

The Sign at Calvary

Scripture: John 19:16–30

Code: 43-108

All right, let's open the Word of God then to the 19th chapter of the gospel of John. We're looking at the portion of Scripture that is John's inspired record of the crucifixion; and I want to put it back in your mind, so let me read, starting at verse 16. Pilate handed Jesus over to the Roman soldiers, who were the executioners, to be crucified.

So verse 17 says, "They took Jesus, therefore, and He went out, bearing His own cross, to the place called the Place of a Skull, which is called in Hebrew, Golgotha. There they crucified Him, and with Him two other men, one on either side, and Jesus in between. Pilate also wrote an inscription and put it on the cross. It was written, 'Jesus the Nazarene, the King of the Jews.' Therefore many of the Jews read this inscription, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, Latin, and in Greek. So the chief priests of the Jews were saying to Pilate, 'Do not write, "The King of the Jews"; but that He said, "I am King of the Jews."' Pilate answered, 'What I have written I have written.'

"Then the soldiers, when they had crucified Jesus, took His outer garments and made four parts, a part to every soldier, and also the tunic; now the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece. So they said to one another, 'Let's not tear it, but cast lots for it, to decide whose it shall be'; this was to fulfill the Scripture: 'They divided My outer garments among them, and for My clothing they cast lots.' Therefore the soldiers did these things.

"But standing by the cross of Jesus were His mother, and His mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus then saw His mother, and the disciple whom He loved standing nearby, He said to His mother, 'Woman, behold, your son!' And He said to the disciple, 'Behold, your mother!' From that hour the disciple took her into his own household.

"After this, Jesus, knowing that all things had already been accomplished, to fulfill the Scripture, said, 'I am thirsty.' A jar full of sour wine was standing there; so they put a sponge full of the sour wine upon a branch of hyssop and brought it up to His mouth. Therefore when Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, 'It is finished!' And He bowed His head and gave up His spirit."

We have been saying all along in the gospel of John that John's purpose in every paragraph is to declare the glory of Christ. He wrote this gospel so that we might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing we might have life in His name, John 20:31, that's His purpose statement. And you might assume that it would be a little bit difficult to find any glory in the execution of Jesus, in the murder of Jesus, the crucifixion of the Son of God; but not for John. For John, there is plenty of manifest glory, even in the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is demonstrated in the verses that I read to you in four ways, four ways.

Four features of John's inspired account of the death of Christ exalt Christ as being divine. The first way has to do with Scripture being fulfilled, and we looked at that last time; the second way has to do

with the sign that was placed over His head; the third way has to do with the sympathy which He manifest and demonstrated while hanging on the cross; and the fourth has to do with the supremacy which He revealed as He took complete charge of His own death. So as you look at John's view of Calvary, we're going to look at the Scripture, the sign, the sympathy, and the supremacy of Christ.

Clearly at the cross scripture was being fulfilled. Down in verse 24 we are told specifically that the soldiers gambled for His garment to fulfill the scripture. Down in verse 28 we are told that Jesus said, "I am thirsty," to fulfill the scripture. But not only those two occasions indicate scripture fulfillment. In fact, before we even get down to verses 24 and 28, scripture is being fulfilled.

Go back to verse 16: "So he then handed Him – " Pilate did, " – handed Him, delivered Him over – " technical term for handing over a prisoner for execution " – to the soldiers – " the executioners. Apparently there were four of them, as we learn later when the four of them took each of Christ's garments; and since there was a fifth, they gambled for it. He turns Jesus over to be crucified. He is handed over. It says in verse 17, "They took Jesus, therefore, and He went out, He went out." I made a point of that last time, because it's very important to do so.

How did He go out? Typically, a person headed to crucifixion would fight and resist. A person who had been battered and abused and beaten, and was familiar with crucifixion, as the Jews were since the Romans were crucifying people all the time all along the highways outside the city of Jerusalem. They would be terrified, if not utterly panicked, that they were being taken to execution in the horrors of crucifixion – a lingering death that could last for days. People had to be driven very often like some kind of wild animal, they had to be controlled. But not Jesus; He went out.

Mark 15, in his account, verse 20; Luke 23 in his account, verse 26 says, "Jesus followed. Jesus followed them." This is remarkable. He didn't have to be driven, He went willingly. He said in John 10, "No man takes My life from Me, I lay it down of Myself." He went out. He followed. This is a fulfillment of Isaiah 53:7, that great prophecy of our Lord's death. Isaiah 53:7 says, "He was led as a sheep to the slaughter. He was led."

