



Aristotle described four different types of tragedy - complex, pathos, moral and spectacle. John has undoubtedly woven tragedy into his narrative of Jesus' betrayal and trial so far. But as we compare John's account of the crucifixion to that of Matthew, Mark and Luke, we notice that John misses out many elements of tragedy (Simon of Cyrene, the mockers, the wine mixed with myrrh, the cry of "Eloi, eloi, lama sabachthani"). John seems to play down the tragedy of Jesus' death.

This is because, even in the grim account of the death of the Jesus, John wants us to see triumph. He wants us to see the sovereign plan of God the Father being worked out and the Son's resolute obedience to it.

We saw God's triumph in three scenes at the foot of the cross.

1. God triumphed as Jesus' persecutors appeared to have won (v16-24)

The battle between the Jewish leaders and Pilate about what to do with Jesus not over at v16. For it was the custom at a crucifixion for a placard naming the sufferer's crime to be nailed above their cross. "Jesus of Nazareth, king of the Jews", Pilate had written in v19, as a final act of revenge against the Jewish leaders who had humiliated him. Jesus' true identity as king was hammered above his head for all who passed by to see.

The executors gambling for the victim's possessions would have been a typical crucifixion scene. These soldiers were probably having a bit of fun and trying to make a profit through Jesus' death. Little did they realise they were fulfilling one of the greatest Psalms in the Old Testament - Psalm 22.

2. God triumphed as Jesus continued to serve his followers (v25-27)

In the midst of terrible physical, emotional, mental and spiritual suffering, we see this precious, intimate scene where Jesus commissions one of his followers to be a son to his mother Mary and take care of her after he has died. Jesus' love for his people, even whilst being brutally killed, is incredible!

3. God triumphed as Jesus chose to die when his work was complete (v28-37)

Jesus' final breath is not the final breath of someone who had struggled with every gasp to last for as long as they can. Twice John used the word "finished" in v28 and v30 ('tetelestai' in the original Greek), which means "completed" or "accomplished" rather than simply "ended". John also described Jesus as "giving up" or "handing over" his life, in v30. Jesus died when he was ready to, when he knew that he had completed his work.

John then draws our attention to v34, the soldier piercing Jesus' side with a spear, by assuring us that this testimony is true in v35. John wants us to see that Jesus is God's shepherd king who was pierced (Zechariah 12:10), and God's Passover lamb (Exodus 12). The Exodus link is particularly significant as Jesus dies, John tells us, at Passover (see 18:28, 18:39, 19:14, 19:31, 19:42). John wants us to see that Jesus is the Passover lamb, the perfect sacrifice whose bones were not broken, so that God will pass over those covered by his blood when he comes to judge.

Home group questions

1. What elements of tragedy have we seen in chapters 18 and 19 so far? What elements of tragedy do we see in the narrative of Jesus' death in v16-42?
2. What ways in this passage, elsewhere in the Bible, in the history of Christianity and in our own lives have we seen God triumph when his enemies were fighting against him and appeared to have won, like the Jewish leaders and Pilate?
3. What ways in this passage, elsewhere in the Bible, in the history of Christianity and in our own lives have we seen God triumph when his enemies seemed ambivalent to him and his rule, like the soldiers?
4. Why do you think John chose to include the scene with Jesus' followers in v25-27? Why do you think Jesus said what he said to Mary and the disciple he loved? What does this show us about Jesus? Which promises of God do you turn to in times of need?
5. What are the four Old Testament prophecies John says that Jesus' death fulfilled? What would have been the significance of each of these references for John's first readers? How are they significant for us? Which do you think is most significant and why?
6. Do you see more tragedy or triumph in John's narrative of Jesus' death? Why?