

John 19:1-37: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 06 February 2020

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[0 : 0 0] John chapter 19 verses 1 to 37. Then Pilate took Jesus and flogged him, and the soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head and arrayed him in a purple robe. They came up to him, saying, Hail, King of the Jews, and struck him with their hands. Pilate went out again and said to them, See, I am bringing him out to you, that you may know that I find no guilt in him.

So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, Behold the man. When the chief priests and the officers saw him, they cried out, Crucify him, crucify him. Pilate said to them, Take him yourselves and crucify him, for I find no guilt in him. The Jews answered him, We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die, because he has made himself the Son of God. When Pilate heard this statement, he was even more afraid. He entered his headquarters again and said to Jesus, Where are you from? But Jesus gave him no answer. So Pilate said to him, You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you? Jesus answered him, You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin. From then on Pilate sought to release him. But the Jews cried out, If you release this man, you are not Caesar's friend. Everyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar. So when

Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judgment seat at a place called the stone pavement and in Aramaic, Gabbatha. Now it was the day of preparation of the Passover. It was about the sixth hour. He said to the Jews, Behold your king. They cried out, Away with him, away with him, crucify him. Pilate said to them, Shall I crucify your king? The chief priests answered, We have no king but Caesar. So he delivered him over to them to be crucified. So they took Jesus. And he went out bearing his own cross to the place called the place of a skull, which in Aramaic is called Golgotha.

There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, and Jesus between them. Pilate also wrote an inscription and put it on the cross. It read, Jesus of Nazareth, the king of the Jews. Many 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. So the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, Do not write, The king of the Jews. But rather, this man said, I am the king of the Jews.

Pilate answered, What I have written, I have written. When 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. So they said to one another, Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it, to see whose it shall be.

[3 : 01] This was to fulfil the scripture which says, They divided my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots. So the soldiers did these things. But standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clarpus, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, Woman, behold your son. Then he said to the disciple, Behold your mother. And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home. After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said, to fulfil the scripture, I thirst. A 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. When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, It is finished. And he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. Since 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. So the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first, and of the other who had been crucified with him. But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water. He who saw it has borne witness. His testimony is true, and he knows that he is telling the truth, that you also may believe. For these things took place that the scripture might be fulfilled.

Not one of his bones will be broken. And again another scripture says, They will look on him whom they have pierced. John chapter 19 begins with a sort of mock coronation. Jesus is dressed up with a crown of thorns and a purple robe, and the soldiers greet him, saying, Hail, King of the Jews. The purpose of this was probably more to bring about a public shaming than to cause the most extreme pain.

Pilate seems to have hoped that a public humiliation of Jesus before the crowd would satisfy their murderous desire, and give them some sort of catharsis. This would have saved Pilate from actually having to go through with an execution. Once again, John probably wants us to see the irony of the situation.

Although the soldiers are performing a mock coronation, Jesus really is being prepared for glorification at the cross. The crown of thorns that he wears is reminiscent of the thorns of the curse of Genesis chapter 3. Fittingly, the crown is borne upon his brow, another place connected with the curse.

Pilate's ploy fails. The people insist upon crucifixion. He presents Jesus again, using the words, Behold the man. Again, this is presumably a mock royal acclamation. This is the man that you want to lead you. Once again, John, however, wants us to see the irony that this is the man being prepared for the coronation of the cross. Initially refusing to go along with them, Pilate tells the Jews to crucify Jesus themselves. He sees no fault in Jesus. But the Jews insist that they have no authority to crucify Jesus themselves. But Jesus' claim to be the Son of God means that he must be put to death according to their law. They challenge Pilate again, and Pilate returns to speak to Jesus. He points out to him, perhaps rather frustratedly or angrily, that he has the authority to put him to death. Jesus should speak up for himself. However, Jesus claims that Pilate's authority comes from God alone. Pilate would have no authority to do anything were it not for the fact that God had given him that authority. Once again, we're reminded that this is the day of preparation. Jesus is the Passover lamb. In Isaiah chapter 53, we were told that the servant would be like a sheep, silent before its shearers. That Jesus does not present a case for himself, again would remind us that Jesus is the Passover lamb. He's the one who's the servant of God, the one who fulfills and brings together these roles. The Jews manipulated Pilate, claiming that he was no friend of Caesar if he allowed Jesus to live. And so in the end, Pilate hands

[7 : 04] Jesus over to them. Who is the them here? It would seem to be the Jews on the surface of it grammatically. But yet when we look at the crucifixion, it's supervised by the Roman soldiers. So it seems as if part of the ambiguity is the point that the Jews actually have their way with Jesus. It's not primarily Roman instigation of the crucifixion. Rather, the crucifixion is instigated by the Jewish authorities, and Pilate and his men go along with it. Once again, we should recognize the irony of their claim that they have no king but Caesar.

