

John 19:17-37 -- The Crucifixion

"It Is Finished"

Part of our ongoing series through the Gospel of John

Introduction

We are now seeing the climax of the Gospel of John with the crucifixion of Jesus. From chapter 1, John declared 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God' -- and chapter after chapter he has shown us this truth being revealed. Now we see the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world being led to His slaughter (John 1:29). In this passage we will see the connections to the Old Testament prophecies being fulfilled in real time.

In the previous verses, Jesus was brutally flogged, mocked as 'King of the Jews,' and is now headed to the cross. Every detail John records in what follows is chosen with theological precision. Nothing here is accidental.

Section 1: The King Carries His Cross (vv. 17-18)

John 19:17-18 *So they took Jesus,¹⁷ and he went out, bearing his own cross, to the place called the place of a skull, which in Aramaic is called Golgotha. ¹⁸There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, and Jesus between them.*

Background and Context

As Jesus is taken along the road called the Via Dolorosa -- meaning 'the way of suffering' -- He would have carried the cross to the place of crucifixion. The entire cross was not what He carried, but the patibulum, the horizontal beam. John's account does not mention Simon of Cyrene, but given the severity of the flogging Jesus had already endured, it is not surprising that He would not have had the strength to carry the beam the entire way. This was standard Roman custom.

Some Church Fathers have drawn a connection between Isaac carrying the wood up the mountain to his own sacrifice in Genesis 22 as a foreshadowing of Jesus carrying the cross to be the sacrifice for the world. Jewish readers hearing this account could have made this connection as well.

The exact location of Golgotha is not known with certainty, but what is known is that it was outside the walls of Jerusalem and near a public road -- a high-traffic location chosen intentionally. This fulfilled the Mosaic requirement that the sin offering be taken outside the camp (Leviticus 4:12; Hebrews 13:12). The word Calvary is derived from the Latin word calvaria, which also means skull, used in the Latin Vulgate in all four Gospels.

Why do you think the Romans chose a location where many people could view these executions? What does that tell us about the kind of statement the cross was intended to make?

Roman Crucifixion -- The Weight of the Shame

Roman crucifixion was reserved for slaves, criminals, and enemies of the state. It was not merely a method of execution but the most prolonged and torturous means of killing a person that Rome could devise. The condemned were stripped of their clothing, executed in public, and left exposed for hours or days. Death ultimately came through asphyxiation as the weight of the body collapsed on the lungs. Those being crucified would push themselves up on the small platform beneath their feet to breathe, prolonging both their life and their agony.

Once at the crucifixion site, the condemned would have their hands and feet tied or nailed to the patibulum, which was then connected to the vertical beam and raised upright. For Jesus to die this way was not only physically agonizing -- it was the deepest possible social and religious humiliation. Deuteronomy 21:23 declared that anyone hung on a tree is under God's curse. In bearing that curse, Jesus absorbed the full weight of what we deserved.

Section 2: The Title on the Cross -- Pilate's Unwitting Proclamation (vv. 19-22)

John 19:19-22 ¹⁹Pilate also wrote an inscription and put it on the cross. It read, 'Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.' ²⁰Many of the Jews read this inscription, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and it was written in Aramaic, in Latin, and in Greek. ²¹So the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, 'Do not write, The King of the Jews, but rather, This man said, I am King of the Jews.' ²²Pilate answered, 'What I have written I have written.'

Background and Context

Roman custom required that the crime of the condemned be written on a placard and either hung around his neck during the procession or carried before him on the way to execution. Once hanging, the placard was fastened to the cross. In the case of Jesus, Pilate wrote the title in three languages: Aramaic, the common language of daily life in Judea and among the Jewish people; Latin, the official language of Roman law and government; and Greek, the international language of commerce and culture. The multilingual inscription meant that virtually every person present at the crucifixion could read the charge -- whether Jewish pilgrim, Roman soldier, or Greek-speaking visitor. Its purpose under Rome was to warn everyone of the repercussions of opposing Roman authority.

What irony do we find in Pilate's response to the chief priests regarding the title?

The title 'King of the Jews' was written in the three major languages of the world at that time. In light of what Jesus said in John 12:32, what message does this trilingual proclamation carry about who Jesus came to save?

When the chief priests demanded a change to the wording, Pilate refused with a phrase that carried Roman legal finality: 'What I have written I have written.' Roman law forbade the alteration of an official sentence once it had been formally pronounced and recorded. The man who lacked the courage to release an innocent man could not bring himself to change a title. God used Pilate's pride and political exhaustion to ensure that the true identity of the One dying on that cross was proclaimed publicly, permanently, and in every language of the known world.

