it becomes easier to understand.²² He in essence says, "I have testified to the things that I have personally seen and still remember vividly in my mind. Therefore, my testimony is truthful, genuine and perfect. And I know that I am telling you the truth." John presents himself as an eyewitness who has accurately recorded what occurred and knows beyond a shadow of a doubt that his testimony is both sufficient and true. As a Spirit-inspired apostle, John was incapable of making a mistake in his account.²³

After John makes this emphatic, passionate statement regarding the reliability of his record he gives the reason why he made his interjection: "that ye also may believe." The apostle uses the present subjunctive (*ina pisteuete*, "may keep on believing") which indicates that his appeal goes beyond merely entering the faith. John is concerned that a strong faith in Christ *continues* in the Christian community. This interjection indicates a pastoral concern on the part

²⁰ Alfred Plummer, *The Gospel According to John*, 334.

²¹ Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 5:305.

²² "We know that John never mentions himself or any member of his family or wider relationship by name. He always uses the third person and even this only when literally compelled to do so" (R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John's Gospel*, 1317).

²³ Many commentators believe the last statement, "he knows that he is telling the truth" (v. 35), does not refer to the beloved disciple but to God (e.g., Moffatt's paraphrase says, "He who saw it has borne witness (his witness is true; God knows he is telling the truth)"). The Greek can be interpreted in both ways. Those who favor the view that God knows he is telling the truth argue that, as a Jew, John would appeal to a secondary witness, not to himself. This argument is refuted by the simple fact that John is writing an account as one of four evangelists. He knows that the synoptic gospels have already given their testimony of God's amazing miracles, the centurion's confession as well as the group of female observers. Therefore, he does not need to appeal to God as a second witness. The other evangelists already have. "Jn. assures his readers that the aged apostle knows exactly what he is saying: *ekeinos oiden*" (J. H. Bernard, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 2:65).

of John as he wrote his gospel. There were many heretics in John's day that were attempting to seduce believers away from a true orthodox trust in Christ. The apostle focuses on the trustworthiness of this incident because it demonstrated: "(1) the reality of Christ's *humanity* against Docetic views...; (2) the reality of Christ's *Divinity*, against Ebionite views; while His human form was no mere phantom, but flesh and blood, yet He was not therefore a mere man, but the Son of God; (3) the reality of Christ's *death*, and therefore of His *resurrection*, against Jewish insinuations of trickery (comp. Matt. xxviii.13-15); (4) the clear and unexpected fulfillment of two Messianic prophecies."²⁴

From this blessed interjection by John we ought to learn a number of important truths. First, the inspired historical testimony on which we rely for our salvation is one hundred percent accurate and therefore stands as a sure foundation as the object of our faith. As Peter says, "For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty" (2 Pet. 1:16). Atheists, modernists, higher critics and all skeptics attack this solid foundation of truth because they do not want to submit to Jesus Christ as the supreme Lord over everything in heaven and on earth (Mt. 28:18ff.). But, if the Bible and the gospels were partly true and partly false, how would the Christian know what is true and what is man-made mythology? Under such circumstances biblical faith would be replaced by an arbitrary, relativistic (blind leap into the dark) kind of trust. It would be the end of biblical Christianity and the beginning of secular humanistic tyranny. But, thank God, He has assured us that "every word of the LORD is pure; He is a shield to those who put their trust in Him" (Prov. 30:5; cf. Ps. 119:140).

Second, we see the importance of learning all the various details of the person and work of Christ as a bulwark against heresy. The beloved disciple assumes that a hearty trust in *all the truths* he is presenting is the key to abiding in the truth of the gospel. A strong and steady faith cannot walk on slippery and unsure ground. Believers must fasten themselves to all these truths so that when the waves of heresy, skepticism and doubt come upon them, they are unmovable. People who do not study these great historical events, contemplate them, cherish them and place them in their hearts are easy prey for the philosophical and theological wolves of this world. These gospel truths are our armor. A man who goes into battle without his armor will be butchered and slain by the adversary.

