The Crucifixion and Burial of Jesus

A Study of John 19

As we come to the nineteenth chapter of John, we get a little bit closer to the cross. Jesus’ earthly ministry was about to come to a close. The time has come for Him to die. He came into the world for that purpose.

Pilate was the Roman governor of Judea—and he was convinced that Jesus was not guilty of the charges leveled against Him—and so he planned to release Jesus. Several times Pilate tried to dodge responsibility for condemning Jesus to death. Pilate said to the crowd, “Why, what evil hath he done” (Mark 15:14)?

But the scourging, and even the releasing of Barabbas, did not satisfy the enemies of Jesus.

1. The Sentencing of Jesus (19:1-16)

Since the Jews seemed totally unwilling to let Jesus go unharmed, Pilate proposed that Jesus should be punished [scourged] and set free (Luke 23:16). Pilate suggested a compromise by having the soldiers give Jesus a whipping with a leather strap embedded with pieces of lead, and then release Him.

The “scourging” (verse 1) was more than a moderate whipping. The scourge was a rawhide whip with a wooden handle and pieces of lead fastened into the leather strap. It could severely cut the flesh of the back. Sometimes the victims of a scourging died while at the whipping post.

The soldiers mocked Jesus by weaving a crown made of thorns and placing it on His head. They threw a purple robe over His shoulders (verse 2). They saluted Him as “King of the Jews!” striking Him “with their hands” (verse 3).

Pilate was convinced that Jesus was innocent of the charges leveled against Him, and went out to the Jewish leaders declaring that he found no fault in Jesus (verse 4).

At that point—Jesus came out before the crowd. He was wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe, and Pilate said to the Jews, “Behold the man!” (verse 5). The Greek phrase more literally means “Look at this poor fellow!” He’s weak and lacerated and bleeding!

Pilate was saying, “Look at what we have done to Him; we have beaten Him and crowned Him with a crown of thorns. Isn’t that enough?”

Pilate thought that the sight of Jesus in that garb of mockery would excite their pity for Him, but the Jewish leaders with one voice insisted that Jesus must be crucified (verse 6).

Pilate was mistaken when he thought the Jews would relent. They claimed that Jesus must die “because he made himself the Son of God” (verse 7). They refused to accept His claim to be the Son of God (John 10:36). The Jews looked at Jesus, and His claim to be the Son of God, as a form of blasphemy.
Verse 8 says that when Pilate heard that saying, he was even more afraid, and went again into the judgment hall, and said to Jesus, “[From] whence art thou?” But Jesus gave him no answer (verse 9). Jesus remained silent, and His silence disturbed Pilate, who said to Jesus, Don’t you know that I have power to crucify You and to release You (verse 10)?

Jesus replied that Pilate could have no power at all against Him unless it was given him from above (verse 11). Pilate’s power came from God—even though he was likely unaware of it.

In verse 12 we read that Pilate sought to release Him, but the Jews cried out, saying, “If thou let this man go, thou art not Caesar’s friend.” When Pilate heard them say that, he brought Jesus out and sat down in the judgment seat, in a place called The Pavement, but in Hebrew, Gabbatha.

Pilate was a superstitious man who thought that if Jesus really was one of the gods, he may have really mistreated a god—and he was afraid that the supernatural world would react against him. In Acts 14 the pagan people of Lystra thought that Paul and Barnabas may have been gods.

Yet Pilate was less guilty than was the high priest (Caiaphas)—who delivered Jesus over to be crucified. The Jews knew that all power came from God, and their knowledge of this fact made them more guilty than Pilate was. So Jesus says, “He (that is, the Jewish leader Caiaphas) that delivered me unto thee, hath the greater sin.”

The tense of the verb in verse 12, “From thenceforth Pilate sought to release him”—literally is saying that Pilate was seeking repeatedly to release Jesus. But the Jews shrewdly threatened Pilate with the thought that he would not be a friend of Caesar’s if he let Jesus go.

Pilate could have lost his political power if he was not listed as “a friend of Caesar.”

When Pilate was reminded about his relationship with Caesar, he brought Jesus out, sat down on the judgment seat (verse 13), and said to the Jews, “Behold your King!” (verse 14).

All this happened about 6 o’clock in the morning (Roman time) on the day of preparation (the 14th of Nisan) for the Passover meal. Pilate said to the Jews, “Behold your King!”—but they cried out “Away with him, away with him, crucify him.” They said further, “We have no king but Caesar.” (verse 15).

Verse 16 says that Pilate delivered Jesus to them to be crucified. So they took Jesus and led Him away. That concludes the section about Pilate’s reaction—by saying that Pilate delivered Jesus to the chief priests, and gave them permission to put Him to death.