Section 3: The Seamless Tunic -- Scripture Fulfilled Through Soldiers (vv. 23-24)

John 19:23-24 ²³When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his garments and divided them into four parts, one part for each soldier; also his tunic. But the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom, ²⁴so they said to one another, 'Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see whose it shall be.' This was to fulfill the Scripture which says, 'They divided my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots.' So the soldiers did these things.

What details can we gather from verse 23 about the soldiers and of Jesus' clothing?

Background and Context

Under Roman law, the soldiers who carried out a crucifixion were entitled to the personal property of the condemned, including their clothing. The four soldiers divided Jesus' outer garments into four parts -- one for each. The inner tunic presented a problem: it was seamless, woven in a single piece from top to bottom, meaning that dividing it would destroy its value entirely. Rather than ruin it, they cast lots to determine who would receive it whole.

Verse 24 tells us that this fulfilled Psalm 22:18. Psalm 22 is one of the most remarkable passages in the entire Old Testament -- written by David approximately 1,000 years before crucifixion even existed as a method of execution. The Psalm begins with the cry 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' -- the very words Matthew and Mark record Jesus making from the cross -- and goes on to describe in striking detail the physical experience of crucifixion: bones out of joint, extreme thirst, hands and feet pierced, and garments divided by lot. The precision of this fulfillment is one of the most powerful evidences of the divine inspiration of Scripture and the messianic identity of Jesus.

The soldiers were not aware they were fulfilling any prophecy. They were simply following Roman procedure and making a practical decision about a valuable garment. And in doing so, they fulfilled to the letter what the Holy Spirit had breathed through David a millennium before. God used even the smallest, most self-interested decisions of unbelievers to accomplish His redemptive purposes.

Section 4: The Women and the Beloved Disciple -- Love at the Cross (vv. 25-27)

John 19:25-27 ²⁵But standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. ²⁶When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, 'Woman, behold, your son!' ²⁷Then he said to the disciple, 'Behold, your mother!' And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home.

How many women do you think are present in your reading of verse 25?

Background and Context

The syntax of verse 25 is genuinely difficult to interpret -- the use of 'and' makes it unclear whether 'his mother's sister' and 'Mary the wife of Clopas' are two separate women or one woman described in two ways. Most conservative scholars read the passage as referring to four women, though the exact count is secondary to the main point John is making. What is certain is that these women stayed. The male disciples had largely scattered after the arrest, exactly as Jesus predicted in John 16:32. These women

remained at the foot of the cross at great personal risk, making a public statement of loyalty at the moment of maximum cost.

Verse 26 contains a connection to an earlier moment in John's Gospel. What does the repeated use of the word 'Woman' tell us about the significance of this moment in the overall arc of John's narrative?

Even while dying, Jesus was thinking about the people He loved and making provision for them. What does that tell us about the character of the King and about how His kingdom community is meant to function in caring for one another?

The beloved disciple mentioned in verse 26 is almost certainly John himself -- the same disciple who was known to the high priest's household (John 18:15-16), who outran Peter to the empty tomb (John 20:4), and whose eyewitness testimony the Gospel is built upon. The specific, personal detail that he took Mary into his own home from that hour is the kind of incidental memory that only an eyewitness would record.

Jesus addresses His mother as 'Woman' -- the same word He used at the wedding in Cana in John 2:4, where He said 'Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come.' Now His hour has come, and He uses the same address. This verbal echo connects the first sign of John's Gospel to the final hour and suggests that through His death, the bonds of the new kingdom community He is creating transcend even natural family bonds. Even in His own suffering, Jesus ensures that those He loves will be cared for.

Section 5: "It Is Finished" -- The Most Important Words Ever Spoken (vv. 28-30)

John 19:28-30 ²⁸After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the Scripture), 'I thirst.' ²⁹A jar full of sour wine stood there, so they put a sponge full of the sour wine on a hyssop branch and held it to his mouth. ³⁰When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, 'It is finished,' and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

Key Greek Word

Tetelestai -- 'It is finished' (John 19:30) -- The perfect passive indicative of teleo, meaning 'to bring to completion, to accomplish, to fulfill.' The perfect tense is critical: it does not simply mean 'this is over.' It means a completed action whose results stand permanently and can never be undone. In the first century, this same word was written on commercial receipts to indicate a debt paid in full. Jesus was not announcing defeat. He was declaring total and irreversible victory.

Why might John specifically mention that a hyssop branch was used to lift the sponge to Jesus' lips? What does that detail connect to, and why does it matter for understanding who Jesus is?

