

John 19:31-36
Seeing in Death the Saving Triumph of Jesus

Introduction

Last week, Jesus cried out (I believe *to the Father*), “I thirst,” and then, after being given a drink of sour wine, He bowed His head and gave up His spirit. Now John tells us what happened to the body of Jesus after He died — and how this enables us to see even in death the saving triumph of Jesus.

I. John 19:31 — Then the Jews, because it was the day of Preparation [for the Sabbath; Friday], so that the bodies would not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), asked Pilate that their legs might be broken, and that they might be taken away.

Normally, the Romans would leave crucified victims to linger on the cross until their death, sometimes for several days, and then the vultures would finish them off (Beasley-Murray; Carson). If there was need to hasten death, the victim would be brutally put out of his misery by breaking (or crushing) his legs with an iron hammer. This resulted not only in a much faster rate of blood loss, but also in suffocation, because the victim could no longer push himself up to fill his lungs with air.

The Jewish leaders want the death of Jesus and the two men who were crucified with Him to be hastened because they don’t want them left hanging overnight. They appear to have in mind this passage from the law of Moses.

➤ Deuteronomy 21:22–23 — If a man has committed a sin, the judgment of which is death, and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his corpse shall not hang all night on the tree, but you shall surely bury him on the same day (because cursed of God is he who is hanged), so that you do not make unclean your land which Yahweh your God gives you as an inheritance.

It seems that the Jews were not normally concerned with leaving crucified victims to hang overnight, or even for multiple nights (or perhaps they would have been if they had more say in the matter). But in this case, not only was the next day the Sabbath, it was a “high” Sabbath—it was a Passover Sabbath. The religious leaders are zealous—at least in some sense—for the Passover festival (cf. Jn. 18:28). They love to celebrate Israel’s redemption from Egypt through the ten plagues and the crossing of the Red Sea. They believe it would be wrong to leave these victims of God’s curse hanging overnight when the next day is a day of such holy joy.

But there’s a tragic irony here. These same Jewish leaders seem to have forgotten that the Passover represented not just Israel’s deliverance from *Egypt*, but also Israel’s own deliverance from *divine judgment and death* at the hands of the destroying angel (cf. Exod. 12:23; Heb. 11:28; Ps. 78:49). All the firstborn *of Israel* would also have been killed if they had not applied the blood of the Passover lamb to the doorposts of their own houses. The Passover, therefore, was a reminder of Israel’s own need for a greater and a more permanent redemption from sin and death. The Passover pointed to the hope of a “second Exodus” when they would be given not just

a temporal inheritance in an earthly Jerusalem, but an eternal inheritance in a heavenly Jerusalem. In short, the Passover should have pointed these religious leaders to Jesus, the very one whose death they have demanded and now ask to be hastened so He won't be left hanging on a Passover Sabbath.

Here is a blind hypocrisy that staggers the mind. And here also is a divine sovereignty that staggers the mind. In the sovereignty of God, it's precisely their sinful blindness that brings about the fulfillment of the Passover in the death of Jesus. We see, then, on the one hand, the mysterious, all-encompassing sovereignty of God—and this both humbles us and comforts us. But we see also in the Jews' blind hypocrisy a warning against being so blind ourselves (cf. 18:28). How important it is that we learn to pray with the psalmist:

- Psalm 19:12–14 (cf. 139:23-24) — Who can discern his errors? Acquit me of hidden faults. Also keep back Your slave from presumptuous sins; let them not rule over me; then I will be blameless, and I shall be acquitted of great transgression. Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O Yahweh, my rock and my Redeemer.

John's primary point, however, is not that these things should serve as an example or a lesson for us. His point is that as a direct result of this request that the legs of Jesus be broken, we should see who Jesus is, and that in seeing who He is and believing in Him, we might have life in His name. John continues in verses 32-34:

II. John 19:32–34 — So the soldiers came, and broke the legs of the first man and of the other who was crucified with Him; but coming to Jesus, when they saw that He was already dead, they did not break His legs. But one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately blood and water came out.

First, what are we to make of this blood and water? Over the centuries, some have suggested that this was a miraculous event. If it was, then we should probably imagine not only “pure” red blood, but also crystal-clear water, “flowing” from Jesus' side even as water flows from a spring or a fountain. This miraculous flow of blood and water would then be symbolic of the forgiveness and cleansing and eternal life that flows to us through Jesus' death (cf. 3:5; 4:10, 14; 6:53-56; 7:38). This certainly is a spiritually edifying interpretation, isn't it? It certainly gives us space for lots of meaningful meditation. And yet there's no hint in the text that John believed he had witnessed a miracle.

