

A Preview of the Cross

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[0 : 0 0] We're going to be looking through some wonderful chapters over the next few weeks as we look at this final section in John's Gospel. We have been going through John's Gospel kind of block by block over the last four years or so all leading to this point.

This is the final block and we get at this point in John's Gospel. The whole thing really slows down here. In fact, in John's Gospel, the last 24 hours leading up to the death of Jesus and what happens next takes up almost half of the whole of the Gospel.

We began that last year looking from chapter 13 onwards. Jesus is teaching the night before his death, often called the upper room discourse. Jesus was telling his disciples the night before he would die.

We continue that now from chapter 18 looking at the events of Jesus' death. And the main reason this is such a focus for John, that John slows down, that John zooms in here.

The reason that we want to spend our time looking at this as a church together is because Jesus' death is because the cross is the very heart of the Gospel.

[1 : 1 2] It's because everything depends on this. And as Ross just prayed earlier, we don't want to take these fundamental things for granted. The Apostle Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians, later on in the New Testament, writes, For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

That doesn't mean that Paul didn't speak about anything else. We read in that letter about various other topics. But it means that he ensured that the cross of Christ was at the heart of everything that he taught.

The whole Christian life then is to be shaped by the cross. And so a couple of things as we start. That means if you're here this morning and you're not yet a Christian, you're still kind of wondering what that's all about.

You're kind of trying church out for a little bit. Well, there's nothing better that you could be here to hear about this morning. There's nothing more significant than we could be looking at and to get to grips with what Christianity really is all about.

Here is what we're going to see, the kind of the nucleus of the Gospel. And we do hope that you'll keep on joining us over the next few weeks as we look at these chapters together. And it also means for those of us who are Christians, as we seek to follow Jesus, that again, it's vital we keep on coming back to the cross.

[2 : 3 3] That we keep on coming to Christ and him crucified, as the Apostle Paul said. Because the Christian life grows from and is shaped by this nucleus.

This is the foundation on which everything else is built. We could say that to the extent that we understand what is happening at the cross, and not just in terms of mental categories of understanding, but understanding in terms of its unparalleled significance in our life.

To that extent, we'll be able to grow in living as God's people in response to all that he has done for us in the Gospel and through the cross. This is the foundation that we need and need to keep on returning to, to build the Christian life upon.

And this whole section of John, these last chapters are going to help us with that. These verses in particular are a great kind of gateway into this section, showing us what is unfolding as Jesus goes to the cross.

The climax of John's Gospel, the climax of Jesus' ministry, the non-negotiable heart of the Christian faith. So let me pray, and then we'll get stuck in together.

[3 : 48] Heavenly Father, we thank you again for your word. We thank you that you reveal yourself to us through it. And we ask that right now, with the help of your Holy Spirit, that you would speak to us all, at whatever our starting point, that we might better grasp the significance and wonder of the cross as it lies at the heart of the Christian faith.

Now, Lord, please give me words to say. Please give us all ears to hear and hearts to receive your word to us this morning. Amen. Amen.

Great. It would be good to keep that passage open in front of you then, John chapter 18, those first 11 verses. There are four kind of key things here that we're going to see about what's happening as Jesus goes to the cross.

We'll look at them in turn. We'll look and see how they all fit together as well. And the first one is this, that Jesus goes to the cross deliberately. Jesus goes to the cross deliberately.

The cross is this terrible event. The cross is this wicked betrayal of Jesus. The cross is the ultimate demonstration of the wickedness of humanity, rebelling against the goodness of God.

[5 : 03] But John makes really clear that the cross isn't something that is outside of God's control. But this whole journey to the cross is Jesus' deliberate and considered and planned action.

That's been a big theme in John's gospel so far. If you've been with us when we've been looking at previous blocks, you might remember how Jesus repeatedly speaks of the hour that was to come.

Looking ahead to this hour and meaning by that hour, the hour of his death. He says in chapter 12, for this purpose I have come to this hour.

Or perhaps even more clearly we could go back to chapter 10 and this idea of Jesus knowing what is going to happen and doing it deliberately. Where Jesus says, Throughout John's gospel then, Jesus has been deliberately and with full awareness moving toward the cross and his death.