Third, we must *continually be trusting* in the historical fact that Christ truly died for our sins. The glorious gospel is not some philosophical axiom to which we give a quick nod and then move on. It is a truth that is to remain the centerpiece of our faith and practice. The fact that Jesus died in our place as a satisfaction for sin and that by virtue of His death sin is subdued in our everyday Christian lives must remain the focal point of our theology and worldview. People who view the cross as something that we must quickly go beyond to focus on politics, social action, "Christian Reconstruction," eschatological theorizing and so forth are in grave danger of losing the biblical emphasis of Scripture and losing the purity and power of the gospel.

The Types and Prophecy Fulfilled

After describing the events he has witnessed, John says that they are literal fulfillments of certain Old Testament types and prophecies. "Belief is supported by Scripture; for the two surprising events, Christ's escaping the *crurifragium* and yet having His side pierced, were

²⁴ Alfred Plummer, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 334-335.

evidently preordained in the Divine counsels.”²⁵ “This correspondence between prophecy and fulfillment is itself a strong motive to faith.”²⁶ John is pointing out that his eyewitness testimony is supported by the testimony of the sacred Scriptures. Therefore, these details that seem unimportant to the uninformed are in reality very important. They demonstrate that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Before we examine the typology and prophecy that John had in mind we need to consider from a strictly human perspective how unlikely these predictions were to be fulfilled. The governor Pilate had given specific orders for these men to break the legs of Jesus and the two criminals. Normally soldiers (especially Roman ones) carry out their orders. But these soldiers not only found that the Nazarene was already dead, but had been so impressed by the manner in which our Lord died and the miracles which attended His death, that they did not want to mutilate the Son of God’s legs. Perhaps the centurion himself stayed their hand. Also, the soldiers had no command to pierce Christ’s side. When they came upon Him, He had obviously already died. There was no need to pierce His side. Yet, one of the soldiers decided to do so, just to make sure. “How can brutal men be kept from one act of violence, for which they had specific commandment, and be led to enact another for which they had no commandment? There is only one answer. By overruling circumstances, the God who inspired the prophecies made sure that they were fulfilled.”²⁷

It is amazing how God so easily and perfectly carries out His will no matter what the circumstances and without in the least violating man’s choice as a secondary agent. The way in which these prophecies were fulfilled teaches us that no matter how unlikely (from a human standpoint) it looks as though a promise or prophecy from God is to be fulfilled, we can still firmly believe it without doubting or wavering. When you find yourself tempted to doubt any promise or prophecy from God, think of these kinds of fulfillments and trust all of God’s Word firmly. “Let God be true and every man a liar. Though men or devils should give God the lie, hold on to what God has spoken; for heaven and earth shall pass away, but not one jot or tittle of his word shall fall to the ground.”²⁸

The first fulfillment of Scripture is an allusion to two passages which deal with the proper treatment of the paschal lamb. Exodus 12:46 reads, “In one house it shall be eaten; you shall not carry any of the flesh outside the house, nor shall you break one of its bones.” Likewise Numbers 9:12 says, “They shall leave none of it until morning, nor break one of its bones.” The paschal lamb served as a special type of Christ. It was not to be treated like an ordinary animal for food. It was dedicated to God and protected by the law from the breaking of its bones and other common uses. It was God’s special lamb set apart for the purpose of delivering Israel’s first born

²⁵ Alfred Plummer, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 335.

²⁶ E. W. Hengstenberg, *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*, 2:427.

²⁷ James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 5:1533.