So I said last time cattle are herded from the rear; sheep are led. He, like a sheep, was led, and He followed. And we also note that He was bearing His own cross, in verse 17, and I saw in that a kind of an analogy to Isaac who was to be the sacrifice that Abraham would make for God. And Isaac went to his own death as a sacrifice thinking he was going to help his father in some way. He was moving toward his own death, Genesis 22 says, carrying the wood on his own back, the wood upon which he would give his life. Abraham put Isaac on the wood on the altar, lifted up a knife to take his life, God stopped him and provided a substitute. That too is a picture of Christ. But in the case of Christ, He carried His own wood to His own execution, and there was no substitute; He would die on the very wood that He carried.

It says also that He went out. Went out of what? Went out not only of the judgment hall, but went out of the city of Jerusalem. He went out. Why did He go out? Hebrews 13:11-12 says He suffered outside the gate. You go back to the Old Testament to Exodus 29, Leviticus 4, Leviticus 16 – sacrifices for sin were made outside the gate, taken outside the gate. He is the ultimate, final and only true sacrifice for sin, and He suffered outside the gate. They crucified Him.

That's not how the Jews kill people. The Jews stoned people. They threw them down and threw

stones on them until they crushed out their life. But Jesus was lifted up; that was not a Jewish way of execution. Jesus even said in John 3, "The Son of Man will be lifted up. As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so will the Son of Man be lifted up."

Later He said, "If I be lifted up, I'll draw all men unto Me," signifying the kind of death He would die. The fact that He was not stoned by the Jews even though Pilate several times told the Jews, He gave them permission to stone Him, was a fulfillment of prophecy. He was lifted up.

Isaiah 53, verses 9 and 12 says that in His death He will be numbered with the transgressors. And we read in verse 18 that He was crucified with two thieves, one on each side – transgressors. It also says in Isaiah 53 that His grave would be a sign to be with the wicked; and that's exactly right. He would have been thrown in gehenna, the city burning dump, like the other criminals, when he was taken down, dead from the cross.

We also have a prophecy of crucifixion specifically in Psalm 22. Psalm 22, starting in verse 14, describes His death as involving piercing, exhaustion, unnatural position of the body out of joint, stress on the heart, weakness, raging thirst, torture, and all of His muscles made taut. All of that describes crucifixion, Psalm 22. And then in a most fascinating note, it says that, the end of verse 23, He had a tunic which was seamless, woven in one piece. Why bother to say that? Because there was one tunic in the Old Testament that was so woven with only a hole for the head, but otherwise woven out of one piece, and that is in Exodus 28, verses 31 and 32, and that was the tunic of the high priest. Christ goes to the cross as our Great High Priest.

Psalm 22:18 says the soldiers will gamble. It's quoted in verse 24. It's the scripture that was fulfilled when they gambled. They didn't know the scripture, they didn't know what they were doing, but their gambling for that tunic fulfilled the promise of Psalm 22:18, "They divided My outer garments among them, and for My clothing they cast lots." Therefore the soldiers did these things. God was orchestrating everything. Every single thing was a familiar fulfillment or picture of something in the scripture.

Now it was customary when someone was to be crucified that they were paraded through town either dragging their own instrument of execution, their own cross; and in front of the person would be a man with a sign, a placard, that would identify the crime; and this was to put fear in the hearts of all the people about violating any Roman law. So Jesus essentially was taken through the city. He went from judgment to execution. That too fulfills the Old Testament. Isaiah, chapter 53, says in verse 8, "He was taken from judgment and cut off from the land of the living."

Right from judgment to execution, that violated Jewish law. There was supposed to be days in-between for new evidence to be heard. That violated Roman law. There were at least two days required between a judgment and an execution. Isaiah 53 said He will go from judgment to execution, nothing in-between; and that's exactly what they did, again, fulfilling prophecy. And in the process of taking Him out to the place of execution, the place of the Skull, Golgotha, a man with a sign was placed in front of Him. The sign itself brings glory to Christ; it's fascinating. Look at verse 19: "Pilate also wrote an inscription and put it on the cross. It was written, 'Jesus the Nazarene, the King of the Jews –' or "– Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews."