And we see that underlined here at the start of chapter 18. Knowing that Judas has betrayed him, Jesus doesn't hide away. Jesus doesn't change his plans. But verse 2, he goes to the very same place that he has frequently been with his disciples.

[6 : 25] He goes to the very place that he knows that Judas knows to look for him. And then do have a look at verse 4. As his accusers arrive, we read, Then Jesus, knowing all that would happen to him.

What does Jesus do? Does he move away? Does he retreat? No, Jesus, knowing all that would happen to him, came forward and said to them, Whom do you seek?

Jesus hands himself over, knowing the consequences. Jesus goes to the cross deliberately. And it's really important that we get this straight at the start. Because for the cross to have any significance, it needs to be deliberate.

If the cross is just a big accident, if the cross is something that is done to Jesus despite his best efforts, then there's no point in us looking for a meaning in it or a purpose about it.

Those would just be things that we would be making up and kind of applying it to ourselves. And yet that's clearly not the case. Jesus goes to the cross deliberately. Jesus goes to the cross as the climax of his mission.

[7 : 34] Jesus goes to the cross for a reason. And again, it's reminding us that nothing could be more important for us to focus on than the cross. Because that is where Jesus' focus was.

And it means this amazing news that God had from the beginning of time, this deliberate plan to rescue people. To rescue people like us who had strayed far from him.

Who had forgotten him. Who'd rejected him. Who tried to find purpose and meaning in life without him. God had this plan to bring us home. And Jesus was determined to fulfill that plan, whatever the cost.

And so that's the first piece that we want to make sure we have in place. This passage and in these upcoming chapters, this is not Jesus kind of stumbling along, wondering what is going to happen next.

But in everything, Jesus remains in control as he goes to the cross deliberately, fulfilling God's salvation plan for his people. So there's number one.

[8 : 37] Jesus goes to the cross deliberately. Second, we see Jesus goes to the cross revealing his divine glory. So who is it that has to suffer?

Who is it that has to die to fulfill his salvation plan? And we see here in these verses that it's none other than God himself. The God of all creation.

Again, throughout his gospel, John records various evidence of Jesus' divine nature. That Jesus is God. Both in the miracles that Jesus performs and also in Jesus' teaching.

Jesus both demonstrates and explains his identity as God. And again, we see that underscored here in chapter 18 with the cross, particularly in view.

Do just have a look down at verses 4 to 7. Picking up where we left off there. Jesus said to them, whom do you seek? They answered him, Jesus of Nazareth.

[9 : 39] Jesus said to them, I am he. Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them. When Jesus said, I am he, they drew back and fell to the ground.

So he asked them again, whom do you seek? And they said, Jesus of Nazareth. This is a strange scene, isn't it? Jesus is the one who's supposed to be arrested.

This band of soldiers, we read, with torches and weapons have come out with all of the religious authorities to take him. They find him. But as he comes forward and reveals that he is the one that they're looking for, what happens?

Well, they draw back. They fall to the floor. Why? Why does this happen? Well, the key here is Jesus' statement, I am he. And you might see in the footnote, if you've got one of the church Bibles, literally Jesus simply says, I am.

I am. Crucially, that phrase, I am, it is one of the ways in the Bible that God refers to himself. So back in the book of Exodus, one of the great rescues of the Bible, where Moses asks God who he should say has sent him, who has given him the authority, who is behind this rescue mission, God responds, say this to the people of Israel, I am has sent you.

[11 : 01] This is God's name for himself. We see that repeated in the book of Deuteronomy, in the prophet Isaiah, as well as other places. We've seen it already in John's Gospel.

These I am sayings from Jesus. I am the bread of life. I am the light of the world. I am the good shepherd. All of them loaded with this divine weight, where Jesus identifies himself with the very name that God uses to identify himself.

And that is what's happening here so clearly, in the garden, before the cross. And the soldiers draw back. They fall down. It's as if they recognize, they glimpse for just a moment the true identity of who Jesus is.

The true glory that he holds. The true significance of the one that stands before them. One commentator writes how they respond better than they know by falling down before him.

