

A Question of Truth

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[0 : 00] Let's bow our heads and pray together and ask God to help us as we hear his word. Father in heaven, we come to you with great humility and expectation.

We ask, Father, that you will speak to us, that you will heal our hearts, that you will bring us hope, and especially that you will strengthen our faith, that we might serve you and be vessels of your grace in this world.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, it's great to be with you. As Aaron said, my name is Dan Gifford, and thank you for telling everybody I'm the highest-ranking Christian here.

That term, venerable, is good in one aspect, is that people often will confuse that. And they'll ask me, why are you called the vulnerable, Dan Gifford? And that changes everything.

I'll just say, well, because I need your prayers desperately. And that's where we are today. We're in the Gospel of John, knowing that we are people that need God desperately and his grace.

[1 : 11] John 18, if you want to turn there on page 904, is a really dark part of the Gospel of John. And so we're entering into or back into this Gospel for the last three chapters in this place in Jesus' life where he is experiencing incredible suffering, and he will experience death as well.

But the thing that's wonderful about this section is that you also see the light of Jesus, the great goodness of God, shining brightly in stark relief.

This is the blessing of this section here. And I think it's very relevant for us today. We've seen a lot of darkness this week. We've seen terrorist attack in London.

Five people killed, 50 injured. Attacks in Mosul, airstrikes that have killed thousands of civilians over the last few months.

Many hundreds of thousands are homeless in and around Mosul as well, and living in very cold, hungry conditions. And you have situations like this all over the world that are not really covered by the news very well.

[2 : 22] And that darkness is something that may remind us of our own sufferings, our own dealings with darkness, loss, or grief in different ways.

And the question we ask is, where is God in the darkness of this world? Well, in this passage and in the rest of John, we see very clearly that God's mission is to come right into that darkness in Jesus, who is God and man.

In fact, the one reason Jesus comes into the world is because of the darkness and the suffering that is in it. We heard in Revelation, if you remember, that one day God will lift away all evil and suffering and pain and death from this world when Jesus returns in glory.

But in this time of looking forward to God's return in Jesus, God is at work in all of the brokenness, in all of the darkness, and he's bringing people into his kingdom.

They are seeing and being filled with his grace as they repent. And every day God is bringing his grace to us, his light into darkness.

[3 : 37] So these chapters in John really speak to us about this. They show us that Jesus' powerful saving work always happens in the midst of sin and death and sickness.

That's where he serves as king over the darkness in the world. And so I want us to turn to chapter 18, verse 904, and I want you to see how Jesus is immersed in the worst of human darkness.

If you remember from last week, Jesus has experienced betrayal in the deepest way. Judas has betrayed him in his own circle, betrayed him to death.

Peter, one of his closest friends, denies him three times. And then you have the shepherds of Israel, you know, the priests, the people who are supposed to bring people to a knowledge of God and really be about directing them to worship God.

They're the ones who condemn Jesus in a false trial, something that's totally unjust, even though they know he's innocent.

[4 : 50] And then in this passage today, the great powers of the world seem to be against Jesus. So Pilate, who represents this Roman empire that's the most powerful force in the world, he sends Jesus to torture and execution, even though he acquits him of all charges.

And then at the end of our passage, you see darkness because the popular voice, you know, the crowd, chooses a murderer over Jesus, even though the court has said he's innocent.

Here's darkness. And you say, where is the good in all this? It's incredibly unjust. Those are the questions that we ask in our own lives sometimes. Where is he in the darkness?

Well, I want to just point out three things in this passage. Three ways that Jesus' light shines very, very brightly in the darkness of this passage.

There's three ways. One is that he is the Passover lamb in verses 28 through 30. And secondly, he is the true king. He is all about truth in verses 31 through 38.

[6 : 00] And then the third little part is that Jesus is the substitute who sets people free. That's the last two verses. So I want to look at those.

First of all, looking at Jesus as our Passover lamb. Look at the end of verse 28. Notice that the priests don't actually enter into Pilate's headquarters.

And that's because you become spiritually unclean as a Jew if you come into a Gentile house. And they would then need to go through a week of cleansing, which would mean they would miss the Passover feast.

