

Message #59

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John

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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ELEMENTS
OF JESUS' CRUCIFIXION
JOHN 19:15-24

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

The most humiliating experience that I have ever had is being fired from a church. As a young person, I experienced success in high school in academics and music--- not so much in sports. In college I had success in academics and speech and debate, and I did fine in graduate school. In my first job in a church, I had success working with young people and single adults.

At age 31, I took on my first church as a pastor. It was a newer church in the Midwest, about our size, with a young congregation. There was an older couple who dominated the leadership of the church. They were very capable. What concerned me was that they made fun of each other in public situations, and the wife had a habit of embarrassing people in front of others. Women especially complained to me about that. They were afraid to address their complaints to her.

In one week I witnessed two instances of the wife embarrassing people in front of others. So I talked to her in private. It did it in what I thought was a quiet, gentle way. She said very little. But after that, she set out to get rid of me. I was the problem. The situation culminated in a secret meeting that was held with some of the leadership. In a split vote, the church board decided to fire me. After a Sunday church service, I was handed a letter asking for my resignation. I had a wife and new baby and a new house and no job. It was difficult to find a new church position with this black mark on my record. It was humiliating. It was painful.

Most of you have had experiences of humiliation or rejection or failure of one sort or another. Because of that, you may be able to identify with the hero of our story today.

We have been making our way through the Gospel of John in the New Testament. We have seen that this apostle of Jesus has explained the purpose of his book in #20 v. 31. (PROJECTOR ON--- JOHN 20:31) There he writes, “...these [signs] are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” Outsiders in this first century who were exposed to Christians would naturally want to know why they should follow this Jewish rabbi who was rejected by His own people and was killed by the Romans for being a rebel. So John describes seven miracles that point to the conclusion that Jesus was God in the flesh. (PROJECTOR OFF)

More recently we have been looking at John’s explanation for why He was rejected by the Jewish leaders. They were jealous of His power and popularity. He didn’t follow their rules, and He threatened their religious position. So they wanted Him dead. In order to accomplish that, they had to get the Roman governor to go along. He did not especially care for these Jewish leaders, and He was suspicious of their motives. But Pontius Pilate could not afford to have another bad report about him go back to Rome, especially if it was couched in terms of him letting a rebel against Rome off of the hook. So he gave his approval for the crucifixion of Jesus.

We take up the story then with Pilate sending Jesus off to be crucified. In vv. 15-24 of #19, which is on p. 905 in the black Bibles under many of the chairs, we find seven elements in the crucifixion of Jesus that have great significance for our understanding of what His death has to do with us and our circumstances in life.

I.

First of all, from vv. 15 & 16, we learn about THE JOINT RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE CRUCIFIXION. (PROJECTOR ON--- 1. THE JOINT RESPONSIBILITY...) The Apostle John writes, “**They** [the crowd supporting the Jewish leaders] **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** [apparently his soldiers] **to be crucified.**”

We looked at these two verses last week. I pointed out that the Galileans and other supporters of Jesus were probably not even aware of the arrest of Jesus. Most of the apostles had gone into hiding. They were not in any state of mind to organize a protest or demonstration. So this was largely a crowd of supporters of the religious leadership.

The point here is that both Jews and Gentiles were responsible for the death of Jesus. Jesus fulfilled the Biblical requirements for the prophesied Messiah. He exercised miraculous power. But He offended the religious leaders. He didn't follow their rules in regard to things like healing people on the Sabbath--- what a terrible sin. He criticized them for corruption. He was God in the flesh. But they wanted Him dead.

The legal situation was such that they had to get the approval of the Gentile power which ruled much of the civilized world in order to have Jesus executed. The Roman governor Pontius Pilate did not find anything in Jesus that required the death penalty. But the threat of a bad report going back to Rome was enough for him to give approval for Jesus to be killed. The penalty required by the Romans for rebellion and treason was death by crucifixion. Thus Jews and Gentiles bear joint responsibility for the crucifixion of Jesus.

From a theological perspective, the death of Jesus is necessitated by the sin of all of us. (ROMANS 4:24-25) The Apostle Paul writes in Romans #4, “**...Jesus our Lord ... was delivered up for our trespasses...**” So it is our sin and the terrible evil of the religious leaders and the willing complicity of the Roman government which are all responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus.

