

John 19:17-30 – Good Friday – He Bowed His Head and Gave Up His Spirit – April 3, 2026

+In Nomine Iesu+

We read the assigned crucifixion narrative from John 19 as our Gospel reading. And we are going to talk about one particular aspect of the meaning of the cross today. We spent some serious time with Passion texts in Lent. We listened to the words of Jesus from the cross—all seven of them.

“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” “Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.” “Woman, behold your son; Son, behold your mother.” “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” “I thirst.” “It is finished.” “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.”

I hope each word brings you back into this redemptive story. These words show us how Christ fulfills prophecy. They demonstrate His compassion for sinners. We see the mission of God, bringing redemption to the world.

And following these words, Jesus bowed His head and gave up His Spirit—John tells us. He lays down His life for His friends—always with the intention of taking it up again. And in all of this, He brings salvation to His people.

Today, for Good Friday, I would like to turn our attention to Matthew 16. You will find similar statements from Jesus in all of the Gospels. Here, before the crucifixion—even before the Transfiguration—Jesus speaks to His disciples. And He gives some clarity on the meaning of the cross for His Disciples.

He says, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life? Or what shall a man give in return for his life?”

It must have been difficult to hear Jesus speak about the cross before it happened. Earlier in this same chapter—in Matthew 16, Jesus says, “From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.”

And the Disciples respond with amazement and confusion. Jesus predicts His passion at least three times. He wants His followers to be prepared. Jesus says it very clearly. But we don’t always listen—even when things are clear.

The cross was the plan from the beginning. It is in this way that salvation comes to the world. It is a costly affair. For the sins of the world—for our sins—the Son of God must die. There is no other way. And He is willing to pay that price. The cross of Christ is the Gospel—the good news of sins atoned by God for us. And we are transformed by the gracious Good News of the cross.

The response to this news matters. It must be received in faith—with trust—we must rely on what Jesus has done for us there. And in His cross, there is a call to follow. The Danish Lutheran theologian Soren Kierkegaard makes a distinction between followers of Jesus—and admirers of Jesus. And I think it is about those who have come to terms with the cross and those who haven’t.

He says, “The difference between an admirer and a follower remains, no matter where you are. The admirer never makes any true sacrifices. He always plays it safe. Though in words and phrases he is inexhaustible about how highly he prizes Christ, he renounces nothing, will not reconstruct his life, will not be what he admires, and will not let his life express what it is he supposedly admires.”

And this is in keeping with Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s category of cheap grace—as contrasted with costly grace—from *The Cost of Discipleship*. You have heard this line from me before. He says, “Cheap grace is preaching forgiveness without repentance; it is baptism without the discipline of community; it is the Lord’s Supper without confession of sin. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without the living, incarnate Jesus Christ.”

And notice, with these comments, it is easy for us to think of Christianity apart from the cross. We think we don’t need Good Friday, simply because we are content with our piety, faithfulness, and life choices. We think we are worthy of God’s love. We don’t see ourselves as poor, miserable sinners. We don’t think we need the cross to be right with God.

Stricken, Smitten, and Afflicted, our hymn today, confronts this cavalier view of human sin—and the fallen condition—especially our own. The hymn writer, Thomas Kelly, “Ye who think of sin but lightly, nor suppose the evil great, here may view its nature rightly, here its guilt may estimate.” Our sin was such that the cross was necessary. It is the only possible solution for the human condition.

And this is a biting confrontation of casual and cavalier Christianity. And it brings up a decent question. Are we admirers or followers of Jesus? There is a huge difference—like a *Parable of the Soils* kind of difference. And the conclusion of Lent seems like a good time for such an analysis—especially on Good Friday.

Jesus’ comments in Matthew 16 are precise and simple. The cross is looming before them. And it changes everything. But since nothing like the cross ever happened before, you can understand the Disciples’ reaction.

Peter even tries to keep Jesus from the path of the cross. And maybe the Disciples should have understood Him a little more clearly. They will put the pieces together—after the Resurrection, Ascension, and Pentecost. They will be witnesses in the world—and it will cost them. And we are reminded that spiritual truth is spiritually discerned—it comes by the agency of the Spirit.

Now, as we hear these words, we hear them this side of the cross and resurrection. But think about how Peter, James, and John—really all of the Twelve—would have heard them. We have warm feelings for the cross of Jesus Christ—it is a true sign of triumph and beauty for us.

But for the Disciples, it would have been a word of death. It was a fearful and terrible execution. It was also a sign of the cruelty of the Roman occupation. But at its worst, God curses those who die on a cross—on a tree.

In Deuteronomy 21, Moses passes on God’s instructions, “And if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree,

his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God.”

It must have been shocking for them to hear Jesus shift the emphasis of the cross. First, He predicts the cross—and His place under God’s curse. And then He uses the cross and crucifixion as an image of discipleship. He calls us to take up the cross and follow Him.

Now, “bearing the cross” is often understood by modern society as bearing up under some personal hardship—especially illness or loss. But here, Jesus is saying something else. It has more to do with Christian disciplines: prayer, silence, service, giving, submission, virtue, meditation, and study. It is more about fasting during Lent than being brave when we are sick. It is the kind of difficulty that we face as followers of Christ.

Notice that Jesus says we should take up the cross and follow Him. We take Him as our Rabbi. We walk in His steps. We live life by His example. We die to our own will—and take up God’s will. Bearing the cross is death to self—it is giving up the direction of our lives, and adopting His way of life. It means we have died, and our life is hidden with Christ in God. This is our incorporation into His death and resurrection.

In Galatians 2, Paul says it this way, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”

For Paul, the cross is the historical event of Christ’s death. But in His death are bound up all the components of our salvation, among which are justification before God, reconciliation with God, and regeneration—spiritual life out of spiritual death. This makes the cross a reminder of the death of the Son of God—but also an irreplaceable symbol of grace. And from there, the cross is an image of the Christian life of discipleship.

And so, Jesus addresses the two paths—for admirers and followers—for cheap grace and costly grace. Here, the word typically translated as *life* could also be translated as *soul*. “For whoever would save his *soul* will lose it, but whoever loses his *soul* for my sake will find it.”

To lose our lives—to give our souls over to Christ—means following Christ alone. We take Him on as our Rabbi, our Shepherd, our Great High Priest. He is the Director of our hearts and souls and minds. We do what He says—even if it is difficult. And we find true life in the discipline.

When we try to hang onto our own way—our own money, our own habits, our own pattern of life—and reject what God desires for us—we ultimately lose for eternity all that we are trying to protect. When we let go of our own self-centered desires and accept God’s way, we discover true life in His salvation and righteousness—and especially in eternity. It is as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.”

This means that we cannot have Jesus as Savior without having Him as Lord. Jesus comes as a disruption. He disrupts our thinking—our way of life. And this disruption is necessary if we are to live faithfully in His kingdom. His kingdom comes with a cross—for Him—and for us. And this is actually for our good. He bids us come and die to ourselves—and then find that in Him we truly live.

The crosses we bear must be ones determined by His cross. They are about service and sacrifice—faith and faithfulness. Jesus, therefore, tells His disciples to follow Him. Like Jesus, we must bow our heads and give up our spirits. If we seek to save our lives using the means the world offers—then our lives will be lost—and for all eternity. Instead, we must be willing to lose our lives for His sake. We give up all demands to have our own way. And in so doing, we find life.

Jesus is right, after all. And His word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. We walk in the way of the cross. “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life? Or what shall a man give in return for his life?” In the name of Jesus. Amen.

+Soli Deo Gloria+