

“Guilt and the Cross”
John 19:23-37
March 14, 2021
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

We continue, this morning, in the Gospel of John, and his account of the crucifixion and death of Jesus.

Please do listen carefully, for this is God’s word for us this morning.

^{19:23} 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, ²⁴ 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, ²⁵ but standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. ²⁶ When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, “Woman, behold, your son!” ²⁷ Then he said to the disciple, “Behold, your mother!” And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home.

²⁸ After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the Scripture), “I thirst.” ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, “It is finished,” and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

³¹ 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. ³² So the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first, and of the other who had been crucified with him. ³³ But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. ³⁴ But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water. ³⁵ 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. ³⁶ For these things took place that the Scripture might be fulfilled: “Not one of his bones will be broken.” ³⁷ And again another Scripture says, “They will look on him whom they have pierced.”

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Lord, you are our hiding place and our shield,
we hope in your word.
Help us to turn from all false ways,

and keep instead the commandments of you, our God.
Uphold us according to your promise, that we may live,
and let us not be put to shame in our hope.
Hold us up, that we may be safe
and have regard for your statutes continually.
For we know we will one day stand before you and give an account,
and so, with that in mind, help us now to attend to your word.
Grant this in Jesus's name. Amen.
[Based on Psalm 119:114-117, 120]

Introduction

Our text this morning has a number of things to say, and so we will actually take two Lord's Days to discuss it.

This morning we will focus on what this text has to say about our guilt. And as we do, we will consider three things:

- First, we will consider the bad news of our guilt.
- Second, we will consider the good news of our guilt.
- Third and finally we will consider the good news *for* our guilt.

So, the bad news of our guilt, the good news of our guilt, and then the good news *for* our guilt.

The Bad News of Our Guilt

So first, the bad news of our guilt.

And to get to the bad news we have to be attentive to the literary signals that John is giving us here throughout this passage.

If we know the standard Christian doctrine of Christ's substitutionary death, it can be easy for us to just impose that on top of this passage and move on. But instead of doing that, let's ask how John himself points us to the bad news of our guilt in this text.

One of the chief ways John draws our attention to this reality is by pointing us to the Passover. In fact, this passage is filled with references to the Passover.

Maybe the most overt comes in verse thirty-one, where John tells us that it was the day of Preparation, meaning the day before the Sabbath. But as he does, John reminds us, it was not just the day before any Sabbath, but the day before a Sabbath that was also a high day – a special day for the Jewish believers. And what made it special?

Well, just a few verses earlier, at the end of chapter eighteen, John reminded us again that all of this was happening during the time of the Passover. [Carson, 622] So John, a few verses ago, explicitly reminded us that these events are occurring during the Passover festival, and now, here in verse thirty-one he reminds us once again. But the links to the Passover don't end there.

In verse twenty-nine John mentions that it was a hyssop branch – likely a hyssop stalk [Carson, 621] – that the sponge of sour wine was put on to lift it up to Jesus’s mouth. Why was this detail included by John? It’s clearly not necessary to understand the immediate events.

Well, first of all, it gives us a reminder that John himself was an eyewitness to what is being described, and so he gives us another eyewitness detail. But I suspect that John’s intentions went beyond that. Because hyssop had symbolic significance to an Israelite. Because among its many uses, it was hyssop that that Israelites at the first Passover, at the time of the exodus, were instructed to use to paint the blood of the sacrificial lambs onto their doorpost. [Exodus 12:22] And so, with the inclusion of that specific detail, John gives us a second reference to the Passover in this passage.

Next there is the Scripture that is cited in verse thirty-six. The words do not precisely line up with any one text, but there are instead three texts that John may be referring to here.

One is Psalm 34:20, about God’s care of the righteous. This may be an allusion John is including, but it does not seem to be the dominant one.

