

Knowing the Bigger Story

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- [0 : 00] So a while ago I read a story and the story went like this. There was someone who received a priceless family heirloom from a relative and they were entrusted with the safekeeping of this very valuable heirloom.
- They were so attached to it and they loved it so much that they carried it around wherever they went. And one day the person who received this to look after decided to go for a hike in the mountains and sure enough carried this with him.
- And he was showing it off to a friend. At one point he dropped it down this deep ravine and lost it forever. Valuable family heirloom lost forever. Sounds like a rather sad and pointless ending to a story, doesn't it?
- But I just told you the ending to J.R.R. Tolkien's epic three volume, The Lord of the Rings. And I told you the very moment the power of the evil Lord Sauron was destroyed and the free peoples of Middle-earth were rescued when Frodo the Hobbit cast the ring of power down into the deep chasm to destroy Sauron's hold over the free peoples of the earth.
- Now, it didn't sound like that when I told it, did it? It sounded quite mundane. That's because I didn't tell it in terms of the bigger story that it was part of.
- [1 : 20] The death of Jesus sounds quite mundane and means very little to many people if they don't know the bigger story that it is part of.
- For many people, the death of Jesus is just a tragedy. And for many others, not even that. It's a story of a charismatic Jewish leader who lived long ago, who had very high hopes and who had big dreams but ultimately failed to follow through with what he said.
- And that's what the people there on the day thought when they were looking at Jesus on the cross. You can hear from their words what they said, that they thought exactly that about him, that he is a failure.
- He failed to follow through. Let me read to you again some of the things that happened on that day, some of the things people said. From Mark 15 verse 29, those who passed by were yelling insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, Ha! The one who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself by coming down from the cross.
- If you are who you say you are, in the same way the chief priests and the scribes are mocking him among themselves and saying, He saved others, but he cannot save himself.
- [2 : 33] Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross so that we may see and believe. Even those who were crucified with him taunted him. And it does look like that.
- It does look like exactly what these people are seeing. That Jesus made these big claims, but he just, at the end of the day, he couldn't follow through and his plans all fell flat.
- And especially as we get to the climax of his death on the cross, where he shouts out, My God, my God, why have you abandoned me? Why have you forsaken me? That strange thing that Jesus said on the cross.

And that seems to confirm our suspicions, doesn't it? That this was just an epic failure and even Jesus realized that at the end. That's what many people believe.

That's how many people see the death of Jesus today as a sad ending to an otherwise promising life. But there's another way that you can read the events of that day.

[3 : 36] You can read them also as the epic fulfillment of a much bigger story that had been in place for thousands of years already. Not many people do that because not many people actually know the bigger story.

And that's why I think for a lot of people, the death of Jesus doesn't mean much for them. Because I think they miss the bigger story. You may have even picked up that there was something bigger. If you were listening carefully earlier, when we read from Psalm 22, right?

These are the words of David. David lived a thousand years before Christ. And yet, as we read Psalm 22, there's details of events like people gambling for clothes.

Little things that foreshadow what's going to happen to Jesus. Which means, if nothing else, it means that this is not random. These events are not just a random failure.

Something bigger is going on. They're part of something bigger. And you see this throughout the Old Testament. There are these foreshadows, thousands of years before the events of Jesus, that foreshadow his life and especially foreshadow his death.

[4 : 47] Prophecies, specific, uncannily specific prophecies about the things that happened the day Jesus died. Which hints to us that these are all part of a bigger plan.

But what plan? How can all this bad stuff that happened on that day be part of God's plan? Well, we need to keep reading.

And when we read the words of Isaiah, he's a prophet who lived 700 years before Jesus. But God spoke through him about many things in the nation of Israel in his day.

He was recognized as a prophet who had supernatural insights, supernatural words from God. And he wrote this prophecy about something that would happen in the future. Not even he knew quite what he was writing about.

But he writes this. About someone who would come and do something on this earth that no other person could ever do and would ever do. And he puts it this way.

[5 : 45] Isaiah 53 from verse 4. He himself bore our sickness and he carried our pains. But we in turn regarded him stricken.

Struck down by God and afflicted. But he was pierced because of our rebellion. Crushed because of our iniquities. Punishment for our peace was on him.

And we are healed by his wings. We all went astray like sheep. We all have turned to our own way. And the Lord has punished him for the iniquity of us all.

