

As COVID-19 continues to march around the globe, many people are unsettled not only by the virus but by the economic toll. We hear stories of isolated wards being established, people intubated, and lonely deaths. We are a society that has wanted to choose our own destiny, to be in control, and command our final moments. Yet along comes a virus that has upended our world, showing us how little control we have.

No one wants to die alone. The sad stories this week of a nursing home in Bobcaygon brought out how awful this virus is. With 22 dead in one nursing home, families were not able to say goodbye to their loved ones. The evilness of this virus has humbled us, struck fear into many, and made us wonder about life and death itself.

We can wonder if God has remembered our world. Has God forgotten us? Does he hear our prayers? We cry out, asking God for mercy, yet in this cry for help, we can feel utterly alone. Is there any comfort?

There is a great deal of comfort. God is has not forgotten us in our sufferings. He sent his very own Son to die on the cross, and by the death of Christ we get a window not only into the heart of God, but into the value we ought to place on life. What is this heart of God? And what is the value of life? John 19 gives answers these questions in surprising ways – ways that ought to draw us near to Christ and into the heart of God.

## **What is the heart of God?**

Jesus has just said his final words: “It is finished!” and breathed his last. Now, John gives us great detail about Christ’s death. He tells us that it was the day of Preparation – the day before the great Passover. The Passover was the feast the Jews had celebrated to remember their deliverance as a people from the slavery of Egypt. God had miraculously rescued them from slavery, and for almost 1300 years this annual celebration was a reminder that God had not forgotten his people.

But now, Jesus hangs from a cross, dead. The religious leaders didn’t want Jewish bodies hanging on crosses over this great celebration, so they asked Pilate to ensure that all of those crucified were dead. The way the Romans made sure people died faster in crucifixion was to break their shins. A crucified person would have to push up on their feet so as to get enough air to breathe, and by breaking their shins they could not get a breath. If the crucifixion wasn’t horrible enough, the Romans had mastered how to maximize the torture.

When the soldiers arrived at Jesus, however, they found that he was already dead. Instead, a soldier pierced his side, and out flowed water and blood. For centuries, people have debated the significance of this event. Some have pointed out that the separation of fluids in the pericardial sac proves that Jesus was dead, and so John is providing the medical evidence that Jesus was really dead. But the fact that the soldiers didn’t break Christ’s bones should have been proof enough. Others have speculated about the significance of this event and tried to find allegorical meanings. If we consider that John has been writing with a highly symbolic style, we would recall that water and blood have

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had significant meaning in his gospel. Water was turned to wine in Jn 2. A woman received living water to satisfy her soul in Jn. 4. Jesus cried out that he is the living water in Jn7. All throughout this gospel, John has used water to help us understand that what God desires to pour out is his Spirit (see Jn 7:39). He would pour out his Spirit by the offering of a sacrifice, forever ending the Old Testament practice of animal blood sacrifices. And now, at the moment of Passover, by the blood of the sacrifice of Christ, God will pour out his Spirit and give all who will look to this man on the cross the Spirit of wisdom, power, and self-control.

John used this language in his letter – in 1 Jn 5:6 he said, “This is he who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ; not by the water only but by the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one who testifies, because the Spirit is truth.” John tells us that he saw these things as an eyewitness (Jn 19:35) and because he saw these things, he can stand as a witness that God’s word is true: “Not one of his bones will be broken.” In this moment, at the eve of Passover, John thinks about the Lamb of God (1:29) and the command that the passover lamb be one who was unblemished and without a broken bone (Exod. 12:46). And then, in the next verse, John looks at Zechariah 12:10 and sees how we must look to the One who was pierced for salvation. In its broader context, Zechariah looks and sees that there will be a great reversal by God – the One who is pierced (Zech. 12:10) will be the One who opens a fountain to cleanse them from sin and impurity (Zech. 13:1).

What is the heart of God? It is the opposite of human nature. The Jews didn’t want to be blemished by having these men hang from crosses and would rather have them killed quickly to get rid of them; God the Son goes to the cross to cleanse us from all impurity and give us his Spirit! This cross is the display of the self-giving God!

Do you want to know what God looks like? He looks like a sacrificial, self-giving God. He is willing to endure human wrath and injustice and the penalty for sin to forgive you and empower you to live a different kind of life. Look at the bloodied and dead Saviour and see the heart of God given for you! If all you see is an ugly, battered, and dead man, there is no salvation. But if you gaze deeply, God will show you his very heart. He offered up the Passover Lamb so that you could be set free from your bondage – the bondage that this present COVIDIAN age is tearing away. God’s heart is to draw your heart to himself by looking at Christ and responding with a simple trust – God loved the world in this way – he sent his only Son that whoever believes in him would not perish but have life eternal! This is why one hymn writer would say it this way:

Rock of ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee;  
Let the water and the blood, from thy riven side which flowed,  
Be of sin the double cure: cleanse me from its guilt and pow’r.

