

19:16b-42 | The Passion

In this next section, we'll study the Passion proper, wherein the Lord is enthroned on the cross. That fateful "hour" has finally arrived (cf. 2:4). Broadly speaking, this portion of John's account can be divided into *three* sections: Jesus' crucifixion (vs. 16a-27), death (vs. 28-37) and burial (vs. 38-42).

Interestingly, John is keen *not* to emphasize the aspects of suffering attached to the crucifixion. This is not to say the cross is absent; it casts a ghastly shadow over the entire scene. But it is to say that John focuses our attention on the goings on *around* the crucifixion rather than on the crucifixion itself (e.g., controversy on the cross' inscription, the gambling, etc.).

Since the Synoptics also record Jesus' crucifixion, John's account overlaps with the other gospels at many points. In fact, this version closely parallels the one written by Mark.¹ But, as always, John is not content to simply rehash what his brothers have already written; he reveals additional facts hitherto unknown in the gospel tradition (e.g., Jesus' final request, his last words, the reappearance of Nicodemus, etc.). Even when on common ground, John's account is still his own.

Bear in mind that what is described for us is not, strictly speaking, a historical record. There are, of course, historical elements. Jesus was a *real* person who was *really* crucified by the Roman government two thousand years ago; atheist scholars don't even debate this point.² However, John's purpose is primarily *theological*; he wants us to interpret *real-life* events through the lens of Scripture. *Thrice* John mentions that what occurs on Golgotha occurred within the confines of God's sovereignty (cf. vs. 24, 28, 36-37). The darkest day in human history was still under the control and direction of the Lord. God the Father's will is a key theological theme in John's account and the crucifixion is no exception.

¹ Carson (1991), p. 608.

² Interestingly, Bart Ehrman (an unbelieving biblical scholar), during his acceptance speech at the Freedom From Religion Foundation in 2014, said, "I know in the crowds you all run around with its commonly thought that Jesus did not exist. Let me tell you. Once you get outside of your conclave, there's nobody who...I mean, this is not even an issue for scholars of antiquity. It is not an issue. There is no scholar in any college or university in the western world who teaches classics, ancient history, new testament, early Christianity, [or] any related field, who doubts that Jesus existed. Now, that is not evidence. That is not evidence. Just because everybody thinks so doesn't make it evidence. But if you want to know about the theory of evolution verses the theory of creationism and every scholar in every reputable institution in the world thinks and believes in evolution, it may not be evidence, but if you've got a different opinion, you better have a pretty good piece of evidence yourself. The reason for thinking that Jesus existed is because he's abundantly attested in early sources. That's why."

Of course, unbelievers may admit Jesus existed and that he died, but they will not concede the implications of his death. Only believers see the truth illuminated by the facts, “that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing [we] might have life through his name” (20:31). John is retelling this story to nurture and promote the Christian faith. He wants to show that, even in death, there is life for the believer since God’s Son once died and rose again (cf. 1:4; 1 Cor. 15).

Exegesis

19:16b-18 – The first section of the Passion proper focuses on four aspects of Jesus’ death: “the place” of the crucifixion (vs. 16b-18), “the title” above Jesus’ cross (vs. 19-22), “the tunic” of Jesus (vs. 23-24), and, lastly, the “mother” of Jesus (vs. 25-27).³

John tells us that as the soldiers “led [Jesus] away,” he was “bearing his cross” (cf. Gen. 22:6). That the Lord bore “his cross” aligns with what we know about Roman procedure.⁴ However, to be clear, Jesus did not carry the entire wooden structure of the cross; he carried only the crossbeam.⁵ This was no small task; it was still quite difficult, especially given the Lord’s weakened physical state. This is why Simon of Cyrene was compelled to carry it for Jesus once he could go no further (cf. Lu. 23:26).⁶

Once outside the walls of Jerusalem (cf. Heb. 13:12), the soldiers led Jesus to “the place of a skull, which is called in the Hebrew Golgotha.” This phrasing is reminiscent of vs. 13, where John mentions the “stone pavement,” called “Gabbatha” in Aramaic. Why he felt the need to translate these things is a mystery.⁷

Likewise, why, exactly, this location was referred to as “the place of a skull” is also unknown. Perhaps the makeup of the site resembled a skull, or there may have been actual skulls littering the ground, or, most likely, “skull” is a general reference to death; thus, “the place of a skull” is a fitting name for a spot that held multiple executions.⁸ Today, two locations claim to be Golgotha: “Gordon’s Calvary,” located 250 yards northeast of the Damascus Gate, and “the Church of the Holy Sepulcher,” inside the city’s precincts.⁹ Support for the former is from the

³ Klink (2016), p. 791.

⁴ Carson (1991), p. 608, quoting Plutarch, “Each criminal as part of his punishment carries his cross on his back.”

⁵ Köstenberger (2008), p. 542, explains how the vertical beam would’ve already been embedded into the ground.

Klink (2016), p. 791, says the crossbeam of the cross was called “the *patibulum*.”

⁶ Simon of Cyrene helping Jesus does not contradict John’s assertion that Jesus went to Golgotha “bearing his cross.” Clearly, the Lord began the journey doing so and was aided later.

⁷ Wright (1950), p. 355, “*Golgotha*, or ‘the place of a skull,’ corresponds to the Latin *Calvaria*—from the noun *Calva*, the bald-scalp: whence we have our term Calvary.

⁸ Keener (2003), 2:1135.

⁹ Youngblood, Ronald F., “Calvary,” *Nelson’s Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, New and Enhanced Edition, (Nashville, TN; Thomas Nelson, 2014), p. 214.

late 19th century, while support for the latter traces back to the fourth century with the Christian historian Eusebius. The Church of the Holy Sepulcher has the most historical evidence in its favor, but it is impossible to know for certain.

