

# A Question of Scripture

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Date: 09 April 2017

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[ 0 : 00 ] Oh, good morning, everybody. Good morning, yes, good morning. If you are joining us for the first time, my name's Aaron. I'm one of the ministers on staff here.

And we are coming to the end of a series in the Gospel of John. And today we're looking at the crucifixion. There is a sense that we're on holy ground this morning, I think.

It's a very emotional passage. And yet John doesn't romanticize it at all. The description of Christ's crucifixion, in fact, I don't think you could say it any more simply.

There they crucified him. So John's description of what happened that day is very lean. Here's what we're going to do first.

First, I'd like to look at an overview of the whole passage. Because it's made up of a series of seven scenes. And how John gets his main ideas across is through contrasts in those scenes.

[ 1 : 06 ] So let's remind ourselves of what those seven scenes are. Seven short scenes. Scene one, Jesus is led to Golgotha and crucified. Scene two, the inscription, King of the Jews is put above his head.

Scene three, the soldiers gamble over his clothes. And scene four, Christ speaks to his mother and John from the cross. Scene five, Christ dies. Scene six, the soldiers see that Christ has died.

And so they don't break his legs. Scene seven, Jesus is buried. So there you are. Seven short, lean descriptions of what happened on this day.

And as I said, what holds the scenes together are three great contrasts. And we'll look at them one at a time. Beginning with a contrast between scene one and scene two.

And the contrast is between the appearance of the man on the cross and the sign above the man's head. So first scene one, verses 17 and 18.

[ 2 : 08 ] Jesus is taken and he's marched to Golgotha. And it would have been a brutal journey. He's already in pretty rough shape because of the scourging. And on top of that, we're told that he has to carry his cross.

Now it's most likely he's just carrying the horizontal piece of the cross. So the place of crucifixion. The scholars believe that the vertical piece of the cross was likely permanently in place.

And the criminals were marched the longest route to the place of execution to maximize the amount of people who saw the person about to be put to death as a deterrent to would-be criminals.

And at the place of execution, the criminal is stripped naked. The horizontal beam nailed to the vertical piece and the victim nailed in place. Our passage tells us, very interesting detail, that Christ was crucified between two people.

It's a powerful image, I think. Christ here and two on either side. Christ in the middle. It indicates to us that he was regarded as the chief. The chief sinner.

[ 3 : 15 ] The chief thief here. That's scene one. Christ was crucified as a criminal. A cursed man. And anyone looking at him would have thought, yes, there's a cursed man.

Now the great contrast is scene two. From the outside, objectively looking on, you would think, well, this so-called saviour has been humiliated on the most staggering scale.

However, that's not the case, is it? Pilate, unknowingly here in scene two, recasts for us the whole scene. He says this is not an execution.

This is an enthronement. Jesus is not a thief. He's not an insurrectionist getting his due. He's the king. How does this play out?

Well, people being crucified would generally have their crime spelled out above them. Again, as a deterrent, as a warning to other people who were thinking about committing a similar crime.

[ 4 : 13 ] But what Pilate wanted instead was the sign, Jesus of Nazareth, king of the Jews. Now why would he do that? Why does he want that? Well, it's not because he's had a change of heart.

He hasn't had any sort of sudden epiphany. I don't think he feels sorry for Jesus. I think he put it up there because he knew that the religious leaders would hate it. And they say, they say, we want this change.

Can you say something like, he thinks he's the king? Because they want him to sound like a crazy person. And Pilate says, no, this is what I want. You see, the religious leaders had outmaneuvered Pilate.

We heard about that last week. They'd outmaneuvered him. They'd made Pilate crucify a man he didn't want. And this sign? Well, that was Pilate's revenge. Yet, despite the fact that this was a spiteful act on Pilate's part, it serves God's end.

Pilate unknowingly becomes a prophet, proclaiming the truth of the situation here. And, I mean, the contrast is huge, isn't it?

[ 5 : 23 ] Never did a person look less royal than Jesus did at this point. But he was the king. He is the king. And isn't it wonderful that Pilate insists that that fact is proclaimed in three languages.

