



Title: Christ's Crucifixion Part 1

Text: JOHN 19:17-22

Date: March 27, 2022

Main Idea: God's King is crucified.

Personal Study Guide

READ ENTIRE TEXT: JOHN 19:17-22

Highlight – What stands out?

1. Who is Pilate and what role did he play in the crucifixion?
2. What is the relationship between Pilate and the Pharisees throughout Jesus' crucifixion and specifically during this exchange?
3. What did you learn about God (Father, Son, or Holy Spirit) in this text?
4. Do you notice any themes, words, or ideas from other sections of John?

Explain – What does this mean?

1. Where else in scripture have you seen God's plan fulfilled despite the action consisting of a bad nature?

2. What three languages was the phrase “King of the Jews” written in? What do you think this says about the type of King Jesus is and who he is king for?
3. What is the purpose statement in John (see: John 20:31)? How is it fulfilled in this passage?

Apply – How does this change me?

1. Does Jesus speak in this section? It seems like Jesus is out of control here, right? But how do you see Jesus actually being in control of all things even as Pilate and the Jews argue?
2. One Bible commentator says “there is belief, then there is *belief*” in the Gospel of John. What is written on the sign is a true statement, but does Pilate write it in true belief that John 20:31 talks about? How do you see people making statements about Jesus that sound like belief but really are contrary to believe that “leads to life in his name?”
3. Can you think of a time in your life, where what looked like death for you was actually leading to life?

Respond – What’s my next step?

1. How can you speak of Jesus in a way that is true? How are you tempted to speak of him like Pilate?
2. Spend some time praying, asking God to sustain your belief in him and asking him to give you words that speak of him rightly.
3. Can you think of a time where it looked like evil was winning, but evil was being used for good? If that is a current moment, spend time praying for the people involved.

Commentary

Taken from *The Gospel According to John* commentary by D.A. Carson

In main outline, John’s account of Jesus’ death parallels that of Mark rather closely. Nevertheless, he omits some details, and introduces several features not reported elsewhere, including the controversy caused by the inscription on the cross (vv. 19–22), several fulfillment quotations (vv. 24, 28–29, 36–37), the care of Jesus for his mother (vv. 25–27) and the last cry before his death (v. 30). The significance of these distinctive elements is treated below.

19:16b–17. The Greek text simply reads ‘They took charge of Jesus’. The referent must be the soldiers (vv. 23, 25). At this point they probably administered the terrible scourging, the *verberatio* (cf. notes on v. 1). *Carrying his own cross* (lit. ‘carrying the cross for himself’ [*heautō*]) confirms what we know of Roman practice: ‘Each criminal as part of his punishment carries his

cross on his back' (Plutarch, *The Divine Vengeance*, 554 A/B). This refers to the cross-member, the horizontal bar (Lat. *patibulum*). The condemned criminal bore it on his shoulders to the place of execution, where the upright beam of the gibbet was already fastened in the ground. The victim was then made to lie on his back on the ground, where his arms were stretched out and either tied or nailed to the *patibulum*. The cross-member was then hoisted up, along with the victim, and fastened to the vertical beam. The victim's feet were tied or nailed to the upright, to which was also sometimes attached a piece of wood that served as a kind of seat (Lat. *sedecula*) that partially supported the body's weight. This was designed to increase the agony, not relieve it (*cf.* notes on vv. 18, 31ff.).

The Synoptics report (Mt. 27:32; Mk. 15:21; Lk. 23:26) that the soldiers commandeered Simon of Cyrene to carry the cross for Jesus. The traditional harmonization is almost certainly correct. Despite the brutal beatings, Jesus 'went out' (*sc.* from the *praetorium*, 18:28) and carried the cross-member as far as the gate of the city, where he collapsed in weakness from pain and loss of blood, and where the soldiers impressed Simon who (Mark says) was 'on his way in from the country'. If the *praetorium* refers to the Fortress of Antonia, and the traditional *Via Dolorosa* is approximately the route that Jesus went, it is perhaps worth noting that tradition places the intervention of the soldiers and of Simon at the fifth station of the cross. Dodd (*HTFG*, p. 125) judges the harmonization to be 'a perfectly reasonable interpretation of the evidence'.

Even so, it is important to ask why John omits mention of Simon of Cyrene. The brief answer is that it does not lend support to his central themes, and would therefore be distracting. It is possible to think of Jesus' death in terms of his resolution, his obedience to the Father, his Father's plan; it is also possible to think of Jesus' death in terms of Jesus' suffering, struggle, weakness and anguish. Both perspectives are correct (*cf.* 28); both are in some measure taught in each of the four Gospels. But John, even though he makes room for the suffering (*e.g.* 12:27–28), greatly emphasizes the sovereign plan of the Father and the Son's obedience. And so he reports, rightly, that Jesus carried his own cross.

Other connections may have been in the Evangelist's mind, but are much harder to demonstrate. The church Fathers tend to see in this event the antitype to Isaac carrying wood to the place of sacrifice, almost his own sacrifice (Gn. 22:6). Even some Jewish scholars thought the Isaac episode evocative of crucifixion: Isaac carried the wood 'like one carries his stake [= cross] on his shoulder' (*Genesis Rabbah* 56:3 [on Gn. 22:6]). How much John could have expected his readers to infer is very difficult to determine. Again, the second-century gnostic heretic Basilides in his commentary on John argues that Simon of Cyrene took Jesus' place and died on the cross in his stead—the common view of Muslims to this day. If that view were rising in John's day (and there is no evidence that it was), it is possible that John might

find it expedient simply to omit mention of the Cyrene. But we are rapidly approaching the borders of uncontrolled speculation.