Now, just as a bit of refresher, the Passover feast is one of three of the greatest feasts for Israel. And people come from all over the world to Jerusalem to remember that God saved his people by lambs that were killed.

And the blood was put onto the door frames so that death would pass over their house. And the Egyptians would see the power of God and release the people who were in slavery in Egypt to a life of worshiping God as God's people.

[7 : 13] Well, you can't miss the irony here. Because, you know, in their religious observance, in their sense of self-righteousness, the priests are completely blind to their own evil of falsely accusing Jesus so that he'll be executed.

The other thing they can't see, though, is that Jesus turns this incredible evil that they are committing right upside down so that he will die there on the cross as God's perfect sacrifice.

And, you know, John told us this right at the very beginning of his gospel. He said John the Baptist pointed to Jesus when he started his ministry, and he said, Behold, there he is, the Lamb of God, the one who takes away the sins of the world.

That's who Jesus is. The Passover that these priests wanted to celebrate so much is really just a preview. It's a rehearsal that has been going on for hundreds of years that actually points to God's greatest rescue in Jesus Christ.

So the Lamb of God, God's own Lamb, dies on a cross to deliver his people not from slavery in Egypt, but from all slavery to sin, to anything that separates a person from God.

[8 : 41] That's the true Passover. And notice that the priests, they don't have an answer for Pilate when he says, What charge do you bring? Because they know he is innocent.

He is the innocent Lamb. They tell him, Just trust us. We wouldn't have delivered him over to you unless he was doing evil. And so we see here the real reason why they want Pilate to charge him. It's so that he can be sentenced to be nailed on a cross, which is the worst death. It's the death of the curse. You are cursed if you are on a tree. But you know, the powerful thing about Jesus is that is exactly what he intended to happen.

This was his mission. It fulfills the kind of death Jesus said must happen. So back in John 12, he said, When I am lifted up from the earth, I am going to draw all people to himself.

And by this he was describing his death. So that what the priests meant for evil, Jesus means for the greatest good of all. That people are going to be drawn to the Passover Lamb that takes away the sin of the world.

[9 : 55] And Jesus will conquer by turning evil against itself and nailing it to a tree. This is the great light of Jesus, the Passover Lamb.

Now this leads us to the second great light that is revealed in the darkness. And that's verses 33 to 38. It is a light that shows that Jesus is the true king.

Even in the midst of this very vulnerable time, he is shown to be the true king. So Pilate's first question in verse 33 is, Are you the king of the Jews?

Let's get this straight. And the force in the original is you. You are the king of the Jews. You know, you who are all alone, who have no followers, who have no army, and you're under arrest by your own priests.

You are the king. And in a worldly sense, Pilate knows that he has Jesus at his mercy. What Jesus says will determine whether he lives or dies about this being a king.

[11:04] And it is the worst death the world has ever known. But in that time where it looks like Pilate's in charge, Jesus turns the tables and he questions Pilate.

And this is a preview again of that final judgment when Pilate will stand before Jesus who will judge him in perfect justice.

And Jesus asks him this question. He says, Is this your own question or have other people coached you in it? And Pilate replies by saying, I can't understand the issue because I'm not a Jew.

You're the one who's the Jew. Your own people have delivered you. What have you done? And that sets perfectly up Jesus explaining what kind of king he is for Pilate and for all of us as well.

And here's what he says. This is the light of Jesus' kingship. Verse 36. My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting that I might not be delivered over to the Jews.

[12:15] And then he says again, My kingdom is not from this world. You see, Jesus is saying, My kingdom doesn't originate in this world.

It actually comes from God himself. And it can't be about coercion. It can't be about people being compelled to come into the kingdom. So it's impossible for fighting to be involved.

A person has to be drawn into that kingdom by the Passover lamb. And it is a kingdom that is much greater than this world. It comes from God himself.

So Pilate's a bit, he's a bit perplexed. He wants to nail down, especially because he has to make a decision here, nail down what it means to be king.

And so he says in verse 37, So you are a king. Jesus tells him very clearly, Here's the nature of my kingship. That he is the king of truth, the true king.

[13:15] Listen to these words. He says, For this purpose I was born, and for this purpose I have come into the world to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.