Sometimes, even those who don't believe there's a miracle here still argue that John saw in the blood and the water a symbol of forgiveness and cleansing. So the hymn, “Rock of Ages,” says: “Rock of Ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in Thee; let the *water* and the *blood*, from Thy wounded side which *flowed*, be of sin the *double cure*, *save from wrath* [blood] and *make me pure* [water].” What do you think? And why should it matter?

I'm personally not convinced of this reading for four reasons. First, John goes on to draw out the significance of the fact that Jesus' legs were not broken and the fact that His side was pierced (vv. 36-37), but he says nothing more about the blood and water (cf. Lenski). Second, if this was not a miraculous event with pure water flowing from Jesus' side, then I think it would have been

hard to see in this “water” (likely a “clear, pale straw-colored” “serum”) a symbol of that which cleanses and purifies (see Sava, quoted in Beasley-Murray). John simply says that blood and water “came out.” He doesn’t describe it “flowing” as it were from a “spring” or a “fountain.” Third, nowhere else in the Bible do we have such a crassly literal portrayal of the cleansing and life-giving water that Jesus provides (cf. Eph. 5:25-27). And nowhere else in the Bible do we have such a crassly literal portrayal of Jesus’ cleansing and life-giving blood. The blood of Jesus, which represents His death in our place (cf. Gen. 9:4; Lev. 17:11, 14; Deut. 12:23), is spiritually applied to our hearts through faith (cf. Rom. 3:25; Heb. 9:13-14) and not—as in the Old Testament—physically applied. So it’s interesting that in all four of the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ crucifixion, not one other time is the blood of Jesus mentioned. Finally, if this wasn’t a miraculous occurrence (and if there’s no specific Scripture that’s being fulfilled [contra Hendriksen]), then we have to ask how the blood and water that came out of Jesus’ side compel us to *believe* that He is the Christ, the Son of God (cf. 19:35)?

Why do I spend so much time on this? Because we need to ask ourselves: “Is there really anything wrong with the spiritually edifying fruit of a sanctified imagination? If it’s produced by a sanctified imagination, and if the result is something spiritually edifying, what can be the danger? The answer to this question is that very subtly the Scriptures are emptied of their own intrinsic power and authority and beauty, and that power and authority and beauty comes to reside in us; it becomes a construct that we create. But to this I can only respond, God forbid! May it never be! Why did I spend so much time this week asking about the significance of the blood and the water and searching out how I should preach it? Because I believe it’s when we do this that the true power and authority and beauty of God’s word is made fully effective in our lives.

So why does John mention the blood and the water? John includes this detail simply because this is what he saw happen in connection with the spear thrust. It’s the piercing of Jesus’ side that John finds most significant (cf. 19:37). The blood and water that “immediately” came out testify to the reality and the extent of the piercing, and so also to the reality of Jesus’ death – that He was really and truly dead. In verse 30, John says that Jesus bowed His head and gave up His spirit. In verse 33, John says that when the soldiers came to Jesus, they saw that he was already dead. In verse 34, apparently to be sure that Jesus was really dead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus’ side with a spear, and immediately blood and water came out. This satisfied the soldiers that Jesus was, indeed, dead. And John means for us to see, too, that Jesus was really and truly dead and that it was now only His lifeless body hanging there on the cross. If Jesus didn’t truly die, then we cannot say that He tasted death for us (cf. Heb. 2:9). If Jesus wasn’t truly dead, then we cannot say that by His resurrection He has rendered powerless him who had the power of death, or that He has freed us who through fear of death were subject to slavery all our lives (cf. Heb. 2:14-15). But He did truly die. He knows what death is. So John continues in verse 35, speaking, I believe, of himself in the third person (cf. 21:20-24):

III. John 19:35 — And he who has seen has borne witness, and his witness is true; and he knows that he is telling the truth, so that you also may believe.

What is it that John has seen and to which he is bearing witness? Not just the blood and the water, but the wholly unexpected turn of events whereby the legs of Jesus’ dead body were not

broken and whereby the side of Jesus' dead body was pierced. When the soldiers came to Jesus, they saw that He was already dead, but in light of what an unusual occurrence this was, they wanted to be absolutely sure. They could easily have broken Jesus' legs, too. John recounts what happened in such a way that we naturally expect they will.

