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“May Jesus’ willing suffering enable you to face better the terror of life, knowing that despite the hurt, God’s will is accomplished.”

CONTEXT

John nineteen continues the trial narrative begun in chapter eighteen and provides the necessary background information for the astonishing events of chapter twenty. The sins of chapter eighteen produce their rotten fruit in chapter nineteen and the love of Jesus in the chapter will produce its fruits of power and love in chapter twenty.

We will study the chapter in three parts. First, the trial of Jesus comes to its dishonest conclusion (19:1-16a), after which Jesus is nailed to a cross and dies (19:16b-37). The chapter ends with the narrative of Jesus’ burial (19:38-42).

THE TRIAL – JOHN 19:1-16A

As people shout for the freedom of Barabbas (18:40), Pilate orders Jesus flogged. Probably Pilate orders Jesus’ flogged and permits his soldiers to “have some fun” in order to teach Jesus a lesson. Maybe he hopes that Jesus’ enemies will be satisfied if Jesus is badly hurt and they won’t demand execution of a badly beaten innocent man. The Greek text indicates a flogging that was different from the scourging recorded in Matthew and Mark (Matthew 27:26 and Mark 15:15). The Roman military beat people in three ways. A beating and a flogging were intended to teach people a lesson but a scourging was preliminary to and part of crucifixion.

The first three verses of the chapter raise the question, how can human beings be so mean? Pilate’s soldiers demonstrate human brutality which remains a savage part of human behavior in rape, murder, war and other forms of violence. We still read of criminal brutality and also of police brutality. Perhaps there is no moral here, only a tragic historical note. But maybe it is an ugly demonstration of the power of the kingdom of this world in comparison with the love of Jesus’ Kingdom. Do we want a king like Pilate with his soldiers or a King like Jesus with His disciples? Maybe the brutal act helps victims of violence today by knowing that Jesus experienced similar pain and can share their grief and bear their sorrow.

The trial now moves to confrontation between Pilate and Jesus' enemies (19:4-16). The drama begins with Pilate displaying a beaten victim probably hoping that the mob would think that Jesus has suffered enough and has "learned a lesson." Let your artistic imagination wonder what Pilate meant with the words, "Here is the man." Perhaps Pilate aims mocking contempt at people who see Jesus as a threat. Such contempt would be similar to the condescension behind offering to free "the king of the Jews (18:39)." Some scholars have wondered if John records the comment as an allusion to Jesus as "the Son of Man." The theological irony would be that while Pilate and Jesus' enemies see a pitiful victim, early Christians would know that the "Son of Man" suffers much to give His life as a ransom for all (Mark 8:31, 10:33). They would know that the "Son of Man" was being lifted up like the serpent in the wilderness (3:14). The Son of Man is being glorified because He personifies the human who hates life in this world but will keep it for eternal life (12:25). Jesus shows the highest form of human love which gives life for friends (15:13-14).

If Pilate hoped for pity, the plan proves futile. The crowd demands Jesus' execution and, for the first time in John's Gospel, explains why (19:7). When Pilate hears that Jesus is the Son of God, he becomes afraid (19:8). Pilate's fear could mean that he realizes for the first time that Jesus violates the monotheistic creed of the Jews and they will not easily accept a reasonable verdict. Perhaps with typical Roman polytheistic superstition, Pilate takes the charge seriously and wonders if, in fact, Jesus is the Son of God or the son of a god. Perhaps John records Pilate's fear to show how a pagan takes seriously the possibility of Jesus' divinity. Pilate's reaction stands as a subtle encouragement for outreach to pagans or as an implied condemnation of Jewish obstinacy. Recording Jesus' comment about the greater guilt of the people who want Him killed (19:11) supports such an implication.

Whatever the reasons for Pilate's fear, his attempt to free Jesus fails. The charge of blasphemy is set aside with the threat of disloyalty. Perhaps a recently attempted coup by the Roman leader Sejanus against the Caesar Tiberius made the threat of disloyalty especially effective. Pilate gives in to the demands which he knows are unjust but forces a pledge of allegiance which he knows is untrue

(19:15b). How can people who claim no king but Caesar want amnesty for a convicted revolutionary? The trial ends exposing the injustice of Pilate and the hateful hypocrisy of people. They are so religious that they will not enter a pagan palace (18:28), yet they are willing to kill an innocent man.

Reflect briefly on the trial of Jesus and remember how injustice, lies, hypocrisy, and hate hurt people. Let the truthfulness of Jesus call you to loyalty to His Kingdom rather than surrendering to the forces of evil.

According to John, Jesus' final words are "It is finished." He has obeyed the will of the Father and given His life for the world.

