

The Cross: Week 6

Steve Watson | Daily Bible Guide | 2020

Monday, March 30

John 19:30-37 (NRSV)

³⁰ When Jesus had received the wine, he said, "It is finished." Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

³¹ Since it was the day of Preparation, the Jews did not want the bodies left on the cross during the sabbath, especially because that sabbath was a day of great solemnity. So they asked Pilate to have the legs of the crucified men broken and the bodies removed. ³² Then 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 Instead, one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out. ³⁵ (He who saw this has testified so that you also may believe. His testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth.) ³⁶ These things occurred so that the scripture might be fulfilled, "None of his bones shall be broken." ³⁷ And again another passage of scripture says, "They will look on the one whom they have pierced."

Points of Interest

- The sixth of our seven words are some of the last words Jesus speaks before his death, the final words John records. It is finished.
- What is finished? We don't know what Jesus meant. On the surface, these are sad words. Death is imminent. The fear beneath all human fear - the fear of death - is real even for Jesus. His time has come. They could also be proud, even victorious words. Jesus has been faithful to his life's most central work. He has been true to his Kingdom of God teaching and actions, even as they provoked the Empire to the point of killing him. He has been faithful to his call to suffer and die, in solidarity with all human death and suffering. He has entered into his cosmic call of sin-bearer, burden-bearer, disease and death-bearer for us all. He has done it.
- In other ways, these are confusing words. With hindsight, we might say to Jesus that his life's work and presence to us all has just begun. Resurrection is coming. Hope is around the corner. Pentecost - the releasing of the Spirit of God to us all, the presence of Jesus throughout the earth - is coming. The love and hope and redemption of Jesus are all just getting started.

- Perhaps the context of the passage gives us a hint to another meaning of these words: It is finished.
- John's context for these words is Sabbath and sacrifice. Jesus dies as the weekly day of rest begins. What work is ceasing? What rest is beginning? And Jesus, throughout John and here, is symbolically connected with the language of sacrifice. Jesus is the Lamb who was slain, the great sacrifice to end all sacrifice. What sacrifice is finished?
- In an old debate playing out in the Bible, Jesus sided strongly with the Hebrew prophetic tradition that argued God didn't require sacrifices or sabbath for any of God's needs. Sabbath and sacrifices existed for human needs. In the case of sabbath, there's a human need for rest and deliverance from the toxins of stress and anxiety. In the case of sacrifice, there's a human need to externalize blame and anxiety over all our biggest problems in life - things like guilt and fear and scarcity and death.
- At minimum, the first followers of Jesus were clear that Jesus would be our final sacrifice. God likely never needed all those slaughtered animals, but even if God did, Jesus is the end of all that. And whatever need we have to see a weak and powerless creature suffer for us, Jesus has fulfilled.
- Keeping our eyes on Jesus is an invitation to stop our old habits of scapegoating and blame shifting. What Jesus has absorbed, we should do to no other. And keeping our eyes on Jesus is an invitation to ongoing sabbath rest - to ask Jesus to hold the burdens of our anxieties and fears and to live with greater introspection and greater freedom.

A Direction for Prayer

Pray for any family or friends that have been subject to blame or scapegoating, during the virus outbreak or for anything else. Pray for God's protection of their hearts and bodies.

Spiritual Exercise of the Week

Freedom From Blame – On a little scrap of paper, write down two things - one big fear you have, and person or force you blame for it. (You might be blaming yourself, or a person, or a political party, some unseen force or any other person, group, or thing.)

- Push that paper a few feet away from you, and ask God to help you give that fear and blame less energy. Picture the dying body of Jesus holding that fear and that blame and saying: It is finished.
- Ask God for a quieter, more peaceful mind today. Ask God for help to give up our spirit of anxiety and blame for more peace, more constructive purpose, and more gratitude.

Tuesday, March 31

Today we offer to you a short poem to supplement our Bible readings. It is in the form of a collect - a short prayer in which we collect words of praise and request and offer them to God. The poem, by Padraig O'Tuama, and the artwork by Sieger Koder can be found here:

<http://www.padraigotuama.com/news/stationsofthecross> and in Padraig's short book [Daily Prayer with the Corrymeala Community](#).



Jesus of the flesh,
Naked you came from the womb
and naked you were made for the cross.
May we always honor
the integrity of the body.
We ask this for no other reason
Than our own dignity.