²⁸ Charles H. Spurgeon, “On the Cross after Death,” 33:197. On God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility Spurgeon writes, “There was no compulsion put upon them; they did this of their own proper thought. No angel came from heaven to stand with his broad wings in the front of the cross, so as to protect the Saviour; no awful aegis of mystery was hung over the sacred body of the Lord so that intruders might be driven back with fear. No, the quaternion of soldiers did whatever they wished to do. They acted of their own free will, and yet at the same time they fulfilled the eternal counsel of God. Shall we never be able to drive into men’s minds the truth that predestination and free agency are both facts? Men sin as freely as birds fly in the air, and they are altogether responsible for their sin; and yet everything is ordained and foreseen of God. The fore-ordination of God in no degree interferes with the responsibility of man. I have often been asked by persons to reconcile the two truths. My only reply is—They need no reconciliation, for they never fell out. Why should I try to reconcile two friends? Prove to me that the two truths do not agree” (Ibid, 33:198-199).

from the angel of death and the covenant people from bondage unto Egypt. The Passover which led to redemption from Egypt typified the ultimate and final redemption achieved by the Messiah. John sees in the manner of Jesus' death and the treatment of His sacrificed dead body proof that He was the true Pascal Lamb. "For fifteen hundred years Israel had punctiliously observed this item in the passover observance, and none of them (so far as we know) had any idea of its meaning. Now the Holy Spirit explains it."²⁹

In order for Jesus to be a true sacrifice for sin, God allowed His Son to be bound, spit upon, scourged, mocked, ridiculed, crucified and abandoned. But once the price for sin had been paid in full and Christ died, God would not allow His body to be abused or mutilated. "The Lord's right to him is declared by the reservation which is made concerning his bones. Do you not see here how he is identified as being 'the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world'? It is a mark of identity upon which faith fixes her eyes."³⁰ Paul agrees with John that "Christ our Passover, was sacrificed for us" (1 Cor. 5:7). If you want the curse of the law and the avenging angel to pass over you, then you must be cleansed by the blood of Christ. "Sin breaks our bones, as it broke David's (Ps. li.8); but it did not break Christ's bones; he stood firm under the burden, mighty to save."³¹

Another passage which may have been on John's mind is Psalm 34:20, which describes God's loving care for the righteous one who suffers. The psalmist says, "He guards all his bones; not one of them is broken." Although this Psalm refers to God's special protection of living godly men from the violence of the wicked, the Spirit may be applying it to Jesus who is the one true righteous man, because of God's special care for Him in death. This care will extend to our Lord's place of burial and to His resurrection. "Just as Christ in His burial is spared every manifestation of shame which would have no significance for the Suretyship, and just as He therefore, is not cast among the bandits in a general grave, but in 'a grave' as the Son of man, so no other form of affliction is placed upon Him here save that which God regards as absolutely necessary for Him. The dying has been enough. According to His body, also, Jesus walked under the protection of special providence."³²

The third fulfillment of Scripture is from Zechariah 12:10: "And I will pour on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem the Spirit of grace and supplication; then they will look upon Me whom they pierced. Yes, they will mourn for Him as one mourns for his only son, and grieve for Him as one grieves for a firstborn."³³ This is a prophecy that clearly has multiple fulfillments. Here John applies it to those who actually were present at the crucifixion and saw the soldier pierce Jesus' side. It can apply to the soldiers who were in charge of the execution and/or the Jews who were responsible for the crucifixion. Obviously, Zechariah applies it to the Jews. Luke informs us that the large Jewish crowds responded to what they had seen at Calvary by smiting their breasts (23:48), an act of mourning and self-reproach.

The context of the Zechariah passage indicates its fulfillment also on the day of Pentecost when God poured out the Holy Spirit on the church and a great many inhabitants of Jerusalem looked upon the One they pierced with the eyes of faith and the mourning of repentance. The

²⁹ Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John*, 3:250.

³⁰ Charles H. Spurgeon, "On the Cross after Death," 33:200.

³¹ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:1204.

³² Klaas Schilder, *Christ Crucified*, 550.

³³ "The second prophecy, Zech. 12:10, John translates from the Hebrew, disregarding the inexact LXX which had 'pierced through' mean[ing] only mistreat or insult. The Hebrew *daqar* means to stab to death" (R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John's Gospel*, 1321).

beloved disciple will later apply this same passage to the coming of Christ in which the mourning, once again, is not one of repentance but of remorse unto despair and death (Rev. 1:7).

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