We must also keep in mind that this was all according to the sovereign plan of God. Human responsibility and God's gracious sovereignty all worked together to result in this crucifixion. (ACTS 2:23) Thus it is that Peter declares to his Jewish audience on the Day of Pentecost after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, “**...this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men** [probably a reference to the Gentiles]...”

This horrible act of crucifixion ultimately served a great purpose. It provided for our salvation. Paul writes (ROMANS 8:32) in Romans #8 v. 32, “**He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?**” It is fitting that the verb that Paul uses here for “gave him up” is the exact verb that John uses in our text in v. 16. Pilate literally “gave up” Jesus to be crucified. But it was also God, who was working behind the scenes, who “gave up” His son to be crucified. Such it is that both humanity and deity are involved in the crucifixion of Jesus.

2.

In v. 17 we are reminded of THE REJECTION OF THE CRUCIFIXION. (2. THE REJECTION OF THE CRUCIFIXION) “**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.” The soldiers took Jesus and brought Him out of what? Out of the city of Jerusalem. The Romans always had crucifixions done outside of the walls of a city.

Notice also that Jesus was bearing His own cross. The Greek word used here for “cross” was used for a whole cross, or part of a cross. We know from Roman history that the victims of crucifixion were made to carry the crosspiece used in crucifixions. (PLUTARCH QUOTATION) The Greek ancient Greek writer Plutarch said, **“Each criminal as part of his punishment carries his cross on his back.”** (*The Divine Vengeance*, A/B)

There is a picture here perhaps of the spiritual work that Jesus was doing. He was bearing the sins of the world alone. Probably Jesus had suffered a second beating after the governor had given the order for His execution. This would have resulted in the loss of much blood. On top of the initial beating, Jesus would have been much weakened physically. Thus it is that the other Gospels note that the soldiers accompanying Jesus along the way commandeered a religious pilgrim coming to Jerusalem for the feast of Passover to help Jesus carry the cross to the execution site. His name was Simon of Cyrene. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The reason that this place was named Golgotha, or The Place of a Skull, is uncertain. The Latin word, found in the Vulgate, the Bible of the Church for centuries, is Calvary. Perhaps it was a hill that was shaped like a skull. Perhaps it was a place that had been used for executions, or even beheadings, in earlier times. In the 1800s several people noticed a hill and a cliff north of the old city of Jerusalem that looked like a skull. (GARDEN TOMB) Some old tombs were also found nearby. This became known as the Garden Tomb, or Gordon’s Calvary, after a British army officer who promoted this as the site of Jesus’ crucifixion and burial. There was no historical record, however, that this was the place where Jesus died. Archaeologists also determined that the tombs found here dated from centuries after the time of Jesus. But still tourists are brought to this site.

(GOLGOTHA) There is a much older tradition that traces the execution site and burial place of Jesus to The Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which is to the west of the old city of Jerusalem. Archaeologists have also determined that tombs found here date to the first century AD. This site is just to the north of Herod’s Palace, which is the likely place where the trial before Pilate was held. Golgotha would have been just outside of the walls of Jerusalem in the first century.

Places outside of the walls of an ancient city, especially Jerusalem, were often associated with rejection. The Romans typically executed criminals just outside of the city walls near the entrance of a city. In the Old Testament lepers and the unclean had to stay outside of the city. Leviticus #4 describes how a sin offering was to be made. Part of it was to be burned and offered in the tabernacle. The unwanted part was to be burned outside of the camp. Revelation #21 speaks about the future New Jerusalem. It says that the unclean will be excluded from this future heavenly city. (v. 27)

The writer of the New Testament Book of Hebrews recognized the spiritual significance of this exclusion. (HEBREWS 13:12) Beginning in #13 v. 12, he wrote, **“So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. (HEBREWS 13:13) Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured.”** The place of execution itself is associated with rejection. Jesus’ followers are called upon to embrace that rejection, to identify with it and with Him.

3.