Golgotha is an English transliteration of the Greek, itself a transliteration of the Aramaic *gulgoltâ*, which means 'skull'. Our more common 'Calvary' derives from Latin *calvaria*, which also means 'skull' and which was used in the (Latin) Vulgate version in all four Gospels. *The place of the Skull* probably derived its name from its appearance, though this is uncertain. The site is in doubt. Gordon's Calvary is not an option. The most likely site is near the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, just outside the northern wall, and not far from a road (Mt. 27:39; Jn. 19:20).

19:18. Here, in this public place where all could see him, the soldiers *crucified him*. In the ancient world, this most terrible of punishments is always associated with shame and horror. It was so brutal that no Roman citizen could be crucified without the sanction of the Emperor. Stripped naked and beaten to pulpy weakness (*cf.* notes on v. 1), the victim could hang in the hot sun for hours, even days. To breathe, it was necessary to push with the legs and pull with the arms to keep the chest cavity open and functioning. Terrible muscle spasm wracked the entire body; but since collapse meant asphyxiation, the strain went on and on. This is also why the *sedecula* (*cf.* notes on vv. 16b–17) prolonged life and agony: it partially supported the body's weight, and therefore encouraged the victim to fight on.

All four Gospels mention that Jesus was crucified with two others. Matthew and Mark call them *lēstai*, probably 'guerrilla fighters' (John applies the same word to Barabbas in 18:40); Luke (23:40–43) reports the repentance of one of them. John mentions only that Jesus was crucified between them. It is hard to imagine that the Evangelist who uses Isaiah 53 so effectively in John 12 is not now thinking of Isaiah 53:12: Jesus 'was numbered with the transgressors'. But the matter is uncertain (*cf.* Moo, pp. 154–155).

19:19–22. It was the custom for the crime of which the person doomed to crucifixion had been found guilty to be written on a tablet or placard and hung around his neck or carried before him as he made his way to the place of execution. Once the prisoner was crucified, the placard was often *fastened to the cross*. The Greek text says that Pilate 'wrote' it (*egrapsen*): this does not necessarily mean that he took the stylus in his own hand, but that he caused it to be written (NIV 'had a notice prepared') and controlled the content, as the ensuing verses show (*cf.* notes on 21:24–25). The Latin word for such a placard was *titulus*, which generated *titlos* in Greek, and accounts for 'title' in many English versions (NIV 'notice').¹³

The charge on the notice read *Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews*. The Synoptics say much the same (Mt. 27:37; Mk. 15:26; Lk. 23:38); minor differences in wording may owe something to the trilingual form in which it was written. Aramaic (*cf.* notes on 5:2) was the language in common use in Judea; Latin was the official language of the army; and Greek was the *lingua franca* of the Empire, and well known in Galilee. Multilingual crucifixion notices are reported

in other sources (*cf.* Bauer, p. 173). The reason for such linguistic enthusiasm is obvious: the Romans had a vested interest in publicizing the nature of the crime that resulted in such punishment, as a warning to every segment of the populace.

If we recall how the theme of Jesus' kingship has been developing throughout chs. 18–19, there can be little doubt that this episode functions in the narrative at several levels. First, it makes clear that the charge on which Jesus was eventually found guilty was the first one, the charge of sedition (18:33). Second, the wording is Pilate's last act of revenge in the case. He has already taunted the Jews with Jesus' kingship (vv. 14–15); here he does so again, mocking their convenient allegiance to Caesar by insisting that Jesus is their king, and snickering at their powerless status before the might of Rome by declaring this wretched victim their king. Doubtless his own sense of powerlessness before their manipulation (v. 12) contributed to his unyielding insistence that the wording remain as he prepared it. The protest of the chief priests shows they feel the sting of Pilate's savage irony; but their suggestion of an insertion, '*I am the King of the Jews*', to make the matter one of Jesus' claims and no more, would strip the governor of his last revenge. And so he stands firm. Thus Pilate's firmness is not motivated by principle and strength of character, but by the hurt obstinacy and bitter rage of a man who feels set upon. It is not, as Dauer (p. 275) argues, that Pilate refuses to change the truth into a lie, but that he is determined to humiliate those who have humiliated him. This view of Pilate is confirmed by other sources: e.g. Philo (*Leg. Gaium* 301) describes Pilate as 'naturally inflexible, a blend of self-will and relentlessness'.

But at a third level, Pilate's malice serves God's ends. The Lord Jesus is indeed the King of the Jews; the cross is the means of his exaltation and the very manner of his glorification. Even the trilingual notice may serve as a symbol for the proclamation of the kingship of Jesus to the whole world: 'Thus did Pilate *Tell it out among the heathen that the Lord is King*' (Hoskyns, p. 628, emphasis his, adopting the language of Ps. 96:10 AV). Thus the two men most actively and immediately responsible for Jesus' death, Caiaphas (11:49–52) and Pilate, are unwittingly furthering God's redemptive purposes, unwittingly serving as prophets of the King they execute. 'The Crucified One is the true king, the kingliest king of all; because it is he who is stretched on the cross, he turns an obscene instrument of torture into a throne of glory and "reigns from the tree" ' (Bruce, p. 369).