The Jewish leaders then took Jesus away to be crucified. Mark 15:25 says the actual crucifixion occurred at the third hour (9 A.M. Jewish time). It was the Roman soldiers who carried out the horrible crucifixion, but the whole event was instigated by the Jews.

Matthew tells how Pilate called for water and declared his innocence by washing his hands (Matthew 27:24).
It was at this point that the Jews said, “His blood be on us, and on our children” (Matthew 27:25). God answered that frightening prayer with the destruction of Jerusalem (in 70 A.D.), and with anti-Semitism down through the years, including the holocaust of the 1940s.

Pilate was convinced in his conscience that he should set Jesus free, yet he gave in to the bloody demands of the Jews because he wanted others to have a good opinion of him.

One lesson for all believers to learn is this: It is never wise for a person to see clearly what is right before God—and yet for the sake of popularity do wrong.

2. The Crucifixion of Jesus (19:17-27)

None of the Gospel writers actually describes the details of the crucifixion. Perhaps they concluded that crucifixion was so common that it was unnecessary to describe it, or that it was too horrible for words.

Jesus could have called ten thousand angels. He easily could have come down from the cross. The greatest miracle Jesus ever did was the miracle He did not do; He did not come down from the cross.

Jesus voluntarily suffered on the cross in order to purchase our redemption with His own blood (Acts 20:28). He did it because He loves us, and we owe Him our returning love and daily devotion. Such love calls for loyalty to our Savior in our daily lives.

Bishop J. C. Ryle says, “To wear material crosses as ornaments, to place crosses on churches and tombs—all this is cheap and easy work—but to have Christ’s cross in our hearts, to carry His cross in our daily walk, to know the fellowship of His sufferings . . . to have crucified affections, and to live crucified lives—all this needs self-denial, and this is the only cross-bearing that does good in the world” (Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John, pages 349-350).

Verse 17 says that Jesus bore His cross and went out to a place called the place of a skull, where they crucified Him, and two others, one on either side of Him, and Jesus in the center. And verse 23 says that the soldiers, when they had crucified Jesus, took His garments and made four parts, to each soldier a part.

We learn in verse 26 that when Jesus therefore saw His mother, and the disciple John standing by, He said to His mother, “Woman, behold thy son!” Then He said to the disciple, “Behold thy mother!” And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home.

The normal practice for those who were destined to die was to carry their own cross to the place of crucifixion. When the victim arrived at the place of execution, he was stripped of his outer clothes and forced to lie on the wood beams that formed the cross.

The officers stretched out His arms, hammered nails through his hands, and then drove a spike through his feet.

The cross was raised and dropped into a hole which was dug for that purpose. The place where this occurred for Jesus was called Golgotha.
The most likely place where the crucifixion occurred is called today Gordon’s Calvary, just outside the wall of the city of Jerusalem, where there’s a small hill that looks like a skull. The garden tomb is near by.

The body of the condemned person was exposed to the heat of the sun by day and was chilled by the cool air at night. The result was a slow and painful death that sometimes lasted as long as 72 hours. John describes some of the disgraceful atrocities inflicted upon the Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus was positioned between two others—a position that was intended to disgrace Him, but even that position was a fulfillment of prophecy of Isaiah 53:12, which says, “He hath poured out his soul unto death, and he was numbered with the transgressors.”

And the title which Pilate wrote (verse 19), to be placed upon the cross, was written in three languages, and so people from many areas could read it (verse 20).

The title was intended to be just as insulting to the Jews as it was to Jesus. The title created the impression that this unfortunate victim hanging on the cross is the only kind of king you Jews will ever have—and he is the kind you deserve.

The Jewish priests detected the slur implied by the sign, and so they asked Pilate for a correction (verse 21), but in a haughty manner Pilate declared that what was written, would stand as it was written (verse 22)!

Pilate was totally unaware that the title he had written was actually a great truth.

Jesus will, in the end times, return to the earth, riding on a white horse, followed by “the armies . . . in heaven”—and He will reign as King (Revelation 19:11-16).

In verses 23-27 two groups of people are pictured at the cross.

The soldiers who had crucified Jesus were distributing His clothing among themselves, and a group of four women were faithfully grieving until the end.

The four women (verse 25) included Mary, the mother of Jesus, His mother’s sister, Salome, Mary the wife of Cleopas, and Mary Magdalene. All four had been associated with Jesus.

His mother was with Him when He performed the first miracle at Cana, and now up to the very end she stood close to the cross, probably remembering the words of Simeon, “A sword shall pierce through thy own soul also.”

The “disciple . . . whom he loved” (verse 26), was the Apostle John. He stayed with Jesus’ mother at the cross until the very end, and Jesus gave him the responsibility of caring for His mother (verse 27).