Instead, the dominant reference John seems to be evoking is found in the other two related texts: Exodus 12:46 and Numbers 9:12. And both of these verses are about the lamb to be slain at the Passover meal. God gave certain regulations about how the lamb sacrificed for the Passover was to be handled, and one of the regulations was that its bones were not to be broken in the process. John here is making a direct connection between the death of Jesus and the sacrifice of the Passover lamb. [Carson, 627; Augustine, Homily 120.3]

John highlights that it is the time of the Passover, he alludes to the instrument used to display the blood at the first Passover, he cites Scripture comparing Jesus to the lamb of the Passover. Taken together, we can agree with one commentator’s statement that this passage is laced with the theme of the Passover. [Carson, 627]

But why? What point is John making with that connection?

Well, let’s think back to the first Passover – which occurred when God delivered his people from the land of Egypt. The situation in Exodus chapter twelve is that God’s people are enslaved in Egypt. God has brought nine plagues on Egypt to prove his power to Pharaoh and the people of Egypt, and to judge them for not releasing the people of Israel.

And on the night of the first Passover we come to God’s tenth and final plague. He tells his people that each household should take a lamb without blemish, and slay it, without breaking any of its bones. And then, using hyssop they should take some of the blood of the lamb and put it on the doorposts and the lintel of the houses they will dwell in that night. Then, in their house, with the blood on the door, they should eat the Passover lamb. And, God says to them: “I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am Yahweh. The blood shall be a sign for you, on the houses where you are. And when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy you, when I strike the land of Egypt.”

Now, there is something radical in the command God gives Israel, and the explanation he provides here, and we need to be careful not to miss it.

On the night of the Passover, God is coming to the land of Egypt in judgment. But here's what he says here – God essentially says to his people: “If I come among you in judgment, then it won't be just the Egyptians who die – it won't just be your oppressors, it won't just be those pagans who will die if I come in judgment – but I'll have to kill *you* too.”

That does not fit with the expectation of the ancient world or of our world today.

In the ancient world you had your gods, and their job was to be on your side – they were supposed to defend you and judge your enemies.

And though today, in our secular setting, we don't have quite the same pantheon of deities that the ancient world had, we still have the same dynamic at work among us. We all see ourselves as innocent, and others as guilty. Our family is good, it's others that are bad. Our church is good, it's others that are a mess. Our cultural tribe is worthy, it's others that are unworthy.

David Brooks sums up most of our outlooks pretty well – he writes: “Most people see themselves living on an island of intelligence in a sea of idiocy. They feel their own lives are going pretty well, even if society as a whole is going down the toilet. [...] Their own values are fine, even if civilization itself is on the verge of collapse. We all live in Lake Wobegon because we are all above average. We are all okay; it's the vast ocean of morons who are [messing] things up.” [Brooks, 74]

But God will not have that – even when it comes to the difference between his poor, enslaved, victimized people Israel, and their violent, pagan oppressors – even then, even as God comes to rescue his people, the brute fact remains that none of them are innocent – none of them are good. All are guilty. All of them deserve God's judgment.

So, when God comes in judgment – if it is true judgment – he will not simply slay the Egyptians because they are bad, and spare the Israelites because they are good. Instead, he tells them that all of them will deserve to die.

Their hope is not in any delusion that they are not guilty. Their only hope can be in a substitute.

As some have pointed out: on the night of the first Passover, in every house of Egypt someone had to die because of the guilt of that household: either a firstborn son, or a lamb as a substitute. [Keller]

The question for us is, are we really willing to accept our guilt before God?

If you are a Christian – and even if you're not a Christian, but you believe in any god who has revealed an objective moral order to humanity – then you should know that you are guilty. If you are at all honest with yourself, you should know that you do not live up to the laws that God, your Maker, has given to you, and you are therefore guilty. Breaking God's law at any point makes you guilty. If you follow 80% of all Federal Laws, and break only 20% of them, that does not give you a B in your civic duty – it makes you a notorious criminal. And that fact is even

more true when we come before God. And if we know our hearts at all, we know we haven't even kept 80% of what God has called us to. We are guilty.

And you should know this even if you don't believe in a divinely revealed moral law. Even if you look to no outside divine revelation, you should know that you are morally guilty.