The third element to be noted about Jesus’ death is THE PAIN AND SUFFERING OF THE CRUCIFIXION. (3. THE PAIN AND SUFFERING OF THE CRUCIFIXION) The first part of v. 18 says, **“There they crucified him...”**

The Gospel writers do not elaborate upon the details of the actual crucifixion. Part of the reason was that people in the first century were familiar with crucifixion. The Romans used it throughout their empire to kill enemies of the state. Normally it was used for slaves and rebels. Roman citizens did not have to suffer this cruel punishment, unless the emperor himself gave approval for it.

The details of crucifixion were described by various Roman writers. Typically the victims were laid upon the ground. Their arms were either tied to the cross, or their wrists were nailed to the crosspiece with long spikes. We know that this was the case with Jesus, because reference is later made in John’s Gospel to the holes in Jesus’ hands, or wrists.

Victims were then raised upon the crosspiece to poles that were already planted in the ground. There was a spike that was placed through their ankles. A block of wood was placed upon the pole near their rear ends. This gave them a little bit of support. But it was really done to prolong their agony. The challenge that they faced was breathing. Because of the pressure that was placed on their chests, they had to push themselves up to breathe. This was very painful.

Jesus had already suffered from two beatings. He was bleeding. There was blood and pain and probably flies. He would have begun to suffer from dehydration. Some victims would last for a day or more. Because Jesus had probably already had two beatings, He was not going to last so long. It was a horribly painful way to die. This would have well qualified to be what our US Constitution calls cruel and unusual punishment.

4.

The fourth element to be noted here is THE IDENTIFICATION WITH SINNERS IN THE CRUCIFIXION. (4. THE IDENTIFICATION WITH SINNERS IN...) Verse 18 reads, **“There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side and Jesus between them.”**

Last week we saw in our study in vv. 39 and 40 of #18 that Barabbas was let out of custody because of a custom that had been established whereby one prisoner was allowed to be released at Passover as a result of the choice of the crowd in Jerusalem. Pilate was encouraging them to choose Jesus, but the religious leaders had stirred up the crowd to call for the release of Barabbas.

In Mark #15 v. 7 (MARK 15:7) we read, **“And among the rebels in prison, who had committed murder in the insurrection, there was a man called Barabbas.”** The implication is that these other two criminals being crucified with Jesus were also rebels and killers. Jesus was being crucified in the middle of them. Though Jesus was innocent of the charges against Him, He was identifying with sinners.

One of the criticisms of the religious leaders against Jesus during His public ministry was that He was hanging around with sinners. In Mark #2 v. 16 (MARK 2:16) we are told, **“And the scribes of the Pharisees, when they saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, said to his disciples, ‘Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?’”** Now Jesus is literally hanging around with sinners.

This is also a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. Isaiah spoke of the coming Messiah and His identification with sinners (ISAIAH 53:12) In #53 v. 12 he wrote, **“...he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors.”**

The Apostle Paul explains the theological significance of this identification with sinners. (2 CORINTHIANS 5:21) In v. 21 of #5 in 2 Corinthians he writes, **“For our sake he (God) made him to be sin who knew no**

sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” Because of Jesus’ identification with sin and sinners, we can be justified, we can be declared righteous on the basis of faith in Him.

5.

The fifth notable element in our passage is THE UNIVERSAL PROCLAMATION OF THE CRUCIFIXION. (5. THE UNIVERSAL PROCLAMATION...) This is found in vv. 19-22. The text says, **“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 King of the Jews.”” Pilate answered, ‘What I have written I have written.’”**

The usual practice of the Romans in the application of crucifixion or other punishment was to have a tablet or placard with the charges against the defendant put around the individual’s neck. Sometimes a soldier would carry it before him on the way to the place of punishment. Often the placard was placed upon the cross of the one who was being crucified. The whole purpose was for all to see what happened to the one who broke Rome’s laws. Such was the case here.

Pilate probably commanded an aide or a soldier who could write to put these words down upon the placard affixed to the cross of Jesus. This was the charge that was made about Jesus to Pontius Pilate. The Jewish leaders were upset by this. They did not want Jesus to be regarded as their king. They wanted it to be explained that Jesus falsely claimed to be their king.