And what we're seeing as readers here is who it is that will go to the cross. That it is God himself, the great I am. It's not just as in Exodus that I am has sent a rescuer.

[12 : 19] It's that I am has come as the rescuer to carry out this plan. If we want to see the glory of God, we look to Jesus.

If we want to see that glory displayed most clearly, we look to the cross. The cross is then the ultimate revelation of God.

It's where we see the depths of his love for his people. That I am has come to suffer that we might be rescued. It's where we see the wonder of his grace.

That he has done this despite the opposition and our rebellion against him. It's where we see the perfection of his justice. It's where we see his power and his control and his authority over all things.

And we see those things on the cross because it is God himself, Jesus in his divine glory, who goes to the cross. And I think this can really help us as we are thinking about the cross.

[13 : 20] Again, not to take it for granted if we've been in and around church for so long. But it doesn't become over-familiar. Or even if this is something that is new to us. As Jesus goes to the cross, it's not just that he is kind, but he goes as the glorious king.

It's not just at the cross that Jesus makes an offer, an invitation, and it would be great if we'd like to accept it. If that's not too much trouble, but don't put yourself out and do whatever you think best.

It's actually that as Jesus goes to the cross, he is the glorious king, and we must respond to him and to his work. That there is nothing more serious and nothing more significant.

That he alone deserves our worship. He alone deserves our allegiance. We too should fall down before him as our ruler. And yet incredibly, the paradox of the cross, the ruler who goes to the cross in order to save us.

So Jesus goes to the cross deliberately. He does so revealing his divine glory. Thirdly, Jesus goes to the cross to bring freedom to his people.

[14 : 32] We could talk about this passage in this way. We've seen there is a plan. We've seen who carries out the plan. Next we see here, what's the plan for? Again, let's read on from verse 7.

So he asked them again, whom do you seek? And they said, Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus answered, I told you that I am he. So if you seek me, let these men go.

This was to fulfill the word that he had spoken. Of those whom you gave me, I have lost, not one. This is just a great scene, isn't it?

This is a kind of scene that would work in any Hollywood film or kind of superhero movie. Jesus here is not trying to get away. Jesus is not trying to hide behind other people.

Rather, he is stepping forward and saying, take me so that his followers can go free. This kind of dramatic, this heroic demonstration of Jesus' boldness, of his strength, providing protection here for his people in the gloom of the garden.

[15 : 43] He goes forward that they may go free from the religious authorities, from the Roman soldiers who are gathered around them. And as Jesus does this here in John chapter 18, it's a great picture.

It's a great demonstration of what the cross is all about. At the cross, Jesus goes forward that we might go free. Jesus goes to the cross bringing freedom to his people.

That idea of substitution is at the very heart of the cross. That Jesus did not deserve to die. Jesus did not have to die. But when we look to the cross, we see Jesus there die in our place.

Because he does that, it wins freedom for all those who trust in him and follow him. Or in the words of verse 9, none are lost because of what he does for us.

Some of the key metaphors in the Bible of the consequences of our sin are the language of slavery or captivity. So often we're tempted to think that living apart from God, living without regard to him or his commandments, our world tells us that this is freedom.

[17 : 01] You know, you want to be free, ditch the Bible, do whatever you want to do, be whoever you want to be, have that right to define what is right and wrong for yourself. And yet the Bible warns us actually that that is the path to slavery.

That actually once sin gets its claws into us, it doesn't let go. That what we think will make us happy apart from God will never truly satisfy.

We'll always just need more and more. That actually we are captured by sin. That that brings us harm. That that stops us from flourishing.

And ultimately that there is no avoiding sin's ultimate consequence of death itself. Bob Dylan has the famous line in his song, you're going to have to serve somebody.

Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord, but you're going to have to serve somebody. We've just seen how of those options, it's only the Lord who is the one who is willing to go to the cross on our behalf.

[18 : 09] But the devil's lies about freedom actually just lead to that ongoing captivity. Lies that never make good on their promises, that never really bring about what they offer, always leave us leading more, always leave us serving him.

And yet at the cross, Jesus stands in our place to offer that freedom and that protection, true freedom to be living, knowing that Jesus himself has set us free.