Isaiah was living in a time where they knew that they had gone astray from God. As he puts it here, we all like sheep have gone astray. People at that time had come to the realization that we are far from God.

Far further from God than we thought. But Isaiah has this vision of someone who is going to come fix that somehow. But the way he is going to fix it was by taking on himself the curse of others.

[6 : 53] By specifically being pierced, he says. This is Isaiah writing 700 years before. And being pierced, Jesus was. His hands were pierced to the cross. But that was the Roman execution.

This was way before the Roman Empire was even thought of. And this form of execution even existed. And yet Isaiah had this vision of someone who is going to come. And through this painful, violent death, he is going to be a substitution for other people.

He is going to die a death that will pay for the sins of others. But he is going to be abandoned. And no one is going to be on his side. In fact, in verse 3 of Isaiah's prophecy, he writes this.

He was despised and rejected by men. A man of suffering who knew what sickness was. He was like someone people turned away from. He was despised.

And we didn't value him. He was despised. And on the cross, you know, as we look at Jesus, as we read the story, one of the things that strikes me is just how despised he was by everyone.

[8 : 01] Roman and Jew, ordinary person, noble. Even the thieves on the cross were despising him. On either side of him. He was completely rejected by everyone.

He suffered an immense loneliness. Even abandonment by his father God himself. That's a very confusing thing. It's confused even many Christians for many years.

That phrase that Jesus says on the cross. My God, my God, why have you abandoned me? And we think, surely that can't be the case. And many people think that that proves that he failed his mission.

And he was disillusioned at the end. But he went through that utter forsakenness. And it wasn't a sign that he failed his mission.

That abandonment was his mission. I want to say that again. Him hanging on the cross, being forsaken and despised by the people around him, And ultimately being abandoned by God his father was not a sign that he failed his mission.

[9 : 13] Because that was his mission. He went through complete forsakenness. Why? As a substitute. He went through complete forsakenness by God.

So that we never have to. That's why he said, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

That's why he went through it. It was already seen, foreseen, hundreds of years before that there would be this man who would be forsaken by all. And he went through that so that we don't have to.

If his death counts for you, if you are one of his people and you have put your faith in him, I want to tell you something this morning because of what Isaiah says, and because of what scripture tells us about Jesus being abandoned on the cross.

If you trust in Jesus' death, God will never forsake you like he did Jesus on that day. Have you ever felt lonely?

[10 : 18] Boys and girls, do you sometimes feel lonely? Maybe at school. Maybe you've been in that awkward situation where no one wants to play with you at lunchtime, and you just have to go sit in the corner of the field and hope nobody notices you.

No one invites you to play games with them. Have you ever felt lonely? Well, you know what? It's not just you, boys and girls. Adults feel lonely as well. But we will never feel the loneliness like Jesus felt on the cross.

And if you're a Christian, then no matter how lonely you might feel, God will never depart from you. God will never abandon you. God will never forsake you because Jesus was forsaken instead on the cross.

And this is what we start to see. This is the bigger picture that the rest of scripture unlocks, that had been in planning for thousands of years.

This death of Jesus on the cross is far deeper and far more profound and far more significant than we would ever imagine. But this plan goes way back, much further back than Isaiah and David, what we've read already.

[11 : 30] It goes right back to the very beginning of when sin first entered our world. You may be familiar with the story right at the beginning of the Bible, Adam and Eve, Garden of Eden, and it tells us how we entered into this fallen state that we live in today, separated from God.

And when sin first came into the world, there was a being who still exists, a spiritual being. There are a lot of spiritual beings that exist. There is a whole spiritual realm that we don't interact with really on a daily basis.

But there was a spiritual being, Satan, who was the cause of sin coming into this world, the cause of brokenness entering humanity. And when God was telling people the consequences of sin and what would happen in the world, the curse it's called, he said something to Satan himself.

He made him a promise. And it goes like this, Genesis 3.15. He talks of someone who's going to come. A son of Eve.

Sometime in the future. And he says this to Satan, He will crush your head. And you will strike his heel. This was millennia before the events of Jesus.

[12 : 50] And yet there's this promise that one day, a human being would come, unlike any other human being, and evil will seem to be victorious over him.

But in the very action of being defeated by evil, he would defeat it. It's that picture. That picture that's painted right in the first pages of Scripture.

And right from then, this plan has been in place for this person to come, who God would send, who would be defeated by evil, and yet, weirdly, strangely, somehow, at the same time, he would defeat it.