There is no crime. Pilate six times said, "I find no fault in this man." He officially declared Him not

guilty six separate times. Why is he doing this execution then? Because he has been blackmailed by the Jews. On a number of occasions in his earlier history with them, he did some radically foolish things, irritated them, created riots, reports went back to Rome that he was less than competent as a leader representing Rome. He was afraid that one more big mistake, one more big riot with the Jews and he would lose his position, and maybe his own life.

They threatened Him with that in chapter 19, verse 12: "Pilate sought to release Him, but the Jews cried out saying, 'If you release this Man, you're no friend of Caesar; everyone who makes himself out to be a king opposes Caesar. You're no friend of Caesar. We're going to report you to Caesar again.'" So he's blackmailed to do what he knew was wrong. There was no crime, he knew that. Couldn't put a crime on the sign, so instead he put on the sign, "Jesus the Nazarene, the King of the Jews," and nailed it over His head on the cross.

It is, first of all, a declaration of our Lord's innocence, a declaration of His innocence; there was no crime. But more than that, I don't think Pilate was nearly as concerned about Jesus as he was about the Jewish leaders who really were critical to him being able to maintain a career as a Roman governor. But he had reached a point where he was so infuriated with them that he sought vengeance; and this is his vengeance. He writes, "Jesus the Nazarene, the King of the Jews."

Now he knows that the Jews hate Jesus. They have screamed, "Crucify Him, crucify Him!" We see that back in verse 15. That was all basically perpetrated and led by the chief religious leaders. This is his moment of vengeance. "You say He's a king; you say He's a threat to Caesar." You put yourself in a perfect position for Pilate to exact some sarcastic irony and vengeance on them.

They had even said, "We have no king but Caesar," which was, of course, a hypocritical lie. They refused Jesus as their king, but Pilate is going to identify Him that way: "Jesus the Nazarene." Why does he say that? Because Nazareth was an utterly unimportant, insignificant town way off in the hinterlands above the Sea of Galilee.

Early in the gospel of John, chapter 1, the question came up, "Can anything good, anything good come out of Nazareth?" Insignificant; utterly nondescript. "So this Jesus from absolutely nowhere, this weakling, this butchered man, this is your king."

This kind of sarcasm, this kind of mockery, this kind of scorn heaped on them, Pilate's little moment infuriated them; and so in verse 20 when they read the inscription – many of the Jews read this inscription: "For the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, outside the city, near the city along the road, the Hill of the Skull; and it was written in Hebrew, Latin, and in Greek."

So Pilate put it in triplicate: "King of the Jews. King of the Jews. King of the Jews." Hebrew was the language of religion, that's Israel's language; Greek was the language of culture, Greece; Latin was the language of power, Rome. Those were the languages that Pilate chose so that everybody could read. And there were Jewish pilgrims around the time of the Passover from all over the Mediterranean area, and all those languages would be represented among those people. So he took all the languages, the language of religion, the language of culture, the language of power to unite to say, "This is the King of the Jews, this weakling from no place."

But in his folly he declares the absolute truth, because this is Jesus the Nazarene, the King of the

Jews.” He is the Messiah; He is the Anointed One. When He was born, the angel came and declared to His mother Mary that she would have a child who would be a king, who would reign on a throne over and eternal kingdom; and in His infancy wise men came from the east searching for Him as God’s King. In fact, at the beginning of this very week in which He was crucified, when He came into the city, John 12, verse 13 says, “All the people were shouting, ‘Blessed is the King of Israel.’”

Back in chapter 18 Pilate asked Him if He was a king. Verse 36 of chapter 18, “Jesus said, ‘My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I wouldn’t be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm.’” Pilate doesn’t get this.

“So he says to Him, ‘So You are a king?’ Jesus answered, ‘You say correctly that I am a king. For this I have been born, and for this I come into the world.’” He was a king. He was the King of Israel. He was the King of kings and Lord of lords, the one and only King.

Pilate witlessly, stupidly, and ignorantly has spoken the truth, very much like Caiaphas back in chapter 11 when he was talking about killing Jesus and he put it this way: “It is expedient that one man should die for the nation.” And what he meant by that: “We need to kill Him to save our nation.” But when he said it, it was a declaration of the meaning of the death of Christ. This is again how God makes the wrath of men to praise Him. So they came to Pilate and they said, “Don’t. Don’t let that sign stay there. Do not write that, ‘He is the King of the Jews,’ but that He said, ‘I am King of the Jews.’”