“So the soldiers came, and broke the legs of the first man and of the other who was crucified with Him; *but* coming to Jesus...” Contrary to expectation the soldiers choose instead to pierce His side with a spear. What is it, then, about this wholly unexpected turn of events that calls us to believe? What is it about how the dead body of our Lord is treated that calls us to believe? John answers:

IV. John 19:36 — For these things came to pass in order that the Scripture would be fulfilled [filled up], “NOT A BONE OF HIM SHALL BE BROKEN.”

In Exodus chapter 12, God gives these instructions concerning the Passover lamb:

- Exodus 12:46 — “[The Passover lamb] shall be eaten in a single house; you shall not bring forth any of the flesh outside of the house, **and you shall not break any bone of it.**”

In Psalm 34, we read:

- Psalm 34:19–20 — Many are the evils against the righteous, but Yahweh delivers him out of them all. **He keeps all his bones, not one of them is broken.**

I don't think we need to decide which Scripture John has in mind.*

V. Exodus 12:46

Four times we've been reminded that Jesus' sufferings and death take place during the week-long Passover festival (cf. 13:1; 18:28, 39; 19:14). Just a moment ago, we were reminded that this is the day of Preparation for the Sabbath and that this Sabbath is a “high day”; it's the Passover sabbath (19:31). What does it mean, then, when the soldiers break the legs of the two

* The wording in John doesn't match exactly either of these Scriptures.

Exodus 12:46 — καὶ ὅστούν οὐ συντρίψετε ἀπ' αὐτοῦ.

And a bone you will not break of it.

Numbers 9:12 — καὶ ὅστούν οὐ συντρίψουσιν ἀπ' αὐτοῦ.

And a bone they shall not break of it.

John 19:36 — Ὅστούν οὐ συντριβήσεται αὐτοῦ.

A bone shall not be broken of Him

Psalm 33:21 — κύριος φυλάσσει πάντα τὰ ὀστά αὐτῶν, ἐν ἑξ αὐτῶν οὐ συντριβήσεται.

The Lord keeps all the bones of them, one out of them shall not be broken.

John 19:36 — Ὅστούν οὐ συντριβήσεται αὐτοῦ.

A bone shall not be broken of Him

The plural “them” (or “their”) in the Greek translation of Psalm 33:21 would have no significance if John was quoting the Hebrew, which has the singular “his.” In fact, John's next Scripture citation (Jn. 19:37) *is* from the Hebrew text (the Greek translation represents an apparent misreading of the Hebrew original).

other crucified men, but in a wholly unexpected turn of events choose not to break the legs of the dead body of Jesus?

- Exodus 12:46 — “[The Passover lamb] shall be eaten in a single house; you shall not bring forth any of the flesh outside of the house, **and you shall not break any bone of it.**”

We see in this that Jesus is the one in whom the Passover sacrifice is fulfilled. But if this is so, then even the lifeless body of Jesus as it hangs there on the cross is not a defeat. If this is so, then even the lifeless body of Jesus hanging there on the cross is a sign to us of victory. The death that in every other case always signifies defeat, now, in Jesus, signifies salvation. Just as it was by the death of a one-year-old unblemished lamb or goat that all the firstborn in Israel were delivered from death at the hands of the destroying angel, so now it’s by the death of Jesus that we are delivered from death (both spiritual and—ultimately—physical). In Exodus, the significance of not breaking the bones of the Passover sacrifice had to do with the oneness and the wholeness of the congregation of God’s people as they all partook of this meal together (see sermon on Exodus 12:37-51). And so now we see in Jesus, the Passover sacrifice whose bones were not broken, the oneness and the wholeness of this congregation and of the congregation of all God’s people who partake of Christ together (cf. 1 Cor. 10:17).

Notice that there’s no “prediction” in Exodus twelve. There’s only a command that the bones of the Passover lamb or goat should not be broken. John’s point is not that because a prediction has been matched, therefore we have proof that Jesus is the Messiah. John’s point is that because the Passover is “filled up” in the death of Jesus, therefore His lifeless body is not a defeat, but is rather the sign of our salvation. Because the Passover is fulfilled in the death of Jesus, therefore even His lifeless body signals the arrival of that second Exodus in which we are delivered from bondage to sin and death—and in which we receive the inheritance of an eternal, resurrection life. Here is an apologetic designed not just to appeal academically to the mind, but rather to call forth saving faith in the heart. Here is an apologetic designed not just to convince our minds of a fact, but rather to rejoice our hearts in saving truth.