They disavow the Messiah, and they present themselves as the servants of Caesar. However, they had already just asked for an insurrectionist to be released to them. Throughout this passage, Jesus is presented as being in control. He's not just a victim. No one does anything to him that he has not submitted to himself. He bears his own cross, and he brings it to the place of crucifixion. The title above the cross is written in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, suggesting the worldwide significance of Christ's work and rule. We might notice that two other words are translated in this passage, suggesting again that there is an audience beyond the immediate Jewish audience. Here the title was presumably the charge that led to Jesus' crucifixion, King of the Jews. However, as in many places in John, and particularly in this passage, there is a rich irony here. For Jesus is indeed the King of the Jews, and though the chief priests object at the title put over Jesus, Pilate's word is treated as final. Once again, people are saying and doing more than they understand. They are fulfilling the scripture in their actions. Pilate, who had been humbled in part by the crowd and the Jewish leaders who had forced him to go along with them, went with this superscription, presumably in order to spite them. The Jewish leaders want to reject and kill this man, but Pilate is connecting this man to them, claiming that he is their king. Various scriptures are fulfilled in the crucifixion. We find more of the language of fulfillment in this chapter than almost anywhere else in the Gospel of John. Some of the scriptures that are playing in the background here include things like Isaiah chapter 53, or Psalm 69 with the reference to the thirst of Christ, or Psalm 22 verses 15 to 18. Exodus chapter 12 verse 46 with the reference to the bones not being broken. Zechariah chapter 12 verse 10. All of these verses highlight the fact that this is happening according to the scripture. Jesus is playing out many themes of the biblical text and fulfilling its prophecies. This is what ought to have taken place. Now it may seem that everything has gone wrong, but at this time when everything seems to be going wrong, we get this litany of fulfillments of scripture. This highlights that this is no accident. Step by step, what is happening in this chapter is fulfilling what God has declared in the past. Jesus is here carrying out the mission that was set for him. He's not rejecting or swerving from it, nor has he stumbled and fallen.

This is exactly what God had always intended. The appearance of Jesus' mother again at this point is probably significant. John never speaks about the virgin birth, it would seem, but birth is a constant theme of his gospel. Chapter 16 verse 21 speaks of the cross and the resurrection as if birth pangs followed by a birth. A woman with birth pangs at hour come and struggling to give birth to a child and then rejoicing that a child is born into the world. The death of Jesus is like Israel giving birth and it's also accompanied by the giving of a new son to his mother. This son is the beloved disciple, the archetypal disciple. The womb of Israel is being opened and the firstborn delivers his brethren into the arms of his mother. Jesus gives the beloved disciple and his mother to each other, much as we are given to each other by Christ in his church. When we speak about the motherhood of Mary, our focus tends to be upon her physical role in the incarnation, the conception of Jesus and his birth in Bethlehem.

And the physical dimension of this is obviously important. However, the scriptural text here particularly seems to focus upon the spiritual and symbolic role that Mary is playing. The mere physical act of bearing and nursing Jesus is not the great thing, rather the spiritual act of hearing God's word and keeping it. Bearing Jesus within herself as the archetypal disciple is the most important thing.

Mary's bearing of Christ is presented as a fuller realization of that great act of faith. Mary is described in Luke chapter 1 verse 45 as she who believed. Her physical bearing of Christ is fundamentally seen as a spiritual act, one in which the spirit comes upon and empowers her.

[11 : 40] Mary's physical bearing of Christ is not highlighted in John's gospel, but in passages such as this one, the spiritual and symbolic aspect of it really is. Mary's motherhood here is not according to the flesh, but is a stronger form of spiritual kinship formed by the gift of Christ. What we see Christ doing here is forming a new family at the foot of the cross. At this point, Jesus can declare that it is finished.

He has completed what he intended to do, an intention seen most clearly in the bringing together of the beloved disciple and his mother. Jesus hands over the spirit in verse 30. Even his very moment of death seems to occur on his own terms. John chapter 7 verse 39 spoke of the spirit being given over when Jesus was glorified. The lifting up of Jesus on the cross is the first stage of his glorification for John. So appropriately, there is a handing over of the spirit at this point, presumably to the new family that's being formed at the foot of the cross. As Jesus is pierced by the soldiers, blood and water come out from his side. The emphasis upon the truth of this event and the reliability of the witness that was born to it suggests that these details really matter. They're underlined for a reason. Some have related the piercing of the side to the formation of Eve from the side of Adam. Perhaps we might also see birth imagery here. Jesus is the belly or the womb from which living waters flow. Blood and water might relate to the blood of the covenant and the water of baptism. Finally, Jesus had also spoken of his body as the temple. As in Ezekiel chapter 47, water would flow out from the side of the temple and heal and give life to the nation. The pierced body of Jesus might be related to the torn temple veil of the other gospel accounts. As we get further on in John's gospel, I think we'll see other allusions to these passages from Ezekiel. So I think it's natural to see it as the waters flowing out from the temple to give life to the world. Jesus has spoken of his gift of living waters in chapter 4 and in chapter 7, and now the waters flow out as a result of his death. In chapter 1 verse 29, Jesus was related to the Passover lamb.

His bones are not broken. In fulfillment of the law concerning the Passover lamb here, Zechariah chapter 12, from which the verse quoted in verse 37 comes, speaks of repentance given to Israel through the gift of the Spirit. This also serves as the fulfillment of Jesus being lifted up for all of the nations to look at as a sign.

A question to consider. John emphasizes Jesus' fulfillment of scripture throughout the crucifixion account. Can you collect the various references to the scripture that are found in this account, go back to the original context, and see how the broader context of those passages sheds light upon the meaning of the crucifixion and what Jesus is accomplishing here?