In the languages of religion, the languages of commerce, the languages of culture and law. And it's amazing. This spiteful act becomes a missionary act. So all the world would understand who Christ was.

It was proclaimed. Proclaimed wide to every culture. Now, here's the question. What does it mean, though? What does it mean? And I've just said it's a sign. He says he's the king of the Jews. What does that mean, though? What does it mean that he was the king?

In the mid-1800s, a picture was found. It was a piece of graffiti scratched onto a plaster wall in Rome. And sometime in the 1st or 2nd century. And it's a picture of a cross.

And on the cross is a donkey-headed figure. And standing beside the cross is a young man saluting this picture. And below it are the words in Latin, but translated here, Alex Semenos worships his God.

[ 6 : 32 ] So the graffiti was obviously mocking a young Christian. And it's probably the earliest depiction of the cross. And isn't it? Well, it's interesting, isn't it, that the earliest depiction of the cross we have is one that insults it.

People back then thought that the whole God on the cross thing was just silly. It was absolutely ridiculous. People today are a little bit more genteel.

I think a bit more respectful, perhaps. People don't tend to mock the cross, but they do undermine its significance. And one of the ways people do that is by framing the crucifixion in terms of a great man who came to a tragic end.

Or more poetically, in the words of Albert Schweitzer, who was a very famous liberal theologian, he said this, Jesus threw himself upon the wheel of history in an attempt to bring it to a halt, to bring the world to an end and usher in the kingdom of God in its fullness and power.

But the wheel continued to turn, and it crushed him. In other words, Jesus had some really great ideas, but he overestimated himself. He got in over his head, and well, the cross.

[ 7 : 45 ] The cross happened. And when we look at this passage today, you see that John is very careful not to let us think in these terms. How does he do that? With this repeated phrase, to fulfill scripture.

To fulfill scripture. Three times, verse 24, 28, and 36. Now, I don't think these little lines here to fulfill scripture are there to say, Hey, look.

Isn't it cool? Isn't it cool? That little thing. They talked about it all. Isn't that cool? They talked about that so long ago. No. I mean, it is cool, but it's not the point. The point is this. These references to the Old Testament prophecy, they're there to say, God's purposes are alive on the cross.

God is doing something here. God is in control of all the details here. These Old Testament references remind us that behind this sequence of events, behind these seven scenes, there's a deeper script being played out.

That God is saving the world. And God is saving the world through his chosen king. Now, this is not a surprise to Jesus. Jesus is obviously in the loop here.

[ 8 : 59 ] Because Christ talked about his death. He's repeatedly talked about his death. And have you noticed that whenever Christ talked about his death, it was never in the language of fate. It was never in the language of, They'll get me in the end.

This is going to end badly. It was always in the language of purpose. It was, I came to give my life as a ransom. Or in John 10, I lay down my life for the sheep.

See, Jesus knew death was coming. And he knew it had a purpose. He allowed it to happen to him. See, Jesus wasn't crushed by the wheel of history.

He was steering it. He was crucified like a criminal. But he reigned from the cross. That's the first great contrast. The second is between scenes three and four.

So there were two groups of people at the foot of the cross. There was a group of soldiers. And there were the women. Now, let's look at the soldiers. So divvying up the clothes of the executed. That's what they're doing.

[10:02] They're sort of dividing up the clothes of the executed. That was a fringe benefit. If you executed someone, You got to keep their clothes. And they would sell them or keep them. And it's hard to fathom, isn't it, really, That a few hours after Christ was crucified, Somebody was walking around in his clothes.

And these guys just appear ambivalent to what's happening. This is just a day's work. There could be people on the roads, Retar sealing a highway or something.

They could be putting out a new stop sign. They could be doing anything. They work for the government. And yet God is mysteriously sovereign over all of us.

And we're reminded that even this detail is talked about in Psalm 22, Hundreds of years before. But the blank indifference of these men is contrasted to the heartbreak of these women.

