

Study Notes for [John 19:16a-30](#)

THE DEATH OF THE KING

Gerald Neufeld

Setting:

Jesus' Jewish and Roman trials were now over. Jesus had been condemned to death by crucifixion for treason by Pilate for claiming to be the King of the Jews, even though Pilate didn't believe that was a serious charge or that Jesus was a serious threat to Rome. At that point the soldiers, who were well versed in carrying out such executions, took over. John states that Jesus "bearing his own cross" was taken to a place of execution called "The Place of a Skull." There Jesus was crucified, along with two others.

Earlier Jesus had said "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he" (8:28) and earlier still Jesus said "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man." (1:51). As F.F. Bruce states, "His being 'lifted up' is his exaltation, though his enemies intended it for degradation; the cross is the supreme manifestation of his glory. By the cross heaven is thrown wide open, God draws near to man, and man is reconciled to God."

As to the holy Patriarch
that wondrous dream was given
So seems my savours cross to me
a ladder up to heaven.

(Bruce, 62-63).

In John's gospel, the cross is Jesus' triumph; he carried his own cross, ended his life with words of completion and gave up his own spirit in death. Throughout John's passion story, Jesus always remained in control (Keener, 1133).

Notes:

John's description of Jesus' crucifixion provides us with details not found in the synoptic gospels including the argument over the inscription on the cross, several prophetic fulfillments, the care of Jesus' mother and the last cry before his death.

- 19:16a "So they took Jesus ..." the "they" are the Roman soldiers who were part of the detail ordered to execute Jesus.
- 19:17 "bearing his own cross" means that Jesus carried his cross to Golgotha. This was a common practice of Roman crucifixions. Usually just the crossbar of the cross was carried since the center pole remained permanently in place. All three Synoptic Gospels state that, at some point (5th station of the cross), Simon of Cyrene ([Mark 15:21](#); [Acts 6:9](#)) was forced to carry Jesus' cross. The likely explanation is that the cross was initially carried by Jesus but then became too difficult to carry. Remember that Jesus had been earlier scourged; a severe beating that could easily have caused his death. However, John leaves this fact out of his gospel not because he was unaware of it but to emphasize as Bruce states, "Jesus is still in command of the situation. He is 'taken' to the place of execution, it is true, but he is no reluctant victim, compelled to go whither he would not; he goes with his executioners of his own volition and carries the cross for himself" (Bruce, 366).

“Place of a Skull” means ‘Golgotha’ in Aramaic or ‘Calvary’, a transliteration from Latin (See Luke 23:33 KJV). This place of execution was just outside to the north of the city of Jerusalem (v. 20).

- 19:18 Two others were crucified with Jesus. Jesus was right in the middle; another clear sign that he identifies with the worst of humanity. He was not set apart from them. Although Jesus was not a criminal, in the eyes of much of the public he was ([Mark 15:29-32](#)). John gives few details about these men. Most likely they were freedom fighters belonging to Barabbas’ cell (Bruce, 368). However, John’s concern was to identify Jesus with the ‘transgressors’ ([Isaiah 53:12](#)).

Crucifixion was an excruciatingly cruel form of death. The victim’s arms were fastened to a crossbeam and then the beam was placed on an existing post. Only John tells us that Jesus’ arms were fastened by nails ([20:25](#)). There was often a piece of wood attached to the pole that could be used as a seat, not to relieve the victim’s agony but to prolong it. Death usually resulted from suffocation as a result of exhaustion from the inability of holding oneself upright. That was the point of breaking the legs of the two men ([vv. 31-32](#)); with their legs broken, suffocation would occur almost immediately.

- 19:19 It was common to have such an inscription declaring the reason for the execution. However, the irony here is not to be lost on the reader: Pilate who first declared him innocent, was also the one who delivered Jesus over to be crucified. The inscription states the original charge and reason for the death sentence.

Pilate represents all of us who have a vague notion of the truth and even at times declare it, but for personal selfish reasons do not follow up on it and just let events happen; taking the road of least resistance and maximum personal gain. Pilate could easily have blamed the Jews for Jesus’ death and claimed that he was not responsible for it. Yet he was responsible – just like them. Still, in this inscription Jesus was officially recognized for who he really was even though it was written for the wrong reasons.

- 19:20 Pilate wanted everyone to see the sign for two reasons. He wanted to annoy the Jewish leaders for demanding Jesus’ death even though he had wanted to set Jesus free; it was an act of revenge against the Jewish leaders for manipulating him into something he did not want to do. He wanted to humiliate those who had humiliated him (Carson, 611). But Pilate also wanted any other “real” rebels that had come into Jerusalem for the Passover to see this as a warning to what happens to rebels. This was the reason the inscription was written in three languages. As Carson states, “the Romans had a vested interest in publicizing the nature of the crime that resulted in such punishment, it was a warning to every segment of the populace” (Carson, 611).

Aramaic was the language of the Jewish people, Latin the official language of Rome, and Greek the common language of the Roman Empire respectively. In effect it was a proclamation to the whole world that Jesus was indeed King.

John identified a deeper meaning to the inscription on the cross. Earlier he had given us the words of Jesus “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” The one on the cross is the true king of kings after all. As Bruce states, “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, 369).

19:21 The Jews who had rejected Jesus did not want anything that would suggest he really was who he claimed to be. The Jewish leaders wanted Jesus dead because he claimed to be king making himself the Messiah and the Son of God; Pilate had agreed to the crucifixion because Jesus claimed to be king making himself king over Caesar. Of course, neither group actually believed this yet they had him killed for it. The irony was that it really was true.

