

JOHN 19

JESUS, THE UPLIFTED SAVIOR

As we came to the end of the last chapter, we saw that Pilate had decided that Jesus was definitely guilty of no capital crime, and so he determined to release Him. Nevertheless, he was also anxious to secure the favor of the Jews, and so he attempted a compromise by offering to release Jesus to the people as a special favor. But alas! The rulers persuaded the people to clamor for the release of a robber and murderer named Barabbas, and to demand the execution of Jesus.

Now, as this chapter opens, we read of Pilate's second compromise: he hands Jesus over to be scourged. By his decision to punish Him in this manner, Pilate hoped to appease the rage of the rulers and to inspire pity for Him in the eyes of the common people. Scourging was a brutal and inhumane form of torture that was administered by the Romans, and it usually preceded the final execution of those who were condemned by the death sentence. And in this particular case, the soldiers added cruel mockeries to the painful scourging; they crowned the "King" with thorns, they robed Him with purple, and they struck Him on the face with their hands. But this compromise also failed. As Jesus appeared again before the people, bleeding and crowned with thorns, they began to howl, "Crucify him, crucify him!" Now Pilate is enraged. They are asking him to condemn a Man Whom he has already declared to be innocent of the charge that was levelled against Him. "Take him yourselves, and crucify him!" he cries; he himself will have no part in such a judicial murder. Nobly spoken! But how little did the Roman governor realize the net which the crafty Jews were weaving around him! They now begin to accuse Jesus of a religious offense, which is truly deserving of death. They told Pilate, "We have a law, and by that law he ought to die, because he made himself the Son of God!" And they were exactly right: Jesus did indeed claim to be the Son of God; and for that claim, He deserved to die as a blasphemer – except for the fact that *He really was the Son of God!* Here the testimony of John concerning the Savior is reaching a climax. Jesus did claim to be Divine; and for that claim, He was arrested, condemned, and crucified. And never – not even for a moment – did He deny the charge. There are only two options: Jesus is either an impostor, or He is Divine; there can be no middle ground.

Upon Pilate, this new charge has a most unexpected effect: he is filled with terror! Can anyone lightly dismiss the claims of Christ? Even Pilate turns to ask eagerly whether Jesus has truly come down from above. However ignorant and superstitious his thoughts may be, he is intelligent enough to be moved by the

Outline of the chapter:

- ❖ Jesus is condemned by Pilate to be crucified – verses 1-16
- ❖ He is crucified, and suffers terrible pain and agony until He dies – verses 17-30
- ❖ His side is pierced by one of the Roman soldiers – verses 31-37
- ❖ His body is buried by Joseph of Arimathaea and Nicodemus – verses 38-42

suggestion that this patient, princely, innocent Sufferer may actually be a Divine Being. And his one desire now is to release Jesus, but the Jewish rulers have one last desperate resort. They turn upon Pilate with a personal threat: "If thou release this man, thou art not Caesar's friend!" To acquit a Jew who claimed to be a King – how would that sound when it was reported to the emperor at Rome?

The enemy has attacked Pilate in his weakest point; he now surrenders instantly; his soul is lost. His self-love and self-interest must be saved at any cost – even if it involves injustice and crime. And so, at about 6:00 AM, he takes his place upon the judgment-seat. He turns to the Jews with a solemn question, spoken in bitter irony: "Shall I crucify your King?" The chief priests answered, "We have no king but Caesar!" By this statement, they are acknowledging that they are the willing vassals of Rome. They have renounced their Messianic hopes, and denied their national rights; they are apostate from God. The climax has been reached in the record of Jewish unbelief; they have succeeded in accomplishing the death of Jesus. Pilate gives in to their desires; he hands over the innocent Savior to be executed, without delay, by crucifixion.

Before we enter upon even the briefest survey of the solemn scenes connected with the sufferings and crucifixion of our Lord, we should remind ourselves of the significance of the death of Jesus, as already stated in this Gospel. According to the testimony of John the Baptizer, Jesus was "the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sin of the world"; and this removal of guilt involved the death of the Sacrifice. Referring to His own death upon the cross, Jesus declared that "as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up ... that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have eternal life." His death was to put an end to all the virulent power of sin in the lives of each and every believer. Jesus further taught that – as "the Good Shepherd" – He was to give His life for His sheep, so that they might have life more abundantly. The death of Christ, therefore, was not merely the voluntary testimony of a martyr to the truth of his teachings; it was an act of atonement – removing the guilt and power of sin, drawing men to Himself, and making possible eternal life through faith in Him.

In the specific reference to the particular details of the Savior's crucifixion, John spares us all the revolting specifics of the tragic picture. He simply states that Jesus had to carry His own cross, which was the symbol of infamy and agony; that "they crucified him" at Golgotha; and that in order to visibly identify Him as a criminal, two other convicts were crucified on either side of Him, as if He – in the center – were the worst and most evil of the three. We do not need to be told that this form of death was the most shameful and cruel method of execution that depraved mankind had ever devised. We only need to be reminded that, in order to secure our salvation, Jesus endured the utmost depths of humiliating disgrace and painful torture – even the death of the cross!