But the heartbreak is beyond just ambivalence and sadness. The contrast goes deeper than that. I think if the soldiers represent the world's attitude towards Christ, Which is, I'm not that interested, But I'm kind of, I'm just going to make the most of what I've got.

[11:10] I'm going to make the most of what's in front of me. That's the world's attitude towards Christ. I think that's contrasted with the scene of the woman. And they represent Christ's attitude towards the ones he loves.

I mean, it's an astounding sort of moment here, I think. These women would have looked around, And they would have looked at their life, And they looked at the scene, And all they would have seen is injustice and pain, And it's awful. And what does Christ say to them?

He says, He doesn't say, Isn't this terrible? Isn't this awful? How did this happen? He says, Care for each other. That's what you do. You care for each other.

At the foot of the cross, The soldiers fight over cloth. And from the cross, Jesus calls his followers to radical love.

He forms a new family. He says to Mary, Mary, you have a new son. John, John, you have a new mother. Mary. I think this is the second great contrast in the passage.

[12:13] Our response to Jesus' ambivalence, And his great love for us. He blesses this heartbroken people by making a new family. Now moving on, The third contrast. And this is the great contrast.

This is the central contrast of the passage. If you looked at verses 31 to 42, What would you say is the big point there? If you slide your eyes over there.

Big point. Jesus is dead. He is dead. It was Passover. The next day. The religious leaders were going to have a massive feast.

Lots of people coming into town for that. They didn't want dead bodies on crosses. Or people dying up on crosses during their big feast. They didn't want birds pecking on the bodies.

It would just be awful. So they said, Well, let's just make sure these guys are dead. And then we'll pull them down. And the way they make sure that they're dead, or the way they hurry up the death is by breaking their legs.

[13:11] Now how does this work? Well, it's the way the bodies were positioned on a cross. The victims had to push up on the nails on their feet in order to catch a breath. Every time they breathed, they'd push up on their feet.

And so to hurry up somebody's death is they'd smash the legs so they couldn't push up and they'd suffocate quite quickly. So verse 33 says, They broke the legs of the other guys on either side of Jesus.

But when they came to Jesus, Jesus was already dead. So just another indication, a small thing that he died on his own tomb. So what do they do? They stab him with a spear.

He doesn't move. He's dead. He's definitely dead. He's dead. They stab him with a spear. No, he's definitely dead. And John makes a point at this point of saying, I was there. I saw it. He's definitely dead.

Verse 38. These two undercover disciples out themselves in a very public way by caring for the body. And it talks about the embalming sort of stuff that they use.

[14:08] And they talk about wrapping the body in cloth. And they talk about putting it in a tomb. He is dead. Christ is dead. Now where's the contrast? The contrast is verse 30.

When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, It is finished. And bowed his head and gave up his spirit. In the Greek, it's he delivered over his spirit.

He died on his own terms. He delivered over his spirit. Same word used. I think David has mentioned when Judas delivered Jesus. Annas delivers Jesus. The soldiers deliver Jesus. Pilate delivers Jesus. Same word here. But the last time it's used, it's no. It's actually Jesus dying on his own terms. But what I want to focus on are these last words here.

It is finished. Notice what it doesn't say. It doesn't say, I am finished. Jesus is not saying, that's it for me. I'm going to die soon, everyone. And then he dies.

[15:05] He says, It has finished. Something has been done. That's what he's trying to say. The Greek word here, tetalestai. It means totally paid.

It's an economic word. It's a commerce word. So at work, when invoices or bills come in, the person stamps it, right? They stamp it when they've paid it. This is what they did back in the days.

They'd stamp their invoices and bills with this word, tetalestai, tetalestai. Something has been paid and filled. What's the contrast? The contrast is this. Whilst this whole situation, it looks like death. It looks like defeat. It looks like a reason to despair. Yet the last words of Christ are, I've done it. I've done it. I've paid the price.

I've done the thing I'm meant to do. Now what exactly did Jesus accomplish? What did he finish? There is a huge chasm between humanity and God.