What an extraordinary thing for Pilate to hear. Jesus is saying, I didn't come from this world, I came from outside of it, and my whole purpose for being born into the world is to bear witness to the truth. And the question is, well, what is the truth that he bears witness to? It's much more than an intellectual exercise of inquiry. Truth in the Bible is the very character of God.

It's the very center of who God is. It's only as we know God, the Bible says, that we really know truth. Truth is all about his character, about his reliability, his faithfulness, his integrity.

Because in God is all the truth about the world, about ourselves, about our purpose in this life.

God's truth includes all that is good and right and lovely and holy and just.

[14:32] And Jesus is saying, I bear witness to this truth because I am the truth. That comes out really clearly in the Gospel of John. He is the truth. Because in him, we see God's nature.

We get a clear picture of God that he loves people and created them. That all people are broken and need to be mended. And that God became man and that man mends people by being the lamb that was slain for the forgiveness of sins.

And he's worthy of all our worship. If you remember our series on Revelation, that truth is at the very center of the book of Revelation. So the lamb who was slain sits on the throne ruling.

And he is slain because we, humanity, are precious to him. It is so that we can be reconciled to this God, united to him like a bride and a bridegroom.

And that that lamb will come to judge and make things, all things, right in creation. This is true. This is the center of all things. This is what is fundamental to this universe and to our life.

[15:53] And you know, it's not just a huge abstract sort of concept, something that you can keep at arm's distance. The truth that Jesus witnesses to is absolutely life-changing.

So when Jesus teaches about this truth back in John chapter 8, he says, if you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.

It will set you free. This is a promise. It is the promise of the power of God's truth in Jesus. That's because whatever Jesus says is true, whether it is about death or life, about sexuality or money or

worshipping idols or our relationships with one another, whether it's about knowing God and being his follower, all other voices are subject to his royal voice, to his kingly voice and it has power. When I was working on this sermon, I gave Jim Packer a ride to an appointment and this was a great opportunity. You're working on a sermon, sitting in a car together, what do you do? You ask him questions that you're wondering about in the sermon. So I said, well, why do you think that when Jesus is telling Pilate about what it means to be king, that he is king, that all of a sudden he starts talking about truth and really talking about it in a very powerful way?

[17 : 29] And he very basically said it means that he is Pilate's boss and he is the boss of everything. That's what it means when he starts talking about truth and that makes a lot of sense to me and it came from Jim Packer so I believe it.

But this is what this passage is saying. You know, when you abide and live in the truth, King Jesus has the power to set you free and this is a power that nothing in this world has. He sets you free to worship him, to know the forgiveness of God, the peace of God in your heart. It sets you free to follow him as your king and to sacrifice for him and to live the life of giving grace to others in this dark world.

It is the good life of pleasing God that only the truth of Jesus can set you free to do. It is a powerful living truth.

I don't know if any of you have read *The Great Divorce* before by C.S. Lewis but it's quite an imaginative book and it talks about people who are given a chance to visit heaven and one of the guys who was in heaven is trying to get somebody to come and visit and this guy is reluctant.

[18 : 50] They are talking a lot about truth and this guy who has been to heaven says I really want you to see heaven. He says you have experienced truth only with abstract intellect but I will bring you where you can taste it like honey and be embraced by it as by a bridegroom.

Your thirst will be quenched. That's what truth is. That is the nature of it. That's why Jesus describes everyone in his kingdom in verse 37 as those if they are of the truth are people who listen to his voice.

They love to hear that voice. They revel in the truth of God in Jesus and whether you are believing in Jesus for the first time or you've been following him all your life this verse calls us to ask ourselves are you listening to Jesus' voice today and every day?

Do you know the joy of obeying that voice? That's what it means to listen to that voice of really obeying it and being set free by the Lord Jesus. Is that something you know right now today?

Well clearly Pilate gets uncomfortable at this point. You know this is about life changing truth and he's not willing to listen to that royal voice of truth anymore.

[20 : 13] It's likely because he is listening to fears in his life that enslave him. You know their fears about losing power about losing face with the emperor fear of his enemies fear of having to make a decision so he stops the conversation by saying to Jesus in verse 38 what is truth?