If John has in mind Exodus 12:46, I believe he must also have in mind Psalm 34:19-20.

VI. Psalm 34:20

Psalm 34 is a psalm of David ascribed to the time “when he feigned madness before Abimelech, so that he drove him away and he departed” (1 Sam. 21:10-15). David was fleeing for his life from Saul, the king of Israel, but then found his life threatened by the servants of Abimelech, the king of Gath. When David feigned madness, Abimelech drove him out of his presence. Psalm 34, then, is David’s psalm of praise for all of God’s **many** deliverances from death.

- Psalm 34:19–20 — Many are the evils against the righteous, but Yahweh delivers him out of them all. **He keeps all his bones, not one of them is broken.**

Notice again that there is no “prediction” here. If this was a prediction that Jesus’ bones would not be broken, then we would have to take it completely out of context. The verse about no broken bones is in the context of being kept alive—so that David does not die by the hand of

those who hate him. But Jesus did die. Those who hated Jesus did put Him to death. In the original context of the psalm, the idea that the bones of David's *dead body* would not be broken would have made total nonsense of the psalm. But that's because David wasn't the Messiah. That's because David wasn't the fulfillment of the Passover sacrifice. Jesus is. Jesus is David's greater Son. Therefore, as the truly "*righteous*" one (see Ps. 34:11-15, 19, 21), the fact that the bones of Jesus' *dead body* are not broken must be the sign that all of God's previous deliverances from death are about to be fulfilled in a deliverance from death far greater and more wonderful than all those that came before. With John, therefore, we see in the preservation of the bones of Jesus' dead body the promise and the guarantee of His resurrection. We see in the preservation of the bones of Jesus' dead body the sign that here is our Passover sacrifice who, having finally accomplished our salvation, will live again.

Here, again, is an apologetic designed not just to appeal academically to our minds, but to call forth and to continuously be cultivating saving faith in our hearts. Here is an apologetic designed not just to convince our minds of a fact, but rather to rejoice our hearts in saving truth. "He who has *seen* has *borne witness*, and his witness is *true*; and he knows that he is telling the *truth*, so that you also may believe."

We read the passion narratives and there's not a single moment when we despair. This isn't just because we know the "ending." It's because, looking back, we see now at every step along the way the unfolding of God's salvation for sinners like we are.

Conclusion

Because we are in Christ, we can make David's words our own and see in them the assurance of our own ultimate deliverance from death—and also of God's faithful love and preserving care at every step along the way.

- Psalm 34:1–10, 15–22 — I will bless Yahweh at all times; His praise shall continually be in my mouth. My soul will make its boast in Yahweh; the humble will hear it and rejoice. O magnify Yahweh with me, and let us exalt His name together. I inquired of Yahweh, and He answered me, and delivered me from all that I dread. They looked to Him and were radiant, and their faces will never be humiliated. This poor man called out, and Yahweh heard him and saved him out of all his troubles. The angel of Yahweh encamps around those who fear Him, and rescues them. O taste and see that Yahweh is good; how blessed is the man who takes refuge in Him! Oh, fear Yahweh, you His saints; for there is no want to those who fear Him. The young lions do lack and suffer hunger; but they who inquire of Yahweh shall not be in want of any good thing... The eyes of Yahweh are toward the righteous and His ears are open to their cry for help. The face of Yahweh is against evildoers, to cut off the memory of them from the earth. The righteous cry, and Yahweh hears and delivers them out of all their troubles. Yahweh is near to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit. Many are the evils against the righteous, but Yahweh delivers him out of them all. ***He keeps all his bones, not one of them is broken.*** Evil shall slay the wicked, and those who hate the righteous will be condemned. Yahweh redeems the soul [the life] of His slaves, and all those who take refuge in Him will not be condemned.

Is Yahweh's praise continually in your mouth? Have you been delivered from all that you dread and saved out of all your troubles? Have you tasted and seen that Yahweh is good? Have you cried for help and found that He is always near? Do you believe that He will keep all your bones, so that not one of them will be broken? It's in the context of this salvation that we have in Christ that we also love to say with David:

- Psalm 34:11-14 — Come, you children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of Yahweh. Who is the man who delights in *life* and loves *many days* that he may see good? Guard your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit. Depart from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it.