And so that means this morning that whenever we hear those words in our head that tell us that we'll never be good enough, or whenever we're convinced that our past faults and failures will never let go of us, that they're always going to define us, or each day when we mess up, and perhaps we go back to sinful habits that we're trying to move on from, and we can start to lose hope that we'll ever change.

It feels like we're kind of constantly dragged back with a rope about our ankles. But actually we're able to say in all of these things, no, I have freedom through Jesus, who went to the cross in my place.

I will not be lost. I will not be lost. Jesus will keep me, because Jesus has died for me, and he has not died in vain.

[19 : 29] That is the incredible offer of the gospel. And so much of the Christian life is looking to put into practice, is looking to shape our minds and our thinking around what is already true because of Jesus.

So when there are those voices telling us that actually we're not free, that we're stuck as who we are, that actually sin has got its teeth into us and it won't let go, this passage is telling us that's a lie.

Because Jesus has died that his people might go free. It's like, you know, sometimes this happens, you walk out of a shop at Tesco or wherever, and the alarm goes off as you walk past those beepers, and you know you've not stolen anything, but you get that kind of sudden rush of kind of panic and fear that you may never see the sunlight again.

But actually, when you stop and think, you're able to know, you know, I'm not in trouble here. That alarm has no consequences for me. I'm in the clear. I've got the receipts.

If anyone comes to speak to me, I can demonstrate that. In the same way, when it comes to our sin, we hear those accusations, maybe from other people, maybe from ourselves, and they cause us perhaps that moment of alarm, of panic.

[20 : 43] And yet, if our trust is in Jesus, we're able to know that we are in the clear. We are free. Those accusations hold no consequences for us, no hold over us.

Not because we're perfect, but because Christ went to the cross in our place that we might be free. Christ goes to the cross bringing freedom, freedom for his people.

There has always been a plan in the person of Jesus. God himself has fulfilled that plan. That plan was to bring freedom to his people. The final stage that we're going to look at this morning is how does that happen?

And we see finally here, Christ goes to the cross taking God's anger at sin. Christ goes to the cross taking God's anger at sin. This is the last couple of verses of our passage.

Verse 10, then Simon Peter, having drawn a sword, drew it and struck the high priest's servant and cut off his ear. The servant's name was Malchus.

[21 : 47] I think we have probably sterilized the Bible a little bit, but this is a pretty wild scene here. Peter has this swing at the high priest's servant with his sword.

Peter's not a trained swordsman thinking I'll just take the ear and that will teach him a lesson. You know, he's aiming at his head. The point is, Peter still hasn't got it, has he? Peter is still kind of laboring under the idea that it will be some sort of earthly conquest, some physical victory that Jesus needs to win to bring about this freedom.

But Peter, sorry, but Jesus shows Peter and us the true nature of his mission. Verse 11, so Jesus said to Peter, put your sword into its sheath.

Shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me? Jesus, as we've said, as we've seen, is determined nothing will stop him from carrying out his task of going to the cross.

And how he describes that task here shows us why it is, shows us how it is that the cross is the only way that this freedom can happen.

[22 : 58] Shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me? Throughout the Bible, this language of the cup, of God's cup, is commonly used.

And what it tends to refer to is the cup of God's anger at sin. Psalm 75 puts it like this, for in the hand of the Lord there is a cup with foaming wine, well mixed, and he pours out from it and all the wicked of the earth shall drain it down to the dregs.

This kind of poetic, dramatic language. But to drink the cup is to face God's righteous judgment on our rebellion against him.

That catechism question that we just looked at earlier in our service, God is righteously angry with our sins and will punish them. And yet here again what Jesus says in John chapter 18, shall I not drink the cup?

The amazing fact at the very heart of the cross is that Jesus, God himself, drinks the cup in the place of the wicked.

[24 : 15] Jesus drinks the cup in the place of us. And that is the only way that we can go free. Perhaps this morning we don't like to think of ourselves as wicked.

We don't really put ourselves in that category. And yet all of us are able to think of parts of our life, of incidents, of relationships where we know that we should have behaved better.

We know that we're not perfect. Perhaps we might like to think well God can surely just overlook those things, those few incidents. You know, they're not a big deal. And yet as we've seen, God is a holy God.

