

JOHN 19

John 19:1–6. Jesus Is Scourged

It's difficult to understand why Pilate had Jesus scourged before again trying to secure His release. Though some have suggested that this was intended as a separate punishment or an attempt to present a sympathetic figure for acquittal, it was customary to scourge (Greek *mastigeō*) convicted criminals prior to crucifixion, and Matthew 27:26 and Mark 15:15 make it clear that this was the case. More likely, Pilate passed the sentence of execution customary for an insurrectionist (as Jesus was charged) but, being aware of Jesus's innocence (John 18:38; 19:6), continued to hesitate as the process was carried out. In this we can see an effort from Pilate to do the right thing, but he lacked the moral strength to actually do it amid public opposition.

The soldiers' actions (placing the crown and robe and then the hailing) were imitations of the trappings of kingship and of Roman emperors in particular. Their mocking was calculated to expose the absurdity of the regal pretensions of such a pathetic figure as the quiet, humble, beaten Jesus. But because Jesus's kingly qualifications were genuine, the soldiers' mocking treatment symbolically functioned as the legitimate coronation of Jesus, "King of the Jews."

John 19:4–11. Presentation and Second Interview with Pilate

At this point, Pilate seems to have made another effort to secure Jesus's acquittal—he presented the bloodied and regally adorned Messiah to the gathering crowd. We should be careful not to impute the culpability for Jesus's death upon Judaism or Jews generally. As we should remember, Jesus and all His earliest followers were Jews. Jesus certainly made enemies who were also Jewish, but these represented a small faction within larger Judaism. In particular, Jesus found Himself at odds with the ruling aristocracy that

controlled the temple and its functions. These are the “chief priests and officers” that called for His crucifixion in verse 6. Thus, we should remember that the murderous hostility that resulted in the death of Jesus was expressed by only a small, aristocratic faction and that the execution itself was carried out by Roman officials.

Pilate’s rebuff, “Take ye him, and crucify him,” can hardly be serious, since John has already established that the Jewish authorities do not have power to administer capital punishment (John 18:31). Rather, this was Pilate’s rhetorical effort to distance himself from what he saw as the lynching of an innocent man; however, he would ultimately acquiesce to the demand. At the crowd’s words, “He made himself the Son of God” (which has the sense of “pretended to be”), Pilate’s hesitancy began to become true fear—perhaps a superstitious dread of what vengeance this potentially divine figure might seek.

Yet Jesus did not answer Pilate’s harried question, “Whence art thou?” The truth could not have satisfied Pilate—it was difficult enough for Jesus’s Jewish audience to understand that He came from above (John 8:23–25); how then could this Gentile governor have grasped Jesus’s divine origins? Verse 11 destroys the illusion of power, though in Roman custody, Jesus was in complete control of His fate. Pilate was only able to give the sentence of crucifixion because it was in accordance with the divine plan.

John 19:12–15. Behold Your King

The designation “Caesar’s friend” may have been an official title held by Pilate; it is attested as an office later in the Roman Empire. Any act of perceived disloyalty to the emperor was dangerous in imperial Rome, especially under the paranoid Tiberius (AD 14–37). Pilate’s position as *praefectus* of Judaea was far from secure due to his personal mismanagements of the province and internal Roman politics, and the threat of imperial oversight seems to have been what finally persuaded Pilate to give in to the demands of the crowd. We see this facet of Pilate’s character in the writings of the Jewish philosopher Philo, who records (on the occasion of another controversy) that Pilate’s stubborn nature was only broken when a Jewish delegation threatened to report his poor conduct as governor to the emperor.¹

In verse 14 we have another example of John’s dual meaning. Pilate’s comment is obviously sarcastic: if he had actually believed Jesus were a king, he would not have regarded Him as innocent. But buried beneath Pilate’s sarcasm, the deeper truth is present: Jesus *is* the King of Israel. Some have seen in the rejoinder “We have no king but Caesar” a rejection of the Davidic covenant, which promised an eternal dynasty to David and his posterity (2 Samuel 7:12–13). If this is the case, we must remember that this shout of rejection came from a small group of chief priests, not the Jewish people as a whole. At any rate, this verse reminds us that it is a mistake to place our political allegiance—or any other allegiance, for that matter—above our spiritual allegiance to God.

John 19:16–24. Jesus Is Crucified

Once Pilate has given his consent to crucify Jesus, the action proceeds quickly. The portion of the cross Jesus carried was the *patibulum*, the horizontal crossbeam (the vertical portion of the cross typically remained fixed in the ground at the site of execution), and this could not have been an easy task for the already scourged and exhausted Jesus. John’s remark that Jesus carried His own cross recalls Genesis 22:6, in which Isaac carried the wood for his own sacrifice to Mount Moriah. However, it also seems to contradict the account given in Matthew 27:32, Mark 15:21, and Luke 23:26 that Simon of Cyrene was pressed into service to carry Jesus’s cross for Him. A reasonable solution to this problem is that Jesus carried His cross as far as He was able and when He could carry it no further, Simon’s help was enlisted.