How can that be so? Well, Francis Schaeffer, drawing from the teaching of the Apostle Paul in Romans two, put it like this: He said, imagine if every human being had an invisible audio recorder placed around their neck at birth. And this audio recorder was programmed so that it only recorded the moral judgments which you made about other people. Every time you said "Hey, you shouldn't do X." or "You really *should* do Y." or "I think it's terrible that Frank did Z" – every time you made a statement of what someone should or should not do, regarding their conduct, it would record that sentence. And you wear it all your life. And then you die. And you stand before your Maker. And Schaeffer writes "Suppose, then, God simply touched the tape recorder button and each man heard played out in his own words all those statements by which he had bound other men in moral judgment. He could hear it going on for years – thousands and thousands of moral judgments. Then God would simply say to the man, though he had never heard the Bible, now where do you stand in the light of your own moral judgments?" [Schaeffer, 41-42]

And where you'd have to say that you stood was that you knew there were certain things people should not do ... but you did them anyway. And you knew there were certain things people *should* do, but you didn't do them. And so you are guilty.

John alludes to all this by pointing us back to the Passover. John reminds us that we all are guilty. We all fall short. If God, our Maker, were to come among us, we all would be worthy of condemnation. We all would deserve eternal death.

That's the first thing for us to consider this morning: the bad news of our guilt.

The Good News of Our Guilt

The second thing for us to consider is the good news of our guilt.

And that might sound odd, but bear with me.

Our usual response to being told that we are guilty is to either deny the evidence, or to try to rewrite the moral law that would condemn us.

So sometimes we try to dispute the evidence – we question any claim about what we have done. But if we are honest with ourselves ... we know what we have thought, and said, and done. We know we are guilty.

Which brings us to the second option, which is to rewrite the moral law. Now ... how overtly we try to do that can range.

If we are Christians who believe in the inspiration of Scripture, then we can't just blatantly rewrite the Law of God ... but we can functionally rewrite it. We may do that by simply ignoring the parts of the Bible that point to our guilt. Or we may qualify certain moral requirements of Scripture to death until they mean almost nothing. We conservative Christians can actually get *very* good at turning our eyes away from, or qualifying to death the parts of the Bible that would call us out as guilty. Resisting that tendency is one good reason to try to read through the whole Bible on some sort of schedule. Because if we do that, and if we really pay attention, then we will be confronted with those commands of God we would rather ignore. Another good way to resist that tendency is to be connected to the local, the global, and the historical Church. On the level of the local church, we need other Christians to see and confront us with the parts of the Bible we may personally tend to avoid. And on the cultural level, we need the historical and the global church to confront us with the parts of the Bible that the church in our current cultural setting tends to ignore. If we take the Scriptures seriously, that is what we need to do.

Of course still other Christians respond to the sense of guilt they feel from the Scriptures by literally rewriting the commands of God. Once you decide that the Bible does not need to be taken as a whole, you can pick and choose the parts you think are true and need to be followed, and get rid of the parts that you tend to break. In that way, you can rewrite the commands of God to something you can keep.

And if you do not hold to to an objective external moral order – if you just rely on your own sense of right and wrong – then you can try to adjust that internal sense as you go, until it always declares you innocent of any wrongdoing.

We are pretty good at trying to silence our own guilt by attempting to change the law we are evaluated by.

But even to do that is to misunderstand the fact that our objective guilt is not only bad news ... it's also good news.

Now, that sounds odd to us, so what do I mean by that? Well, Tim Keller made this point in a sermon back in 2012.

He put it like this – he said: “If you say ‘Nothing should make me feel guilty – I have to decide what is right or wrong for me’ what you mean then is there is nothing more important than you, and your feelings, and your conscience, and your needs, and your intuitions and your consciousness – that’s all that matters. There’s nothing more important than you, there’s nothing you have to sacrifice [for] and serve and feel guilty if you’re not doing – no, no, no – nothing’s more important than you, nothing transcends you. In other words, if there’s no guilt, there’s no hope, because you’ve got nothing to live for – nothing to die for.” [Keller, “The Crucifixion”]

Keller is saying that if you are guilty ... then that means that there is a moral order that goes beyond your own desires or intuitions. It means that there is something in the universe that is bigger than you. It means that the cosmos we live in have a transcendent reality. Which means that your life has a purpose beyond you.