How can God be holy? And ultimately how can we have hope for justice, eternally speaking, if we have a God who doesn't really mind when people wrong one another?

Who doesn't really mind if people reject their creator? Or a God who doesn't really mind if people live in a way that causes harm to themselves and those around them?

[25 : 21] Ultimately, for there to be justice, God has to punish sin. And all of us fall under that barrier. None of us make the mark. And yet we see here that at the cross, Jesus took that punishment fully upon himself.

And it is only through that that we go free. The cross was not just an example of sacrificial love. It stands at the very heart of the gospel because it actually achieved that freedom.

It paid the penalty, which is the greatest need for all of us. Jesus goes to the cross taking God's anger at sin, the anger that we deserved, and yet which is dealt with if we take shelter under the work of Christ.

This passage helps us understand the significance of what is happening at the cross. The cross is God's deliberate plan. It is God himself who carries it out.

It brings freedom, freedom, and it does that not for perfect people or people who've got it all sorted, but it does that for people like you and me because it does that through Jesus taking the anger of God that we deserve that we might enjoy freedom in him.

[26 : 38] Three really quick consequences as we finish. Firstly, for ourselves, it's just to simply say have we accepted this offer of forgiveness, this offer of freedom that Jesus brings by going to the cross in our place, this freedom that is available because the punishment that we deserve has been spent, has been paid by Christ.

That freedom only comes when we offer, when we accept, sorry, that invitation offered to us, but also remember it's not just an invitation, but also a commandment that we would respond to and put our trust in Jesus, the glorious king and ruler who goes to the cross.

Nothing, nothing could be more important for us than to accept Jesus' work in our place and nothing, nothing brings greater joy because it brings this freedom to be his people that we're designed for.

So that's secondly, thinking of that for ourselves, sorry, firstly thinking of that for ourselves, secondly thinking for other people. It's hard to look at the cross and not think, well, are we also willing to show that same grace to others that God has shown to us?

If we are all flawed people saved only by the cross needing that forgiveness, how is it then that we so often act so surprised that other people have flaws as well?

[28 : 02] The cross, I think, should give us that patience and grace with others because we have had that patience and grace extended to us. The cross enables us to extend to them the forgiveness that we have received when we recognize that all of us, all of us in this church, all of us in this community are in the same boat.

We are broken and sinful people, people who make mistakes, who turn their back on God and who hurt one another and yet all of us are offered this grace and forgiveness in the gospel.

It shapes how we think about other people. Secondly, sorry, thirdly, in terms of God, how do we think about him? As we look at the cross, we see the glory of God in all that he has done for us and I think we should be moved then to give everything in response, give everything in love for him.

The cross, as we began by saying, is the foundation, the heart of the Christian faith, Christ and him crucified. As we look to the cross, as we deepen our understanding and our appreciation of that, just what it was that Jesus did, that we grow in our love for God, that we grow to live out that freedom that he has won for us and we live that freedom for his glory that others too might know his greatness and all that he's done.

Let's pray together. Lord, we thank you for the cross, the foundation of our faith, the grounds of our hope and the means of our freedom.

[29 : 35] Lord, please forgive us when we take the cross for granted, when we become overly casual with that incredible history-changing event, when we fail to give it the central place which it requires in our church and in our lives.

Lord, we thank you that through the cross we can have freedom and we can have forgiveness because there you yourself took the penalty for our sin.

Lord, we thank you that you had a wondrous and wonderful plan to rescue and redeem us and that you completed that plan even at the greatest possible cost to yourself.

And so, Lord, please help us to remain focused on the cross day by day. We ask that what we've seen in your word this morning wouldn't just be knowledge for our heads but would really reach down into our hearts and from there would shape our lives in really practical ways.

Most of all, we ask that it would grow us in our love for you and in response to who you are and all that you've done that we would be eager and equipped to live for your glory.

[30 : 45] We ask that we would glory in the cross, that we wouldn't be ashamed of it, that we wouldn't be forgetful of it but would want to return to it and speak of it and give thanks for it and proclaim it time and time again as it lies at the heart of the gospel and where our hope is found.

And we pray all of these things in the precious name of Jesus Christ. Amen.