Pilate refuses to make this change. He has lost out on his failed efforts to have Jesus set free. So this is a small measure of revenge for him. This, you Jews, is your supposed king. This is the power we Romans exercise over you. This is what we do to your supposed representative. What a pathetic representative He is.

At a deeper level, the Apostle John recognizes that Pilate is unwittingly expressing the truth. Jesus is the King of the Jews. He is being killed by the Jewish leaders and the Romans. Just as the high priest Caiaphas had unwittingly declared that it was better for one man to die for the whole nation, so also Pilate has been a mouthpiece of spiritual truth. He had announced to the Jews that Jesus was their king, He had declared that here was the man. Now he has pronounced that Jesus is the King of the Jews.

In addition to this, Pilate has had this pronouncement written in three languages. Aramaic was the common language of the Jews in the first century. It is related to Hebrew and has the same alphabet and grammar. It was also written in Greek, which was the lingua franca throughout the Roman Empire. Then it was written in Latin, which was the legal and official language of the Roman government. Thus the declaration was written in the language of Palestine, the cultured Greek-speaking world, and the legal, military world of Rome. It was written in the language of Jerusalem and Athens and Rome.

Verse 20 notes that many Jews were reading it. Everyone who could read could understand it. Remember, it was the time of the Passover. So religious Jews from throughout the empire were coming to Jerusalem and were seeing what was happening to Jesus. It was the sovereign purpose of God for the whole world to know about this. For this death had, and has, universal significance.

6.

In vv. 22-24 we find out about THE OLD TESTAMENT FULFILLMENT IN THE CRUCIFIXION. (6. THE OLD TESTAMENT FULFILLMENT...) Verse 22, which we have already noted, says, **“Pilate answered, ‘What I have written I have written.’”** The word “written” in every other appearance in John’s Gospel is used in the quotation of Old Testament Scripture. The Apostle John may be recognizing a Scriptural truth here. Pilate’s declaration is a fulfillment of Biblical prophecy. Jesus is the King of the Jews. He is being killed by the Jews and the Romans in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy.

Verse 23: **“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.”** The normal practice was for a crucifixion detail to involve four Roman soldiers led by a centurion. Roman law and custom said that the four soldiers could divide up the personal possessions of the criminal being executed. Apparently there were four items of clothing from Jesus that were distributed to these four soldiers. It is not certain what four items this might have included. The possibilities would be a loin cloth, an outer robe, sandals, a head piece and a belt. Thus it is that Jesus leaves this world with no material possessions.

The item that the author emphasizes here is the seamless tunic. The tunic was worn next to the body. It was not regarded as underwear, however. It was more like a long shirt. This was usually two pieces of cloth which were sewn together. But Jesus’ tunic was seamless. That made it more valuable. The Old Testament noted that the priests were to wear seamless tunics when they did their work in the tabernacle and the temple. Perhaps there is a hint here that Jesus is doing priestly work. He is dying as our representative.

Because this tunic was especially valuable, the four soldiers cast lots for it. Verse 24 notes, **“...so they said to one another, ‘Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see whose it shall be.’ This was to fulfill the Scripture which says, ‘They divided my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots.’ So the soldiers did these things...”** Some translations have this last line as the conclusion of v. 24. Some have it as the beginning of v. 25.

John is quoting here from Psalm 22, which is recognized as a Messianic Psalm. It is a description of the crucifixion of Jesus written centuries before it happened. It is a clear evidence of the miraculous fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy.

Consider these excerpts from Psalm 22. (PSALM 22:1) Verse 1 begins, **“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”** Jesus will soon utter these words as He dies upon the cross and bears the wrath of God for the judgment upon the sins of humanity.

In vv. 7 & 8 (PSALM 22: 7-8) the author of the Psalm says, **“All who see me mock me; they make mouths at me; they wag their heads; ‘He trusts in the Lord; let him deliver him; let him rescue him, for he delights in him!’”** The other Gospel writers indicate that this is just what the priests and the rabbis and the other skeptics do to Jesus as He hangs upon the cross.

(PSALM 22:14) Verse 14: **“I am poured out like water; and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast.”** This appears to be a fitting description for what happened to victims of crucifixion.

(PSALM 22:15) Verse 15: **“...my strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws; you lay me in the dust of death.”** Dehydration was one of the effects of crucifixion.