If there is nothing higher in the universe than your own judgments and desires – if there is no reason for even the concept of guilt – then life is without purpose ... except for the fleeting pleasures you can grasp at in this life.

But if you are guilty, then there is something more important than you in this world – something you can and should live for. And that something is God, our Maker.

So, in an unexpected way, our guilt, rightly understood, is good news. It is good news because it means that there is something that transcends us in this life.

That is good. But it is not yet a solution. It does not yet help us, because even though something exists that transcends us, we are not at peace with that something. We are at odds with the God who transcends us. We stand guilty and condemned before our infinite Maker.

The Good News for Our Guilt

And that brings us to our third and final point. We have considered the bad news of our guilt. We have considered the good news of our guilt. Now we need to consider the good news *for* our guilt.

And the good news for our guilt is the cross of Christ.

The first hint of that good news comes in verse twenty-eight, when Jesus declares “I thirst.”

Commentators debate which Old Testament passage Jesus is citing here, but a common theme among the possibilities is that whatever verse it may be, the person speaking in it is not primarily speaking of physical thirst, but of cosmic thirst. He is speaking of the spiritual thirst that comes with condemnation, or the spiritual thirst that comes when one feels abandoned by God.

But how could Jesus, the sinless one, be condemned? How could Jesus, the Son of God be abandoned by God?

He could be condemned not because he was guilty, but because he took our guilt onto himself. He could be forsaken by God the Father, not because he deserved to be forsaken, but because he took onto himself the estrangement from God that we deserved.

When Jesus declares “I thirst,” he tells us that the infinite spiritual thirst that we deserve has been placed upon him.

If that is a hint of the good news in verse twenty-eight, then the heart of the good news of our text is found in verse thirty.

In verse thirty we have Jesus’s final words: “It is finished.” Commentator D. A. Carson points out that the typical wording in English, along with the mental picture we tend to have of these words, can be misleading.

First of all, Jesus's last words were likely not a quiet whimper, but a bold declaration. If these words are the same that Mark refers to in his gospel, then we learn from Mark that this was a "loud cry" that Jesus let out [15:37]. Jesus is then making a bold declaration. [Carson, 621]

And what is he declaring? In John's Greek, it is one word: *tetelestai*. Carson explains – he writes: "As an English translation, *It is finished* captures only part of the meaning, the part that focuses on completion. Jesus' work was done. But this is no cry of defeat; nor is it merely an announcement of imminent death [...]. The verb *teleo* from which this form derives denotes the carrying out of a task, and [...] bears the overtones of fulfilling one's [...] obligations." Carson goes on and explains that to fully understand the meaning of Jesus's words here, it might be better to translate this cry on the brink of Jesus's death, as "It is accomplished." [Carson, 621; Also Wright, 131]

What has been accomplished?

Our redemption. Our salvation.

Just as the judgment due to the Israelites had fallen on the Passover lamb, so the judgment due to humanity had fallen on Christ. But whereas the judgment that fell on those Passover lambs was a temporal death in a temporal judgment, the judgment that fell on Christ was the cosmic judgment due to us for our cosmic rebellion.

For our sin is cosmic, and so the judgment due to us is cosmic – it is infinite. We ourselves cannot bear the weight of it – no creature could. But God is no mere creature. And so God came to earth, in the flesh, in the person of Jesus Christ. And then, on the cross, our infinite God took upon himself the infinite punishment we deserved. He received it, down to the last drop, for all those who would place their trust in him, until there was no more. That is what Jesus accomplished on the cross.

And so, Jesus declares here that he has done *everything necessary* to extinguish our guilt. He has paid for our sins in full. He has wiped our slate clean. He has absorbed all of the infinite judgment that we deserved. All we must do is receive it. [Calvin, 235-236]

John Calvin writes that it was in order to assure of us of that truth that on the cross, before he died, Jesus declared "It is finished" – "It is accomplished." [Calvin, 236]

But Calvin says that that assurance did not stop with Jesus's words. That assurance was not only contained in what those at the cross heard, but also what they saw. For what they saw was blood and water.