[16:11] A chasm that exists because of sin. Like the soldiers, most people want to ignore God and do their own thing, be their own God, make the best of life. But the problem is, we were made to be with God.

And when we're away from Him, this is why there's so much pain in the world. This is why there's so much sin in the world. Because we're trying to live a life where we are the moral compass, where we make all the decisions based on nothing but ourselves.

Now God is just, and He is holy. And He can't just sweep sin under the carpet and pretend that we're all sort of cool, that everything's okay. No, a price must be paid. And on the cross, Jesus pays that price.

That's why He says, I've done it. It's finished. It's been paid in full. Folks, see this is the, look if you were new to the whole Christian thing, let me just say it very simply.

This is the genius of Christianity. Right there. Summed up in Christ's last words. It's finished. Do you know what the last words of Buddha were?

[17:20] Strive without ceasing. Those were the last words of Buddha. One of my favorite people in the world is a Buddhist. First, there's some admirable things about the faith.

But salvation in the Buddhist faith, it looks like striving without ceasing. That's very difficult, isn't it? People say things like this. All religions say the same things.

No, they don't. Goodness me. Christ is the opposite. He says, I have done everything. I have bridged that chasm.

I have purchased forgiveness for you. Now, trust in that gospel, Christ says. Trust in that gospel. Then you can do your best. But trust in that gospel.

Now, our problem tends to be is we try and add to what Christ has done. And when we try and add to it, we make it worse. We actually know. We subtract from it. Some of you folks are woodworkers.

[18:21] I love working with wood. Now, imagine this. Imagine I'm making something. Imagine I find a really cool old set of drawers and I want to give them as a gift to you. And so I get this old set of drawers that's really beaten up and I spend weeks and I'm sanding it down and I'm using all my special oils and stuff and filling in cracks and I'm rebuilding drawers and it looks gorgeous.

It's a polyurethane. It's beautiful. It's tungsten oil. It looks amazing. And I present it to you and you go, oh, great, thank you. And out of your back pocket you pull a sanding block and you start getting stuck into it with your sanding block right in front of me.

It's finished! I did it! What's wrong with you? Leave them alone.

Now, how do we add to Christ's salvation? How are we pulling out that sanding block and sort of thinking we can do a better job?

Well, one way is we try desperately to prove ourselves to God and we do that through, the motivation could be vanity because we think we're so fantastic and God should be happy to have us or through perhaps regret.

[ 19 : 36 ] Maybe you're beating yourself up over sins you committed years ago and you've been trying to make up for them ever since and Jesus says to you, I was beaten for you.

I was beaten for you. Why are you trying to atone for it? How dare you hate yourself? How dare you beat yourself up? It's finished.

I told you at the start, about that early piece of Roman graffiti and that mocking picture of a young man worshipping Jesus, a donkey-headed Jesus.

Well, they found another piece of graffiti nearby on a wall in another room. No pictures, just words in Latin. Aleximonos Videlis, which means Aleximonos is faithful.

Isn't that cool? That somebody had that guy's back. What does it mean to be faithful? What does it mean to be a faithful Christian?

[ 20 : 34 ] What does it mean to be faithful to Jesus? Well, it's less about doing and it's more about trusting. And it's about trusting in the central thing that Christ came to accomplish.

And if that's not at the heart of your faith, all that you do, everything that springs out of that will be muddied and tainted. The Gospel says you're a sinner.

You're saved by grace. And you spend your life trying to prove how good you are to God. You never will because you're far worse than you think you are. And if that's how you spend your life, you are living your life based on the final words of Buddha, not the final words of Christ.

See, until you see, until you take seriously what Christ has said, it is finished. Until you see that, you won't know rest.

You won't know spiritual peace. And you won't know freedom until you capture those words. It is finished. So folks, would you make these words personal for your life?

[ 21 : 38 ] Would you think about the sins in your life that you're still beating yourself up over? would you still think about the ways you're trying to prove yourself to God and say this truth over them?

It is finished. Amen.