(PSALM 22:16) Verse 16: **“For dogs encompass me; a company of evildoers encircles me; they have pierced my hands and feet...”** This is just what happened when Jesus was nailed to the cross.

(PSALM 22:17 & 18) Verses 17 & 18: **“I can count all my bones--- they stare and gloat over me; they divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots.”** The Apostle John is making an

exact quotation from the ancient Greek translation of verse 18. His citation of this verse points to his recognition that Jesus is fulfilling the basic elements of this prophetic Psalm. This is another evidence that this crucifixion is part of God's sovereign plan. The Roman soldiers in casting lots think that they are dealing with luck. But what is happening is the sovereign work of God in the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy.

7.

We come then to the seventh and last item in our list: THE NAKEDNESS AND SHAME IN THE CRUCIFIXION (7. THE NAKEDNESS AND SHAME...), which is indicated in the last three verses which we have just considered. In #13 we saw that Jesus removed His outer clothes in order to wash the feet of His disciples. Now all of His clothes are removed, as Jesus is about to perform an even greater service.

To have all of the clothes removed was part of the intention of the Romans to maximize the shame and the humiliation for the enemies of Rome. In the last verse of Genesis #2 it is noted that the man and the woman were naked, but they were not ashamed. In #3 sin enters into the world. Adam and Eve respond by trying to cover up their nakedness. Humans have been seeking to cover up their shame ever since. We have tried to hide our moral guilt, not just our physical nakedness. Jesus died unclothed to cover that moral shame, to cover our true moral guilt.

The angels told the shepherds outside of Bethlehem that the sign for them was that they would find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. Now in death Jesus was robbed of His clothes and dying for the guilt and shame of our sin on a cross. (PROJECTOR OFF)

If you have felt the pain of rejection and humiliation and shame and sin, I offer you Jesus, the friend of sinners. He was the One who was sent from God to pay the penalty for our sin to cover the shame of our sin and moral nakedness. Such is the gift that He offers to us simply by virtue of putting our trust in Him.

For us who are Christians, the challenge is to look around for those who are experiencing rejection and shame and humiliation. We need to offer them Jesus. As a church, we try to do that through our prison ministry. We often find a receptive audience from those who have broken God's laws and man's laws. The elderly in our midst experience a certain shame and humiliation as they encounter the infirmities of old age. Such it is that we have a nursing home outreach on Saturday mornings. We have opportunities to assist Bob Nycek at the Veterans' Home. We have some among us who help with a food ministry and

with Emergency Aid, which seeks to help the poor in our community, who also experience a certain rejection from society.

Even the rich and powerful in our world can experience rejection and pain and humiliation. Charles Colson was the legal counselor to the President in the Nixon administration. He had power and fame and wealth. But he was caught up in the Watergate scandal and encountered shame and humiliation. He went to prison. But Christians reached out to him with the love of the rejected Jesus, and he responded to the gospel.

A Christian who was present described what happened in an interview Colson had with a skeptical PBS journalist: **“She asked how he knew that Jesus was real. Chuck related how while he was in prison, Al Quie, distinguished congressman and later Minnesota governor, pleaded with the president that he might take Chuck’s place in prison because of Colson family issues. Chuck related, ‘That was a turning point in my life, for the first time I really understood what it meant for a man to lay down his life for his friends.’ Tears flowed down the hardened face of the interviewer. ‘Cut!’ She went to the restroom, fixed her makeup and returned. The cameras rolled as she asked another question, and Chuck declared what it meant to be ‘born again.’ Again tears streamed down her face. I have never sensed the power of God to be so real in a room! She told Chuck later that she wanted to come back to God.”** (Hayes Wicker, Baptist Press, 4/25/2012)

Even those whom we might regard as enemies may encounter rejection and humiliation, which presents us with an opportunity to point them toward the true God. In my devotional reading on Friday I came across this verse in Psalm 83. (PSALM 83:16) The author Asaph is describing those who are his enemies and God’s enemies. He says, **“Fill their faces with shame, that they may seek your name, O Lord.”** Such is the function that shame and rejection can serve in our lives and in the lives of those around us. Such is the opportunity that we have to point them to Jesus.