THE CRUCIFIXION – JOHN 19:16B-37

John tells of the crucifixion of Jesus with several details not found in the Synoptic Gospels. Perhaps to show the totality of Jesus' commitment, John does not record that Simon of Cyrene carried the cross of Jesus (Matthew 27:32, Mark 15:21, Luke 23:26). John also does not mention darkness at the crucifixion (Matthew 27:45, Mark 15:33, Luke 23:44). Because he recorded so frequently the symbolism of Jesus as the light of the world bringing light to the world, it could be symbolically inappropriate to mention darkness when the love of God shines so brightly. Probably to show Jesus' love for the whole world, only John reports that the proclamation of the reason for execution was written in Latin, Greek and Aramaic (19:20). Only John records the objection to the title and Pilate's firm response (19:21-22). Maybe John wants his readers to know that even their Roman enemies have a nobility which encourages mission outreach. Furthermore, only John's Gospel records the soldiers dividing Jesus' clothing and gambling for His seamless garment. John refers to Psalm 22:18 to prove that God's will is done even in a moment when chance seems to rule.

In contrast to the guards dividing the spoils, four women and Jesus' beloved disciple stand near the cross (19:25-27). Jesus tells His mother, "Dear woman, here is your son," and to the disciple He says, "Here is your mother." Such simple words receive surprisingly different interpretations. Some Christians emphasize that Jesus

gives the beloved disciple to His loving mother. This interpretation leads some Christians to give special honor to St. Mary. Other Christians think that Jesus makes the beloved disciple the guardian of His mother. They use Jesus' action as an example of His human love. A third interpretation explains the words as an example of how mutual love for Christians comes from the cross of Jesus. Regardless which interpretation you prefer, the incident must demonstrate how Jesus, like a good shepherd, knows His own, loves them, and gives His life for them.

After addressing His mother and disciple, Jesus makes two short statements. As evidence that God's Scriptural plan is complete, Jesus says, "I thirst." The words are not a direct quotation of Scripture but may refer to the messianic message of Psalm 22:15. Or perhaps John wants us to think of Psalm 69:21 because he alone records Jesus drinking wine vinegar (19:29). The hyssop used to elevate the wine soaked sponge to Jesus' lips (19:29) might make some readers think of Jesus as the Passover Lamb of God since hyssop was part of the Passover tradition (Exodus 12:22). According to John, Jesus' final words are "It is finished." He has obeyed the will of the Father and given His life for the world. The gift of eternal life has no strings attached. God's love has kept its promise.

Reflect upon the unique description of Jesus' death as recorded in John. His unique telling of the crucifixion makes vivid the action and purpose of God in that tragic moment. Human brutality gains no victim. Divine power and purpose march toward victory. Remember the words and actions of that terrible hour when times of pain touch your life. Pray that you can see the will of God as more powerful than selfish chance, the separation of loved ones in the face of death, and death itself.

After recording the completion of God's work in Jesus' death, John shows how human evil continues. Hypocrites demand torture of others so that they can continue their religious celebration (19:31-32). Legs are broken to hasten death so that no dying victim would mar the holiday festivities! How can such brutal hypocrisy exist?

Dare we admit that such killing cruelty exists in religious people in our own time or even in ourselves? Search the newspapers and your heart and too many contemporary

examples can be found. For example, the humble circumstances of Jesus' birth and the needs of so many human beings today seem brutally ignored in the glut of materialism during our Christmas celebrations. Christians may proclaim, "I believe in God the Father, Almighty Maker of heaven and earth" on Sunday morning but then, during the week, with cruel prejudice hurt people the Almighty has created. With a penitent heart, ask forgiveness for the ways in which we may accept or cause pain for others.

But even brutality can not thwart the will of God. In the bloodiest moment, Scripture is fulfilled (19:34) when the thrust of a spear makes certain that Jesus is really dead. Almost certainly the flow of blood and water is remembered as more than an interesting biological fact. Some scholars think that it symbolized Baptism and Eucharist which enable people to remember and participate in Christ's death. Such an interpretation fits well into the whole of Scripture but remains unproven since the words of institution of neither Baptism or Eucharist are given in John. Water in John 7:38-39, for example, symbolizes the gift of the Spirit that flows from the side of Jesus. The word "blood" has no clear meaning although it occurs elsewhere in John 1:13 and 6:53-56. Such references may teach that Jesus offers Himself with a greater than normal life-giving power.

1 John 5:6-8 may explain the incident but, unfortunately, the meaning of those passages is not fully clear either. "This is the one who came by water and blood - Jesus Christ. He did not come by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth. For there are three that testify, the Spirit, the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement." Interpreting "blood" in that verse as reference to Jesus' death, scholars think that John 19:34 means that the Spirit (water) now flows because Jesus' glorification (blood) is complete. A better interpretation suggests that the mixture of blood and water was a normal sign of death. Thus John (19:35) certifies that Jesus was really dead. Perhaps the emphasis is on the "sudden flow" and points to Isaiah 53:12 where the Suffering Servant who bore the sin of many "poured out his life unto death." The commentary by Raymond Brown, listed in the bibliography, has an especially thorough discussion on the "blood and water".