Background and Context

The drink offered to Jesus here is different from the wine mixed with myrrh mentioned in the Synoptic accounts, which was a sedative designed to dull the agony. This sour wine was made of wine vinegar mixed with water, commonly used by soldiers to quench their own thirst. Jesus speaking these words was not merely an involuntary cry of physical need -- it was a willful and conscious acknowledgment of the fulfillment of Scripture, specifically Psalm 69:21.

The hyssop branch, mentioned only by John, is the same plant used during the first Passover when the Israelites applied the blood of the Passover lamb to their doorposts in Egypt (Exodus 12:22). The same plant used to apply the blood of the first Passover lamb is now used to give the final drink to the true Passover Lamb. John is making the connection clearly here with Jesus and the Passover lamb as recorded in Scripture.

It is also important to notice the Trinity in this final cry. The crucifixion is the fulfillment of the eternal plan of the Father, accomplished through the willing obedience of the Son, with the pouring out of the Spirit to follow. John says that Jesus 'gave up his spirit' -- not that He died or breathed His last, but that He handed Himself over. The action is voluntary, it is the same word used throughout the passion narrative for Jesus being handed over to His captors. Jesus is not seized by death. He delivers Himself into it on His own terms, consistent with what He declared in John 10:18: 'No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.'

Discussion Questions

1. Tetelestai -- 'paid in full.' If the debt of your sin has been completely and permanently paid, what does that change about how you live, how you pray, and how you face your own failures?

Section 6: The Unbroken Bones and the Pierced Side -- Two Prophecies, One Death (vv. 31-37)

John 19:31-37 ³¹Since it was the day of Preparation, and so that the bodies would not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), the Jews asked Pilate that their legs might be broken and that they might be taken away. ³²So the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first, and of the other who had been crucified with him. ³³But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. ³⁴But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water. ³⁵He who saw it has borne witness -- his testimony is true, and he knows that he is telling the truth -- that you also may believe. ³⁶For these things took place that the Scripture might be fulfilled: 'Not one of his bones will be broken.' ³⁷And again another Scripture says, 'They will look on him whom they have pierced.'

The Day of Preparation -- Four Key Points

1. Jesus was crucified on Friday. The Sabbath began at sundown on Friday evening. The day of Preparation is so called because it was the day set aside to prepare for the Sabbath.

2. Normal Roman practice was to leave the crucified on the cross until they died naturally - a process that could take days. Their bodies would then be left for vultures. The Jews, however, were required by law (Deuteronomy 21:22-23) to take down bodies before nightfall.
3. To speed up death when removal was necessary, soldiers would smash the condemned's legs with an iron mallet (crurifragium). This eliminated the ability to push up and breathe, causing death by asphyxiation within minutes.
4. The Sabbath in question was especially significant -- it was the Sabbath connected with Passover, which is why John calls it a 'high day.' This is precisely the context in which the Passover Lamb imagery reaches its fullest expression.

The Unbroken Bones -- Identification of the Passover Lamb

The soldiers broke the legs of the two criminals on either side of Jesus but when they came to Jesus they saw He was already dead and did not break His legs. This fulfilled three Old Testament texts simultaneously: Exodus 12:46 ('you shall not break any of its bones' -- the Passover lamb instruction), Numbers 9:12 (the same prohibition repeated), and Psalm 34:20 ('He keeps all his bones; not one of them is broken'). The true Passover Lamb was identified by this specific physical characteristic. The crucifixion did not happen despite the Passover -- it was the Passover.

The Blood and Water -- Eyewitness Evidence

One of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear to confirm death, and blood and water immediately flowed out. From a medical perspective, this is consistent with the physiological effects of crucifixion: fluid accumulates in the pericardial sac around the heart and the pleural cavity around the lungs under the conditions of severe trauma. When the spear pierced the chest cavity, both blood and this watery fluid would have flowed. This is medical confirmation that Jesus was genuinely and completely dead. The fulfillment John then identifies -- 'They will look on him whom they have pierced' -- comes from Zechariah 12:10, a text that Revelation 1:7 applies to the Second Coming: 'every eye will see him, even those who pierced him.'

Discussion Questions

1. John includes the specific physical details of Jesus' death -- the unbroken bones, the pierced side, the blood and water. What is the important point John is making about Jesus by including these details? What would be lost if John had simply said 'Jesus died'?
2. John says he recorded these things 'that you also may believe.' What specifically are we being called to believe in verse 35? And what does it mean for your own life to believe it?