It was usual to place an inscription at the top of the cross, over the head of the sufferer who was hanging thereon, stating the crime for which they were being put to death. In order to show his hatred of the Jewish rulers, who had really entrapped and defeated him, Pilate wrote the following inscription for the middle of the three crosses standing outside the city walls on that terrible day: "JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS." He penned these words in bitter irony; for he meant that the only king or deliverer that the subjugated Jews could boast of was a helpless sufferer, dying the death of a common criminal. However, Pilate was affirming more than he intended. What he stated on this inscription was indeed the truth, and it was the very truth which John wished to establish in his Gospel-record – namely, that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah and King of the Jews.

There were two memorable groups of persons standing near the Savior's uplifted cross. John first mentions the soldiers. After they had crucified Jesus, they divided His clothes and cast lots for His seamless coat. According to law, the garments of the crucified persons belonged to the executioners. But the reference was not merely made so that we might see a symbol of the callous unbelief in which men can make light of the death of Jesus, as they gamble for paltry personal gain at the very foot of the cross; but rather, this was intended to be yet another proof that "Jesus is the Christ." Even these brutal soldiers were the blind instruments of fulfilling a Psalm which had long been interpreted as a prophecy relating to the coming Messiah: "They parted my garments among them, and upon my vesture did they cast lots."

Four women formed the second group of persons, and they are certainly a striking contrast to the four soldiers. These women were the mother of Jesus Himself; His mother's sister; Mary, the wife of Clopas; and Mary Magdalene. And in connection with the first of these, an incident occurs which reveals – as beautifully as any fact in the Gospel-history – the tender, human sympathy of our Lord. He "saw his mother, and the disciple standing by whom he loved"; and – forgetting His own painful sufferings and anguish, and only mindful of those whom He loved – "he saith unto his mother, Woman, behold thy son! Then saith he to the disciple, Behold thy mother! And from that hour the disciple took her unto his own home." In these touching words – as he shows how Jesus gave His mother a son, and to His friend a mother – John records a supreme example of filial piety.

The death of Jesus, as recorded by John, is described by one suggestive phrase: "he bowed his head, and gave up his Spirit." This phrase truly implies an act which is voluntary and free. No one took his life from Him; He had the power to lay it down, and He had



the power to take it up again. Therefore, when He knew that all things concerning His sufferings were now accomplished, He dismissed His spirit with Kingly majesty and with full consciousness of His power. There are, however, two words which were spoken by our Lord, immediately before His death. The first of these was the agonizing cry of extreme torment: "I thirst!" It voiced the utmost experience of physical anguish, but it did more – for it exactly fulfilled the inspired prophecy which had foretold the sufferings of the Messiah; and since it was spoken with that prophecy in mind, it is recorded as a proof that Jesus is indeed the Christ. The other word – "It is finished!" – indicated the Savior's Divine consciousness that His earthly mission was ended, and that His work of redemption was now complete. For those who are burdened by the guilt of sin, nothing remains to be done, except to believe on Him as the Lamb of God! For all those who have been tormented by the power of sin, there is eternal life if they only look in trust to the uplifted Christ! Such is the result of faith in the Divine Son of God.

While the body of Jesus still hung upon the cross, an incident occurred which occasioned the fulfillment of two further prophecies, and it is interpreted by John as a double-proof that Jesus is the Christ. According to Jewish law, it was necessary to remove from sight – before sunset – the dead bodies of executed criminals. The enemies of Jesus were especially eager to obey this law because of the sacred character of the Sabbath Day, which was about to begin at sunset. In order to hasten the death of the three sufferers, permission was received from Pilate to have their legs broken. "But when they came to Jesus, and saw that he was dead already, they brake not his legs: howbeit one of the soldiers with a spear pierced his side, and straightway there came out blood and water." In his First Epistle, John interprets the blood and water as symbols of redemption, and evidences of Divine incarnation; but here the thought is fixed upon the proof, from fulfilled prophecy, that Jesus is the Christ. The prophecy had been provided in reference to the Passover-lamb: "A bone of him shall not be broken." This was now true in the offering up of the Lamb of God.

The burial of Jesus presents a picture of pathetic and melancholy interest. Two men of rank and power, who did not openly express their convictions while He was living, now come forward to pay honor and public respect to His dead body. One was Joseph of Arimathaea, and the other was Nicodemus. The former lays the body of Jesus in his own new tomb, and the latter wraps the body in a profusion of rich spices. These were deeds of courage and love. But as we turn away from the sunset-shadows of this dark day of cruel and murderous unbelief, let us remember that Jesus does not ask for secret disciples. He publicly endured the painful cross for us; and the least that He can expect from us is that we openly, courageously, and willingly take up the cross and follow Him!

Lord Jesus, we stand at the foot of the cross and render our unceasing love and praise to You for effecting the work of our redemption thereon! Amen.