## **What is the value of a life?**

Now here hangs the Son of God, lifeless, dead, and alone. John tells us that two men – Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, come and take away Jesus’ body and prepare it for burial. These two men are significant. John tells us that Joseph was a disciple of Jesus,

but had done so secretly, probably part of the group in Jn 12:42-43 who feared being associated with Jesus so as to not be ridiculed. But now, there is no shame in being known as a follower of Jesus. He has seen the heart of God in what Jesus has done for him, so he openly follows Jesus, taking his body, and prepares the burial place for Jesus. He probably was a man of some wealth because it seems as though he lived in Jerusalem and had a burial place there, along with his estate in the town of Arimathea (see. Matt. 27:60).

Nicodemus, we remember, had come to Jesus in the darkness of the night of his soul in John 3. There he had questioned Jesus about who he was and what he had come to do. Jesus had told him that just as Moses had rescued God's people in the wilderness by looking to the serpent on the pole to be healed from the venomous snakes, so Jesus would be lifted up and all who would look to him would be healed of the poison that infects every human heart. And now Nicodemus not only looks to Jesus, but he brings 75 lbs of spices and prepares Jesus' body for burial with Joseph.

Earlier, Mary had come with a pound of expensive ointment and anointed Jesus for burial. Now Nicodemus comes with 75 to 100 lbs of spices! We are told that Mary's offering was a year's worth of wages. We have no idea how much the gift of Nicodemus must have cost, but it was extravagant! Here was extravagant love! Joseph gave up his tomb for Christ's burial – one that was in a garden plot, hewn out of stone and unused (see Matt. 27:59ff), and Nicodemus brings spices worth an incredible amount.

What is Jesus' life worth? For these men, it was priceless. They looked at the Passover Lamb, and all they could see was infinite value. Jesus was worth everything – in his life, but now even more so in death!

What is Jesus worth to you? What's the value of his life? Isn't the value of his life seen in his death? Christians have often sung the song "I surrender all; all to thee, my precious Saviour, I surrender all." Now we are surrendering more than we could ever imagine. But the losses of this present moment pale in comparison to the value of the life and death of Christ! In Jesus, we look at him and find there is infinite value, infinite hope, infinite worth!

The value of Jesus' life has been a source of comfort for people throughout all the ages. The English poet, William Cowper, was a man who looked to Jesus over and over. Cowper was a tender and fragile man. At the young age of 6, his mother died and this left him mentally unstable. Frequently battling depression, he tried to stay busy and divert his attention. But when his father and step-mother died and his closest friend drowned, Cowper had a mental and emotional collapse that resulted in him being placed in an insane asylum. Over time, he was released and entrusted into the care of a Christian man who shared with him the value of Christ.

As Cowper began to reflect on the sufferings of Christ, he was struck by Romans 3:24-25. Paul writes there that sinners are justified by God's grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an atoning sacrifice by his

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blood to be received by faith. Cowper, upon reading these words, said, “Immediately I received strength to believe it and the full beams of the Sun of Righteousness shone upon me. I saw the sufficiency of the atonement He had made, my pardon was sealed in his blood...I could only look up to heaven in silent fear, overwhelmed with love and wonder” (quoted in Elsie Houghton, *Christian Hymn Writers*, Bryntirion, UK: Evangelical Press of Wales, 1982, p. 149).

Though mental struggles would continue throughout his life and even lead him to the edge of suicide a number of times, what kept William Cowper in the darkest hours was the heart of God and the value of Christ’s life. He would live with pastor John Newton, author of “Amazing Grace,” and Newton would challenge Cowper to write a poem or hymn each week. One of those poems we still sing:

There is a fountain filled with blood, drawn from Immanuel’s veins;  
And sinners, plunged beneath that flood lose all their guilty stains.

E’er since by faith I saw the stream your flowing wounds supply,  
Redeeming love has been my theme, and shall be till I die...

Dear dying Lamb, your precious blood shall never lose its pow’r;  
Till all the ransomed Church of God be saved to sin no more!

What’s the heart of God? What’s the value of a life? Look to Christ hanging on that cross. And there you will find the answer of heaven that will sustain you in the darkest of hours!