Points of Interest

- All victims of sacrifice and scapegoating are weak, vulnerable, and powerless. Jesus is extraordinary in that he voluntarily chose weakness and powerlessness. Jesus was born naked, as we all are. And unlike most of us, he died naked and utterly exposed as well.
- Look at Jesus' body in this picture. He is stretched out most vulnerably, undefended. The various people in the image - some clear, others murkily lurking in the background - react differently. Some pray, some are sorrowful, some hurl insults and abuse. Jesus remains open and vulnerable.
- So many of our bodies are violated as well. Bodies that are shamed, bodies that are objectified and commodified, bodies that are abused, bodies that are shamed, bodies that bear violence, bodies that are raped, bodies that are beaten or shot, bodies that are insulted.
- As you pray this prayer, ask God first to see and treat your own body with dignity and honor.
- Ask God for the kindness and decency to see all bodies respectfully, sacredly, with dignity.

A Direction for Prayer

Pray for the protection of your city's most routinely harmed bodies - for the safety and dignity of Black bodies, queer bodies, women's bodies, children's bodies.

Spiritual Exercise of the Week

Freedom From Blame – On a little scrap of paper, write down two things - one big fear you have, and person or force you blame for it. (You might be blaming yourself, or a person, or a political party, some unseen force or any other person, group, or thing.)

- Push that paper a few feet away from you, and ask God to help you give that fear and blame less energy. Picture the dying body of Jesus holding that fear and that blame and saying: It is finished.

- Ask God for a quieter, more peaceful mind today. Ask God for help to give up our spirit of anxiety and blame for more peace, more constructive purpose, and more gratitude.

Wednesday, April 1

Isaiah 53:4-10 (NRSV)

⁴ Surely he has borne our infirmities
and carried our diseases;
yet we accounted him stricken,
struck down by God, and afflicted.

⁵ But he was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed.

⁶ All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have all turned to our own way,
and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

⁷ He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.

⁸ By a perversion of justice he was taken away.
Who could have imagined his future?
For he was cut off from the land of the living,
stricken for the transgression of my people.

⁹ They made his grave with the wicked
and his tomb with the rich,
although he had done no violence,
and there was no deceit in his mouth.

¹⁰ Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain.
When you make his life an offering for sin,
he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days;
through him the will of the Lord shall prosper.

Points of Interest

- This passage is part of one of the four Servant Songs in Isaiah. These are four poetic odes to a servant of God who helps people God knows and love, even at great cost. In most Jewish scholarship, the servant songs use poetic imagery to describe the redemptive sacrifices and sufferings of the nation of Israel or the Jewish people broadly, who have borne immense and needless suffering but will be vindicated by God in the future as they have been at various times in the past. This is a solid and helpful reading.

- Many followers of Jesus are able to read a second reading onto this passage, that the poetry of Isaiah also poetically evokes the life of Jesus. It isn't descriptive. That Isaiah wasn't thinking about Jesus when he wrote and that we are reading poetry, not analysis. It isn't literal. What this passage can do is give us imagery to more deeply understand, appreciate, and worship Jesus as a first vulnerable, and then vindicated scapegoat.
- Like all scapegoats, all people that bear others' blame, Jesus was badly beaten. He suffered enormous physical and emotional trauma. Like all scapegoats, all people that bear others' blame, Jesus was powerless. He was stripped of his clothing, did not have weapons that could match the brutal force of Rome. And like all scapegoats, all people that bear others' blame, Jesus suffered a perversion of justice. He was done wrong.
- Three times this passage says that God has done this to the servant - that God has struck down, laid on punishment, or crushed him. We can take that literally, that God used human agents to punish and destroy his son instead of us. Or, more in the spirit of this Bible guide and this year's Lenten teaching, we can take that poetically. People crushed Jesus, and God used and is using that injustice for many good purposes - to teach us what God is like, to be with us in solidarity, to encourage an end to all further scapegoating, and to unite the life of God with all our pain and death in order to heal us.

A Direction for Prayer

Pray for all your friends and family who are sick today, that Jesus will heal them. Pray for those that have experienced injustice, that they will know God is on their side and that God will help vindicate them. And pray for those that bear old and deep wounds of many kinds, that they will know God's loving freedom to heal them.

Spiritual Exercise of the Week

Freedom From Blame – On a little scrap of paper, write down two things - one big fear you have, and person or force you blame for it. (You might be blaming yourself, or a person, or a political party, some unseen force or any other person, group, or thing.)

- Push that paper a few feet away from you, and ask God to help you give that fear and blame less energy. Picture the dying body of Jesus holding that fear and that blame and saying: It is finished.
- Ask God for a quieter, more peaceful mind today. Ask God for help to give up our spirit of anxiety and blame for more peace, more constructive purpose, and more gratitude.

Thursday, April 2

John 9:1-5, 39-41 (NRSV)

⁹ As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. ² His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" ³ Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. ⁴ We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. ⁵ As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world."

³⁹ Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind." ⁴⁰ Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" ⁴¹ Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains.