Whatever the possible symbolic value, the Gospel makes two major points. First, the non-breaking of Jesus legs and the piercing of His side show that His death fulfills Scripture (19:36-37). It has meaning. It fits God's foreordained plan. The first passage may do more than remind readers that Scripture is fulfilled. It reminds them that Jesus is the Lamb of God, which like an ordinary Passover Lamb, had no broken bones (Exodus 12:46, Numbers 9:12). Second, someone saw the event, bears witness to it and enables the reader to believe. The truth is simple but profound. Jesus' death enables Christian witness so that people can believe.

THE BURIAL – JOHN 19:38-42

The account of the burial of Jesus contains several interesting details not found elsewhere in Scripture. Only John tells us that Nicodemus helped Joseph of Arimathea (19:39, Matthew 27:57, Mark 15:43, Luke 23:50). Although Mark notes the courage of Joseph, John seems to emphasize the fearful circumstances which face disciples. Joseph was a secret disciple and Nicodemus first came to Jesus at night (19:38-39). The circumstances remind us of how we too live in fear. Two other details have more symbolic value. Only John tells the tremendous amount of ointment they bring. The amount demonstrates their great love for Jesus and probably seeks to make the reader know that the burial is "fit for a king." Only John reports that the tomb is in a garden (19:41) and some scholars think that makes Jesus' burial comparable to that of national royalty (cf. 2 Kings 21:18, 26). Jewish legend connected with Nehemiah 3:16 puts King David's tomb in a garden. John, like Luke, reports that it is an unused grave (19:41, Luke 23:53). That information also hints at special treatment accorded royalty. Despite the royal treatment, only John tells us that ordinary Jewish burial custom was followed (19:40). That detail may simply be of historical interest but could also prepare for the miracle of the resurrection. Suspicious or superstitious readers should not think that medicine or magic was used in that tomb to bring about a revival. Jesus needs no bandages for wounds but requires embalming. People bury Him as a mortal. Humanly speaking, the story of His life is over. The situation seems as hopeless as when we stand at the grave of a loved one buried according to our customs. But the Gospel story is not finished.

The trial and death of Jesus remain a focal point for Christian faith. Human hate and brutality torture Jesus. Jesus accepts that humiliation with the obedience to the Father's will and the love for the world of which He spoke so often. Think about the terrible events and pray that God will use them to enable you to see more clearly the greatness of God's love. May Jesus' willing suffering enable you to face better the terror of life, knowing that despite the hurt, God's will is accomplished. Remember the irony of the story. It appears that death has won but, as John knows, Easter will shatter that delusion.

PERSONAL APPLICATION – JOHN 20:1-31

*Pray that the words and actions of Jesus after His resurrection will
bless you as they blessed the first disciples that saw Him.*

John 20:1-9

1. What did Mary Magdalene observe at Jesus' tomb and what was her conclusion?

Have you ever drawn a similar conclusion (logical but wrong!)? If so, explain briefly.

2. How do Peter and the other disciple react to Mary's message?

What do they see at the tomb?

What different ways could they interpret what they see?

State the difference in the two disciples' reactions?

Does the other disciple "believe" (20:8-9) that Jesus is risen or Mary Magdalene's report of theft (20:2)?

What does 20:9 mean to you?

John 20:10-18

3. What happens to Mary at the tomb before she met Jesus?

4. Why does Mary not recognize Jesus?

Can you think of ways in which grief has kept you from seeing Christ? If so, explain briefly.

5. What might be the symbolic theological significance in the fact that Mary recognizes Jesus after He speaks her name (10:3-5)?

6. How do you explain the "apparent conflict" between 20:17 and Matthew 28:9 (John 16:7)?

Have you ever tried to “hold on to” a person or things to the detriment of your spiritual life or mission outreach? If so, explain briefly.

John 20:19-29

7. After Mary tells the disciples that she has seen the Lord, where do they go and why are they there?

Have you ever “locked away” yourself despite the Christian witness to you or have you shared the Good News but seen your listeners lock out the truth? Explain.

8. State Jesus’ words and actions to His disciples and tell what they mean to you.

9. Think about Thomas’ reaction and comment on how doubt and/or realism often follow Christian witness. Cite an example of how you reacted to the Good News like Thomas or how someone reacted to your witness in a way similar to Thomas.

10. What does Jesus tell Thomas to do and why?

11. In the face of doubt or honest spiritual searching how do you make the love of Jesus “real” for people?

12. Give Thomas’ confession and explain Jesus’ response.

What are various reasons people give for trusting Jesus as Lord and God?

13. For what reasons have you confessed Jesus as Lord and God? Have some reasons been “more blessed” (“theologically more acceptable” or “spiritually better”) than others? Try to explain.

John 20:30-31

14. Why are some of the signs that Jesus did not written in the Gospel?

What is the purpose of the Gospel of John?

15. Has studying the Gospel of John helped you experience its purpose? If so, explain how.