The phrase “chief priests of the Jews” is unusual in John’s Gospel. It should be compared with the earlier mentioned phrase, “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.” The contrast and irony between the chief priests and Jesus is evident. (NET Bible, 1961).

19:22 Pilate finally became assertive but for all the wrong motives and reasons.

19:23-24 The removal of, theft of and gambling for Jesus’ clothes was a final humiliation. The human condition seems to here have found new depths of depravity. Sadly this type of behavior was not uncommon. The taking of Jesus’ clothes was an involuntary act of fulfilled prophecy from [Psalm 22:18](#). God’s sovereignty is again revealed in this merciless act of the soldiers (Carson, 612).

There were two main garments: an outer cloak and an inner tunic worn under the outer cloak and next to the skin. Little symbolic meaning exists here other than Jesus was stripped of all earthly possessions yet he was under “his Father’s sovereign care, even as his tunic was not torn and destroyed” (Carson, 615).

19:25-27 The women mentioned are the ones who remained faithful. It may have been that they felt less threatened or it may have been that they had a deeper love for Jesus.

It would appear that there were four women mentioned; Jesus’ mother, his mother’s sister who is not named, Mary the wife of Clopas¹ and Mary Magdalene. Only in John’s gospel was Mary the mother of Jesus mentioned.

19:26-27 Jesus now turned his attention to his mother and the beloved disciple ([13:23ff](#)). Jesus addressed his mother as “woman.” This was a polite form of address that Jesus often used when referring to women ([Matthew 15:28; John 4:21; 8:10](#)) but unusual for a son to refer to his own mother that way. For whatever reason, Jesus’ own brothers were not at the cross. No other gospel mentioned a disciple at the cross.

19:28 “I thirst” is the 5th last word of Jesus and is a reference to [Psalm 22:15 or 69:21](#). If others unconsciously and involuntarily fulfilled prophecy (Caiaphas, soldiers), Jesus understood his actions as fulfilling Scripture.

It is deeply moving that Jesus who was the source of living water ([4:13-14; 6:35; 7:38](#)) was now thirsty. In 7:38-39 the living water was identified with the Holy Spirit. That Jesus, himself, was thirsty implied that God the Father and Holy Spirit had at this point forsaken him (See [Psalm 22:1; Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34](#)) (NET Bible, 1962). When the Samaritan woman was thirsty Jesus offered her living water, when he was thirsty the soldiers ridicule him by offering him sour wine (Mark 15:36). As well, Keener points out the contrast between Jesus turning water into wine at Cana and now when he receives sour wine (see also [19:34](#)) (Keener, 1147).

¹ According to an second century writer, Clopas was the brother of Joseph (Bruce, 371). Clopas is only mentioned here in the New Testament.

19:29 “sour wine” was a cheap drink of the soldiers consisting of vinegar wine diluted with water.

“hyssop branch” was a plant whose leaves held liquid well. It was also the plant that Moses told the Israelite to dip in blood to mark their doorframe so that when the Lord came to strike down all the firstborn, he would see the blood and pass over them ([Exodus 12:12-13,21-23](#) and also [Psalm 51:7](#) and [Hebrews 9:19](#)). Elsewhere John presents Jesus’ death as a new Passover ([1:29, 36; Revelation 5:12](#) and see also [1 Corinthians 5:7; 1 Peter 1:19](#)) (Keener, 1147).

19:30 “It is finished” is the 6th last word of Jesus. (The final words of Jesus are found in Luke 23:46, ““Father, into your hands I commit my spirit,” are echoed in v. 30b, “he bowed his head and gave up his spirit”) Jesus said these words but those who heard did not yet understand their deep significance. Jesus had finished what he had come to do ([4:34; 17:4](#)). As Bruce states, “All scripture that was due to be accomplished in his passion had now been accomplished; the entire purpose for which the Father had sent the Son into the world was now assured of fulfilment, and since that purpose included the salvation of the world and the procuring of eternal life for all believers ([John 3:14-17](#)), salvation and eternal life were henceforth freely available (Bruce, 374).

The irony of the cross was also evident throughout: Jesus overthrew sin by becoming sin and he defeated the grave and death by dying.

Three Major Themes of the Cross (Palmer)

1. Victory of the Cross over evil. All evil converges on the Cross where Jesus ‘absorbs’ and destroys it. The victory of God was won on Friday – this is why it is called “good” Friday (and not on Sunday when the victory is revealed). Jesus won the victory over evil (sin and death) in his humiliation on the Cross – no one else could have done this. That is why there is no other way to the Father except through the Cross and Jesus Christ.
2. All OT expectations of sacrifice and atonement (covering) converge in the Cross (Romans 3). On the Cross, Jesus takes our place – it is we who should died – and covers us. Only Jesus Christ is able to cover our sins by taking our place.
3. God’s love is revealed in the Cross. The definition of love is the act of Jesus giving up his life for us even while we were rejecting him. (Romans 5 and 1 John)

Biographies

Earl Palmer, *The Book that John Wrote*, Vancouver, B.C.:Regent College Press, 1999.

Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John*, Volume Two, Peabody, Mass:Hendrickson Publishers, 2003.

Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, Revised, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishers, 1995.

F.F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John*, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishers, 1983.

D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991.