3. The Dramatic Death of Jesus (19:28-37)

In spite of the pain that accompanied crucifixion, Jesus remained in full possession of His faculties until the very moment of death.
Verse 28 says that Jesus, knowing that all things were now accomplished, in order that the Scripture might be fulfilled, said, “I thirst!”

The cry from the cross, “I thirst,” indicates one of the chief agonies of death by crucifixion. The loss of blood and the exposure to the elements of the weather, generated intense thirst, and thus fulfilled the prophecy in Psalm 69:21.

Verse 31 informs readers that the Jews asked Pilate that the legs of the three on the crosses might be broken, and that they might be taken away. The soldiers came and broke the legs of the first and of the other malefactor who was crucified with Him—but when they came to Jesus and saw that He was already dead, they did not break His legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately blood and water came out. John says that these things were done that the Scripture should be fulfilled, “A bone of him shall not be broken.” And again another Scripture says, “They shall look on him whom they pierced.”

Several times in this section John mentions that the events fulfill the Scriptures.

These statements prove that the death of Jesus was predetermined by God. Many years before the crucifixion, every part of the death of Jesus was carefully arranged. From beginning to end, the whole transaction was in accord with God’s plan and design.

Jesus had now been nailed to the cross (John 19:18) and His body was bleeding and sore. The hot sun and the slow bleeding of the wounds created a raging thirst (verse 28), which was an indication of how much suffering Jesus endured in behalf of others.

When Jesus said, “I thirst”—the soldiers raised a moistened sponge to His mouth, and gave Him vinegar—which helped to relieve His throat (verse 29).

Philip Bliss was thinking of these words when he wrote:

Man of sorrows! What a name
For the Son of God who came
Ruined sinners to reclaim!
Hallelujah, what a Saviour!

Bearing shame and scoffing rude,
In my place condemned He stood—
Sealed my pardon with His blood:
Hallelujah, what a Saviour!

Lifted up was He to die,
“It is finished!” was His cry;
Now in heaven exalted high;
Hallelujah, what a Saviour!
When He comes, our glorious King
All His ransomed home to bring,
Then anew this song we'll sing:
Hallelujah, what a Saviour!

The word which is translated “finished” was the common word often stamped on a bill of sale when that bill was paid in full. Just as an invoice (stamped with the word “finished”) was paid in full, so Christ “paid in full” all that we owed to divine justice because of our sins. A number of Old Testament types were fulfilled, and the plan of redemption was completed.

The death of Jesus is adequate to meet the need of every sinful human being. Salvation is now declared a free gift given to all who believe in Him (Romans 6:23).

The Jewish religious leaders asked Pilate to see that the three men on the crosses would have their legs broken (verse 31). To have men hanging on crosses over the Sabbath, and especially on a Passover Sabbath, would be viewed as defiling the Feast.

By breaking the legs of the crucified victims, death would be hastened. The soldiers would take huge mallets and break their legs with brutal blows. This would increase the strain on the arms and the chest, and in that way quicken the death.

The soldiers broke the legs of the two criminals (verse 32), but did not break the legs of Jesus because they saw that He was dead already (verse 33).

The oozing fluid had already separated into “blood and water” (verse 34), indicating that Jesus had already died.

The Apostle John was an eyewitness of the events, and reminds readers that he was there—and what he is describing is accurate and true (verse 35).

4. The Burial of Jesus (19:38-42)

Joseph of Arimathea was a man of wealth and a secret disciple of Jesus, who came to Pilate and asked permission to remove the body of Jesus from the cross (verse 38).

Nicodemus (who had earlier come to Jesus by night) brought more than seventy pounds of spices to prepare the body for burial. Roman pounds were 12 ounces each, thus about 75 U.S. pounds.

Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus—even though it involved a risk to their lives, stepped forward to claim the body of Jesus. The burial had to be hasty because it was nearly sundown, and at that time the special Sabbath would begin.

Nicodemus brought a supply of spices (verse 39), and they wrapped the body in cloths, placing the spices between the folds of the linen cloths. Because the garden tomb was close to the place of the crucifixion, the Lord’s body was placed in it (verse 41).

After the Sabbath was over, the women planned to anoint the body—but they were in for a tremendous surprise on the first day of the week!
The prophecies about the death of Jesus were now fulfilled.

The work of redemption was completed.

We can rest upon the finished work of Christ.

Jesus has done all, paid all, and accomplished all that is necessary for our salvation.

Now that the crucifixion was complete—the public appearances of Jesus were ended.

The unbelieving world has never seen Him again in this age. Even after His resurrection, He appeared only to His followers.

We may look at the finished work of Christ and rest in peace, certain that His death propitiated the wrath of God.

Fannie Crosby, in one of her hymns—wrote:

Near the cross, oh, Lamb of God,
Bring its scenes before me;
Help me walk from day to day,
With its shadow o’er me.

-Harold S. Martin