He would defeat evil's power. Because you know what evil's power is in this world? Sin's great power is to cut you off from God. That's what evil seeks to do.

But because of Jesus being cut off from God in the place of his people, evil's power is taken away. And so I want you to see this morning that the seemingly tragic event of Jesus dying after an unjust trial and being mocked and eventually dying a gruesome death on the cross, seemingly tragic, sad end, is actually God's eternal plan.

[14 : 06] The fulfillment of an age-old plan to free humans from the consequences of sin and to destroy the hold of evil over his world and over his people.

And those are the only two ways of reading the death of Jesus. Either as a sad ending to a story that you're not really concerned with in your life today, in 2022, or as the epic fulfillment of God's plan to free you from sin and death and give you eternal life.

And you will view it in one of those two ways. Everybody will see the death of Jesus in one of those two ways. And how you view the death of Jesus, how you view the events that happened 2,000 years ago on Good Friday will determine what you do with him.

Those who see this as an epic fulfillment and victory over the power of evil will put their full trust and hope in Jesus. And they will follow him.

But those who don't, you know what they will do? They will inevitably, one way or another, join with the mockers and end up mocking Jesus themselves.

[15 : 20] Maybe not in the way that the people at the cross did outwardly, but they will mock Jesus in some way, inwardly, in how they think about him and how they live.

Have you noticed how often the name of Jesus is used as a swear word in the world? I mean, obviously, Christians don't like that and Christians write to the Broadcasting Complaints Commission and nothing's ever done.

But, have you ever considered why it's Jesus' name and no one else's? There's something deeper going on than just, it's a convenient swear word.

I mean, you don't hear people using other religious figures, famous religious figures, as a swear word. You don't hear people going, oh Buddha, or other political figures. You don't hear people when they're frustrated saying, Karl Marx.

No, it's only the name of Jesus that they use. Why is that? What is going on there? Have you ever wondered why is Jesus singled out for so much mocking even today?

[16 : 26] Just subconscious, everyday mocking, just using the name of Jesus as a swear word. Why is he singled out? What is going on subconsciously? Well, I think exactly the same thing that was going on subconsciously in the people who were mocking Jesus when he died on the cross.

Did you notice in the readings, the people who mocked Jesus, just how venomous their mocking was? How over the top it was?

How mean it was? I mean, kids, have you ever been mocked at school? It's not nice, is it? But when Jesus was mocked, it was far, far worse. I want to read to you again some of the mockery.

And I want us to try to discern what's behind it. I think that's what we need to do. Why were these people so against Jesus? In fact, even before he dies at his trial, the night before, chapter 14, verse 65, the high priest's servants, it says this, they began to spit on him, to blindfold him, and to beat him, saying, oh, prophesy.

The temple servants also took him and slapped him. You say you're a prophet, you say you speak for God, well, who's hitting you, hey? Prophesy. And then, chapter 15, 16 to 19, listen to this mockery, what's behind it?

[17 : 55] The soldiers led him away into the palace, that is the governor's residence, and called the whole company together. They dressed him in a purple robe, twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on him, and they began to salute him.

Hail, king of the Jews. They were hitting him on the head with a stick and spitting on him, getting down on their knees, they were paying him homage. Oh, you say you're a king?

Oh, well, look at you now. King of the Jews, yeah, whatever. Verse 29 to 30, those who passed by were yelling insults at him. It's like they're possessed.

These are just passing by on their daily business. They see Jesus, they start yelling insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, ha, he's the one who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days. Save yourself by coming down from the cross.

And the same way the chief priests and the scribes are mocking him among themselves, saying, he saved others, but he can't save himself. And let the Messiah, the king of Israel, come down from the cross so that we may see and believe.

[18 : 56] You Messiah, you think you're the Messiah, you think you're the king of Israel. This mockery was intense. And it was more than they would normally mock just some criminal on the cross.

Mostly, especially when you see a fellow Jew nailed up to the cross by Romans, you have compassion on them. You don't, you don't mock them like this. Why? It seems people were adamant to convince themselves that Jesus was nothing more than an epic failure.

Why? Well, I'll tell you why. We've seen it in the rest of Mark. It's because they were terrified of the alternative. They were terrified of the prospect of Jesus actually being who he said he was.