In antiquity, crucifixion was generally regarded as the worst form of execution. None of the physical traumas associated with it was fatal; rather, it was the combination of those traumas along with exposure that often killed the victim. Crucifixion was meant to be as drawn out, painful, and humiliating an execution as possible. But John shows us that in Jesus’s case, it was not an unfortunate action but an important part of the divine plan. Grammatically, Jesus is crucified in a subordinate clause—the “crucified” of verse 18 is not even the main verb of its sentence. This rhetorical move suggests to the reader that the physical act of crucifixion was not the most important thing that happened; the emphasis is not on Jesus’s humiliation but rather on His glorification.

It’s not entirely clear what motivated Pilate to place the label “Jesus of Nazareth the King of the Jews” on the cross, though it is likely that he was harboring some resentment toward the temple aristocracy for being pressured into convicting an innocent man. It is likely that the title was meant to designate the charge under which the convict was being executed; however, Pilate had already ruled that Jesus was innocent of any political insurrection, having decided that He was not the “King of the Jews”—at least not in any tangible, political sense. Moreover, the crime was pretension to the throne, not kingship itself. This is why the chief priests were upset with the wording and wanted the title to reflect this pretension: “He *said*, I am King of the Jews” (John 19:21; emphasis added). In a sense, the title placed above Jesus’s cross represented an ironic recognition of Jesus’s royal status. In fact, some have seen the Crucifixion, as it is presented in the Gospel of John, as Jesus’s symbolic coronation as the true king of Israel.

John 19:25–27. Disciples and Family by the Cross

It’s unclear how many women are mentioned in verse 25—it could be as many as four or as few as two. The only male disciple mentioned is “the disciple . . . whom [Jesus] loved,” who is traditionally understood to be John the son of Zebedee, one of the Twelve. When Jesus committed His mother to John’s care, He may have had more than practical affairs in mind; this also demonstrates how through the death of Jesus, we are all brought into the family of God in a more complete way.

John 19:28–37. The Death of Jesus

Hyssop, a leafy shrub, would not have been a very practical instrument for extending a sponge. More likely, it is mentioned to evoke Exodus 12:22. In that verse, the Israelites were instructed to wipe the blood of the Passover lamb on their doorposts using a sprig of hyssop, pointing toward Jesus as the symbolic fulfillment of the Passover lamb. This symbolism is strengthened by the fact that according to John's chronology (which has Jesus being crucified on the day of the Passover feast), Jesus was on the cross as the Passover lambs were being slaughtered at the temple.

Note the active verb at the end of verse 30. Jesus had earlier taught, “No man taketh [my life] from me, but I lay it down of myself” (John 10:18); here He voluntarily laid down His life. The verb “gave up” (Greek *paradidōmi*) is used in a long chain of actions that resulted in Jesus's death: it is used to describe the actions of Judas, the chief priests, and eventually Pilate.² The fact that Jesus completed this process by handing over His spirit to the Father demonstrates that He had been in control of the situation from the beginning.

Breaking the legs served to accelerate the death of those on the cross, both through shock and the victims' inability to straighten their bodies with their legs and stave off asphyxiation. Normally, an action that would have shortened the period of suffering would not have been allowed—after all, extending suffering was the purpose of crucifixion—but the Romans made concessions for local religious customs.

While commentators have debated the possible medical causes for the effusion of blood and water from Jesus's side, it may be more useful to read this episode in light of the symbolic value of blood and water in the Gospel of John. In John, blood symbolizes mortality and death, whereas water is the representation of spirit and eternal life. The two symbols have appeared separately throughout the narrative, but here they appear together. United, these symbols reveal that the gifts of the Holy Ghost and eternal life are bestowed through the death of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God.

John 19:38–42. Joseph and Nicodemus Bury Jesus

Following the death of Jesus, we see two of His formerly apprehensive disciples act with the confidence of mature discipleship. Prior to the death of Jesus, Joseph of Arimathea had been a disciple but only “secretly [*kekrymmenos*] for fear of the Jews” (John 19:38). However, there was hardly a more public way to announce one's discipleship than by appearing before the Roman governor to request the body of an executed criminal.

Nicodemus, meanwhile, had come a long way from his nocturnal interview with Jesus in John 3. He left that encounter baffled by Jesus's teaching but obviously impressed. When the authorities later sought to arrest Jesus, he retorted, “Doth our law judge any man, before it hear him, and know what he doeth?” (7:51). Jesus had foretold to Nicodemus that “the Son of man [must] be lifted up” (3:14). Nicodemus did not understand this at first, but seeing Jesus upon the cross, he finally recognized his Messiah and brought a kingly amount of spices for His burial.

We cannot know exactly how much Joseph and Nicodemus understood about the death of Jesus, but it seems unlikely that they realized their Messiah would rise from the dead in three days' time—not even the Twelve seemed to fully grasp this. In a sense, this makes their public declaration of discipleship even more astounding: they chose to identify with Jesus at a time when the future looked very bleak indeed. But Joseph and Nicodemus recognized something truly special in Him and were willing to throw their lot in with a man who had been executed as an outlaw.

Notes

1 Philo, *On the Embassy to Gaius*, 301–302.

2 In reference to Judas's actions, *paradidōmi* is used in John 6:64, 71; 12:4, 13:2, 11, 21; 18:2, 5, 36; 19:11; 21:20 (it is usually translated as “betrayed” in these contexts); in reference to the chief priests', in John 18:5, 30, 35; and in reference to Pilate's, in John 19:16.

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