And that ends everything. And we don't know whether it's a dismissive statement he's making you know he's saying that's ridiculous or it's wistful you know I desire that truth but I can't or I won't pursue it but it's ironic that question because he's not expecting an answer but Jesus is standing right in front of him.

The answer to the question what is truth is standing in front of him in Jesus. I am the truth the way the truth and the life says Jesus.

And the rest of John the remaining chapters are clearly going to describe that truth of Jesus upon which everything in heaven and earth depend and that is that Jesus died for our sins that he rose again in power and victory and that he reigns as the king the king of kings and lord of lords the lamb of God slain for us who is on the throne.

So Jesus is the king the king of truth. And then finally our passage ends with a third great light in the darkness and that is that Jesus our substitute is our substitute that sets us free.

[21 : 54] Those last two little verses at the end of the chapter verses 39 and 40 tell us this and it's something for us to really think of as a picture all of the time I think because Pilate knows Jesus is innocent he says I don't find any guilt in this man but he doesn't want trouble he doesn't want inconvenience that standing for Jesus would mean so he does a cowardly thing he shouts to them in verse 39 you have a question you have a custom that I should release one man for you at the Passover so do you want me to release for you the king of the Jews and they cry out again the crowd does not this man but Barabbas now Barabbas was a robber now Jesus used that word robber back in chapter 10 of John as somebody who steals kills and destroys somebody who's the

very opposite of the good shepherd and so here there is an incredible exchange this convicted guilty destructive

Barabbas goes free and Jesus who has been declared guilt free completely innocent goes to the cross in his place he dies Barabbas does not and I think that John shares that scene with us because this is what Jesus death means for every person here tonight he goes to the cross in your place and in my place as well and he is our substitute who sets us free now and forever because the sentence of guilt of sin before a holy God belongs to every person that guilt belongs to all of us and it is taken by the Lamb of God onto himself when you entrust your life to him it's a very personal exchange you know think of God calling you by name he says to me Dan you go free and Jesus goes to the cross that is the great exchange and it frees you not to a life of guilt as it did for Barabbas but it frees you to a life of actively listening to that royal voice the voice of truth and following that voice in all of your life this is the gift of the great exchange the substitute that sets us free so when we look at

Barabbas think of the gift that Jesus has given to us in this chapter well I want to close by saying that we have seen three very bright lights in this darkness Jesus is the Passover Lamb he saves us Jesus is the King of Truth he is the true King and he is our substitute that sets us free to live for him and the question for us as we leave is what does it mean for us today well I think that being in the season of Lent we have a gift because that season calls you and he calls me to really examine our lives and to ask ourselves are you listening to the King of your life you know are there areas that you may be rejecting the Lamb of God and it may be in a number of different ways but it may be in the ways that the people in this passage were rejecting

Jesus so are you like the crowd do you go along with the popular thinking of those who are around you maybe very powerful ways of thinking or charismatic figures many times the world rejects the truth of God they make it makes idols out of sexuality and our material wealth and it causes us to think about life and death and what we are about in ways that are completely contrary to the king of truth so the question is are you listening to the voice of the world around you or are you listening to the voice that sets you free or you might be like the priests and this I think is something that's a temptation for people who have been a Christian for a long time especially are you confident in your own goodness in the fact that you have been a Christian that you are involved in Christian activities in the church the priests own sense of spiritual pride really blinded them to seeing their own need for a savior they could not see their own sin they didn't see their need for Jesus the Passover lamb who takes away the sin of the world and each of us constantly need our spiritual eyes to be open and to see our need to repent and to believe the good news the good news of Jesus that has saved us and frees us and finally there's Pilate you know he has a fear of others and of his own position because of inconvenience and trouble he doesn't want to stand for Jesus is that our situation as well do we like Pilate sit on the fence even though we know the truth of Jesus do we feel that it is inconvenient for us or uncomfortable for us to stand for him or do you love the truth of Jesus more than your own well-being more than your own sense of comfort are you standing for Jesus when it is difficult and it is uncertain well we thank God today for his Holy

[27 : 45] Spirit who strengthens us the Bible says that we can put on the belt of truth the truth of Jesus own voice and that we can stand strongly for and live for Jesus who is the servant king who loved us and died for us may God give us that grace may we look to him and listen to the voice that changes everything the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world amen