John tells us that when “they crucified [Jesus], there were “two other[s] with him, on either side one, and Jesus in the midst.” Matthew and Mark refer to these two men as **ληστής** (*lēistēs*), the same Greek term used by John to describe Barabbas (cf. 18:40). And as we discussed when addressing Barabbas, *lēistēs* doesn’t refer to a common “thief,” but an “insurrectionist,” a “guerrilla fighter,” or a “rebel.” The use of the same Greek word suggests strongly that the two men crucified alongside Jesus were associates of Barabbas; they were “fellow freedom fighters.”¹⁰ Thus, as Isaiah 53:12 predicted, the Messiah was, in fact, “numbered with the transgressors.” Not only that, but by being placed in the middle, he took the place of “honor.”¹¹

First implemented by the Persians, refined by the Carthaginians, and adopted by the Romans, crucifixion was the perfect blend of torture, humiliation, and propaganda.¹² After being scourged with the flagrum (*see notes 19:1*), criminals would be marched to a spot alongside a major highway outside a city (cf. Matt. 27:39), stripped naked, and then fastened to the cross. There were two ways of securing a convict to the crossbeam of the cross, nails or rope; often, both methods were used (cf. 20:25). The nails were five to seven inches long and driven in either the wrists or forearms and not, as commonly believed, the hands since they could not sustain the weight.¹³

Once affixed to the crossbeam, a person would be hoisted up and attached to the vertical portion of the cross, which had already been embedded into the ground. As their wrists had been, their heels would then be pierced by nails and/or tied with rope (*see Figure 19.1*). Though often depicted as being high off the ground, most crucified individuals were close to the ground.¹⁴ So close that animals were known to attack the feet of the crucified.¹⁵ Finally, a piece of wood called a *sedecula* would be attached to the cross, acting like a seat.¹⁶ Though, to be sure, this “seat” wasn’t intended as mercy, but a way of prolonging the process, delaying death,

¹⁰ Beasley-Murray (1999), p. 346.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Fowler, R.D., “The Practice of Roman Crucifixion,” *Holy Land Illustrated Bible*, Christian Standard Bible, (Nashville, TN; Holman Bible Publishers, 2020), p. 1389.

¹³ Keener (2003), 2:1136.

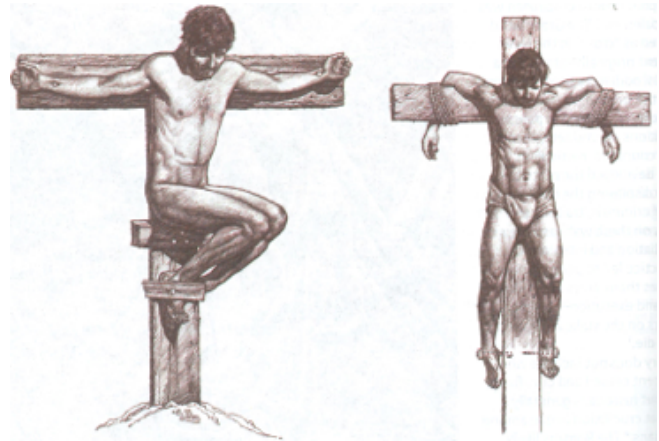
¹⁴ Köstenberger (2008), p. 542

¹⁵ Keener (2003), 2:1136.

¹⁶ Carson (1991), p. 608.

and thereby increasing the suffering. In fact, most individuals hung on the cross, exposed to the elements for hours, even *days*.¹⁷

Figure 19.1 – There was no standard form of crucifixion. Pictured here are the "St. Anthony's cross" (left) and the "Latin Cross" (right).¹⁸ There is also the Greek cross, which resembles a plus sign (+), and the St. Andrew's cross, which looks like an "x."



John summed up the horrors of the cross in a handful of words.¹⁹ He could do this because his audience was well-acquainted with the practice. Living within the confines of the Roman Empire, crucifixions were not only widespread, but they were also an almost daily occurrence. But, to a modern mind, it is difficult to wrap our heads around how truly awful this practice was. Albert Réville described crucifixions like this:

"It represented that acme of the torturer's art: atrocious physical sufferings, length of torment, ignominy, the effect on the crowd gathered to witness the long agony of the crucified. Nothing could be more horrible than the sight of this living body, breathing, seeing, hearing, still able to feel, and yet reduced to the state of a corpse by forced immobility and absolute helplessness. We cannot even say that the crucified person writhed in agony, for it was impossible for him to move. Stripped of his clothing, unable even to brush away the flies that fell upon his wounded flesh, already lacerated by the preliminary scrouging, exposed to the insults and curses of people who can always find some sickening pleasure in the sight of the tortures of others, a feeling that is increased and not diminished by the sight of pain—the cross represented miserable humanity reduced to the last degree of impotence, suffering, and degradation. The penalty of crucifixion combined all that the most ardent torturer could desire: torture, the pillory, degradation, and certain death, distilled slowly drop by drop. It was an ideal form of torture."²⁰

¹⁷ Köstenberger (2008), p. 543.

¹⁸ Illustration taken from Fowler (2020), p. 1390.

¹⁹ Beasley-Murray (1999), p. 344, "One element in John's account, shared incidentally by the three synoptic Gospels, is the *brevity* [emphasis added] of his description of the actual crucifixion: it is contained in a sub-clause consisting of three words (v 18: ὅπου αὐτὸν ἐσταύρωσαν, "where they crucified him")."

²⁰ Morris (1995), p. 712, quoting from *The Life of Jesus* [London, 1958], p. 535-536.

VIDEO DESCRIPTION

Deep Dive: The Gospel of John | Week 87 | John 19:16b-18

SPEAKER: Ben Hyrne, Pastor

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