We read in verse thirty-four of how the Roman soldiers checked whether Jesus was really dead or not by piercing his side with a spear. And when they did, "at once" John writes, "blood and water" "came out."

What is the significance of that?

Medical experts disagree on what organ inside Jesus may have been pierced, leading to the appearance of blood and water flowing from his side. But in any case, one thing John wants to do

is to give us again an eyewitness touch, as further testimony that Jesus did in fact, die. [Carson, 623]

But John also has a tendency towards double meanings ... and it seems difficult to believe that he did not want us to see symbolism in these events as well.

In fact, John likely wanted us to see several things in the blood and water that flowed from Jesus's side, but we'll focus on just one this morning.

John Calvin discusses that one aspect like this – he writes that in the flow of the blood and water we see that “Christ brought true atonement and true washing; for, on the one hand, forgiveness of sins and justification, and, on the other hand, the sanctification of the soul, were prefigured in the Law by those two symbols, *sacrifices* and *washings*. In sacrifices, blood atoned for sins, and was the ransom for appeasing the wrath of God. *Washings* were the tokens of true holiness, and the remedies for taking away uncleanness and removing the pollutions of the flesh.” [Calvin, 240; see also Carson 624 & Wright 135]

The blood and the water that flow from Jesus's side point back to the sacrifices and the washings of the Old Testament ... but they also did so much more than that. Because the truth they reveal is not ultimately that Jesus's sacrifice points back to the washings and the animal sacrifices of ancient Israel ... but that every washing and animal sacrifice of Israel pointed forward to Jesus – the true Passover lamb.

After all, this passage is filled with references to the Old Testament. Again and again John points back to the Hebrew Scriptures. And while scholars sometimes disagree on the details of those connections, the pattern we see is that John wants to make it clear that what is happening here is God's long-awaited plan of redemption. [Carson, 619-620] It is what God had in mind throughout the entire history of his people. From the words of the prophets to the events of historic redemption, to the Passover lamb, to the entire sacrificial system, all of it pointed forward to this – to Jesus's death on the cross.

And while those things – while the washings and the animal sacrifices had to be done over and over again, Christ's sacrifice only had to be done once. And when it was done, Jesus declared that it the redemption of his people was truly finished – it was truly accomplished. [Calvin, 236]

That is the good news John here holds out to us in the cross of Christ.

Conclusion

Brothers and sisters, you are guilty. You know this. You know it from in your heart. You know it from the judgments of your own lips. You know it from the word of God. You are guilty, and you deserve God's displeasure.

But even in the despair it may bring, your guilt points to something bigger than you. It points to something beyond yourself. It points to the God who made you, and who transcends all of human life, and gives purpose to all of existence.

It points to a God who transcends you ... and it also points to a God who loves you. For he came, as God the Son, to bear your guilt. On the cross, he took it upon himself. He died the death that you deserved to die, and when he had absorbed the judgment that should have fallen on you, he declared: “It is finished.”

Your calling is simply to cling to him. Your calling is to bring your guilt to him, and let him take it on to himself. Your calling is to despair of saving yourself, and trust in Christ alone for your salvation. Your calling is to admit that you deserve eternal death, to call on the name of Jesus Christ, and then to trust him – to really trust him – when he declares “It is finished.”

Brothers and sisters – those of you who bear the name “Christian” – do you believe this? Do you really believe this?

If you do not, then understand that you are calling Jesus a liar. He says that he has accomplished your salvation on the cross. Is he wrong? Is he lying?

He shows you that all the sacrifice and all the cleansing you need flows from him. Do you doubt him? Do you think he is deceiving you?

Believe his word this morning, and ask him to deliver you from whatever unbelief remains in your heart.

And as you place your trust in Christ, rejoice. Give thanks. Celebrate with joy and thanksgiving. For joy is the only appropriate response to what the Lord has done for us.

As the Apostle Paul has put it: “Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed for us: therefore let us keep the feast.” [1 Corinthians 5:7b; Calvin, 241]

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

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