They mock him specifically for the things that they fear that he might actually be. They mock him because that's what happens. When you actually fear, you shout louder. When your conscience is pricking you, you shout louder to try and drown it out.

Don't we all do that? You know, when we're arguing with someone, and you actually start to realize you're in the wrong, what happens? You start to shout louder. That's what these people were doing. I think their conscience was pricking them and so they mock him all the more so that they don't have to listen to it.

[20 : 13] They mock him as a prophet because if he actually does come and speak for God, if he bring, if he is the word of God, then you have to listen to him. And they don't want to do that.

They mock him as a king because if he is actually a king, you have to obey him. And they mock him as the Messiah because if he is, then you can't just believe whatever you want anymore. And I think that is the same motivation behind people mocking the name of Jesus today.

Why? No other name. Why the name of Jesus? Because I think the conscience that God has given us is pricking us. And so the more that you mock Jesus, the less you have to listen to that. The name of Jesus isn't just a convenient swear word, but it's used by a world that is still desperately trying to convince itself that Jesus isn't who he says he is.

And yet when we look at the bigger picture, we can't deny who Jesus is. But many people won't let themselves see that bigger picture. Many people won't come to church and listen and learn about the bigger picture because they don't want to believe because of what that might mean for their lives.

And so they mock him. Outwardly or inwardly. But did you notice not everyone in the story mocked Jesus?

[21 : 31] There was one person who didn't. It was the centurion whose job it was to kill Jesus.

Very strange. Very unexpected. The most unlikely person is the first person in all of Mark to confess who Jesus truly is. Mark 15 verse 39.

When the centurion who was standing opposite him saw the way he breathed his last, he said, truly this man was the son of God. Now we've got to appreciate that was a big and dangerous thing for a Roman centurion to admit.

You weren't supposed to believe that as a Roman. But it's actually just as big a thing for anyone to admit today in any age.

You know why? Because if you really believe that, if you really see who Jesus really is, your life needs to change. You need to listen to him.

[22 : 38] You need to actually start focusing on him. You need to start coming to church and you need to take him seriously. And that is why a lot of people don't want to see the bigger picture.

So let me ask you in closing, how do you see the death of Jesus? These events that happened on Good Friday 2,000 years ago. How do you see those events? Because they are events, they did happen.

We know they happened. The events are indisputable. The question is, what do you read in those events? How do you interpret those events? Do you see them as just a sad ending to a story that you're not really that concerned with?

Or do you see them as the epic fulfillment of God's plan to free humanity from sin and death? Because those are the only two options. And I want to encourage you this morning, don't let the discomfort of admitting that Jesus may be far more than you realize stop you from discovering the truth about him.

If you still haven't decided who Jesus is or if you're still not sure in your own mind who Jesus is, I want to encourage you to read the Bible, read specifically the book of Mark.

[23 : 48] If you're here for the first time, you should have received one of these coming in. I'm happy to give you one if you come to me after the service. Read through Mark and ideally read through it with a Christian friend.

That's a great way to start. If you find a Christian from St. Mark's, they've just learned six months of sermons in the book of Mark, so they'll be able to help you read it and they'd love to do that.

If you ask a Christian, would you read the Bible with me, they'll be delighted. And that's the way to start. But then come to church and find out more. Find out more about this bigger picture that you've maybe been afraid to find out about.

You owe it to yourself to learn the big story and so that you can think about Jesus properly, that you can think about his death rightly. And when you do, when you read God's word, when you start coming to church, then be ready like the centurion to come face to face with someone who is far more important than perhaps you ever expected him to be.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word that tells us this key historical event, the death of Jesus on the cross.

[25 : 09] But we thank you that it doesn't only tell us what happened on that day. We thank you that we have the rest of your word to tell us why it happened, to give us the bigger picture. Lord, I pray for all of those who have not yet seen and believed that the death of Jesus is what your word says it is.

I pray for all those here who are not yet in relationship with you. I pray that you would cause them to seek your voice in scripture.

Lord, for those who don't know if you even exist or not, I pray that you would cause them to go to the one place they can hear you and they can encounter you in scripture through your Holy Spirit.

And I pray, Lord, that you would bring many back to church who want to find out more, who want to know the bigger story so that we can live rightly and we can embrace the salvation that you've offered us in this new life not only here but in eternity that you give us in your plans to restore this world to what you want it to be.

Thank you that we can be part of that. Because of what Jesus did on the cross. Amen.