Points of Interest

- Before we return tomorrow to the language and meaning of sacrifice, we'll look at two short parts of a long story about Jesus in the middle of the gospel of John.
- This passage is amongst other things, a rebuke of religion. I know this because of an A- I got on a paper in graduate school. I wrote what I thought was an amazing paper on this passage, for a class in biblical Greek. But I got an A-, not an A, because I missed something important to my professor, that the last word before this section, and the first word after it, have to do with temple or religious holiday. So this passage is going to highlight what Jesus does that religion mostly screws up.
- In religious settings, we like playing into a human obsession with blame. "Whose fault is this?" we like to ask. And depending on our religion or politics or any number of other things, we blame the liberals, or we blame the conservatives, or we blame the Christians or the Muslims or the Jews or the immigrants or the billionaires. . . . It's exhausting just writing this. Don't get me wrong. Careful analysis of causes of injustice and harm are valuable in doing good, just work for the flourishing of human life and the flourishing of this earth. But most of our blame is not this. It is quick and nasty blame-shifting used to harm a weaker person or group, while gaining votes or money or image or good vibes for others.
- In Jesus' time, as sometimes in ours, sickness or disability are seen as a sign of somebody's moral failing. When people keep wondering who to blame for this one man's blindness, Jesus refuses to play that blame game. He says that's a bad question. As I like to say, "Fault is not an interesting word." It doesn't usually get us toward more truth or more help.
- Jesus instead turns his students toward action. He wants to ask: What good can God do here? Not: whose fault is this?

- Given this is a story about the healing of a man's blindness, there are extended metaphors around light and darkness, and around sight and blindness. We won't fully analyse those here, but provide a couple of brief thoughts.
- There are dark times, when we can not see or act. Times of panic are sometimes like that. Times of great delusion are like that. Sometimes seasons of immense scapegoating are like that. Death is certainly like that. And there are times of light, when we see and understand the good and have power to act on it. Spring, 2020 - a time of pandemic - strikes me as a time of both darkness and light. Our capacity to see and act on the good seems compromised in many ways. So much we don't understand. We have so many limits. And yet, where the good we can do is clear, Jesus says to join with God in doing good.
- Jesus also turns our notions of blindness and sight upside down. So much of what we think we see and understand is, according to Jesus, backwards. Who we call winners and losers, best and worst, richest and poorest, most honorable and shameful is so often backwards. There is a type of judgment from Jesus that has nothing to do with punishment, but with revealing the truth of things. May we have the humility to admit where we've been wrong about things, and may we learn to see ourselves and one another and our earth more truly.

A Direction for Prayer

Pray that in a season of fear, good work would be done for others by all of us who have vision and power to do it. And pray that the richest, most powerful, most educated, and even most religious in your city would have the humility to learn and redirect in any places they have been misguided or unhelpful.

Spiritual Exercise of the Week

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Friday, April 10

Hebrews 10:11-18 (NRSV)

11 And every priest stands day after day at his service, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins. 12 But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, "he sat down at the right hand of God," 13 and since then has been waiting "until his enemies would be made a footstool for his feet." 14 For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified. 15 And the Holy Spirit also testifies to us, for after saying,

16 "This is the covenant that I will make with them

after those days, says the Lord:

I will put my laws in their hearts,

and I will write them on their minds,"

17 he also adds,

"I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more."

18 Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin.

Points of Interest

- This passage comes in the middle of a long discourse about Jesus, sacrifice, ancient temple practice, and reinterpretation of Hebrew scripture. A fair bit of it is technical and belongs in a pretty remote cultural and religious context. But a few more contemporary comments here.
- Hebrews argues, along with a fair bit of the Bible's prophetic tradition, that much of ancient religious practice accommodated human needs but wasn't particularly effective. Sacrifices gave people some relief from guilty conscience and fear but not a lot of lasting power for inner transformation.
- Jesus' ministry involved a few game changing transformations to global spirituality and relationship with God, including but not limited to:
 - o A single, final sacrifice to end all sacrifices.
 - o A union of divine and human personhood, so that God knows what it is like to be human and humans have a representative of our species that spends all day with God.
 - o In the resurrection, an initial great vindication of justice and a triumph of life over death, with much more of this to come.

- o A new covenant (new promise, new deal, new way) between God and people, where God can be internally present by God’s Spirit to human minds and hearts, guiding people from within, rather than without.
- o A greater imaginative capacity on God’s behalf, to forget about human failing and wrongdoing.
- The intention of Hebrews is to help us gain freedom and perseverance through hard times. In the section that follows this passage, the key words are “confidence”, “assurance”, “a new way”, “enlightenment”, and “endurance.”

A Direction for Prayer

Pray for your family and friends that feel discouraged or otherwise far from God and far from life, that they would gain a hope in God’s closeness to them, empathy with them, and power for them.

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