Pilate would have nothing to do with it. Verse 22, “Pilate answered, ‘What I have written I have written.’” He happy to stick the knife in and turn it for his own momentary vengeance. He said the truth, so for the whole world to know for all of human history, the cross will always say this – combining Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John’s account: “This is Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.” God’s Messiah, God’s Messiah.

Now, look, they were all ignorant. Pilate didn’t know what he was doing. Jewish rulers didn’t know what they were doing. Peter makes that remark, if you look at Acts 3, when he gave his second sermon at the temple site in the area called Solomon’s Porch, Acts 3:17. This is such a gracious sermon.

Peter says, verse 17, “And now, brethren, I know that you acted in ignorance, just as your rulers did also.” Everybody was ignorant. The Jewish people were ignorant, the chief priests were ignorant, the Sanhedrin was ignorant, Pilate was ignorant, the Roman soldiers were ignorant, everybody was ignorant. “But the things which God announced beforehand by the mouth of all His prophets that His Christ would suffer, He has thus fulfilled. Your ignorance God used to fulfill His promise.”

And then this gracious call, verse 19: “Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away.” You mean that sin could be wiped away, the sin of crucifying the Son of God? Yes, “In order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord; and that He may send Jesus, the Christ appointed for you.” In other words, “Repent and return, and the Messiah will come back and set up His kingdom.”

That’s how gracious God is. What the Jews did in ignorance, what the Romans did in ignorance,

what the chief priests did, what Pilate did: all ignorant, all rejecting Christ, and yet it came down to a sign; the sign proclaimed the truth. God was controlling the events to fulfill prophecy laid down in Scripture. God even controlled making the sign so that it ended up speaking the truth. History does not record a crucified Savior with a list of crimes over His head, it records a crucified Savior with the truth over His head: King of kings. He is the King not only of Israel, but He will be the King of the entire world, and Philippians 2 says, "Every knee will bow, every knee."

Maybe the sign played a role even that day, because one of the thieves looked at Jesus and said this: "Lord, remember me when you come into Your – " what? " – kingdom." So there like an evangelistic tract over the head of Jesus: "Remember me when you come into Your kingdom." God used the sign to save a thief dying beside Jesus; part of the influence no doubt.

So when you look at the cross and you're looking for the glory of Christ it's there in the fulfilled scripture, it's there in the sign, and then just for a brief moment it's there in the sympathy. This is really an incredible scene. I'll introduce it to you, because it's so wonderful.

Verse 25, middle of the verse there, "But standing by the cross of Jesus were His mother, and His mother's sister, also Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene." And then one man, verse 26, "Jesus saw His mother, and the disciple whom He loved standing nearby."

So the scene you have the crowd; you have the chief priests, the rulers, the Sanhedrin; and you have the Roman authorities, you had the executioners, you have the Roman soldiers exercising crowd control, led by a centurion. But over against all of those ignorant people in sharp contrast to them, there's a group of five standing very near the cross. A little later in the scene they fade away into the background, but at the beginning they are very near the cross. They're very, very different than the hateful assembly who makes up the rest of the mass.

Jesus is not alone; not everybody has forsaken Him. There's four women and one man. Why weren't there more? Very dangerous to be intimately identified with a crucified, executed criminal. You don't want to be identified with a man who's being executed by the Romans for being a threat to Caesar. If, in fact, He is some kind of an insurrectionist, you don't anybody to think you're part of the rebellion or the revolt. But there were four courageous women and one courageous man. I've long asked the question: "Where were all the other men, the disciples?"

I just want you to notice something here. It says, "Standing by the cross of Jesus were His mother." Does it strike you interestingly that He doesn't name her? Mary, wife of Clopas, is named. Mary Magdalene is named. The mother of Jesus sister is not named. But you would think if you're going to use Mary to identify a couple of the women, certainly you would have the dignity to name Mary, the mother of our Lord.

I'm going to remind you of something. If you think it's strange that John doesn't use her name, think how strange this is. Matthew and Mark do not even mention that she was there. How in the world did this unnamed woman whom two gospel writers don't even mention become the queen of the universe? And, oh, by the way, she is never mentioned in any of the epistles of the entire New Testament. And in the book of Revelation where we have all kinds of glimpses of heaven, she is never mentioned, never. She'll be mentioned one more time in Acts 1:14 when she was gathered with the disciples, Mary the mother of Jesus and His brothers, that's it. Obviously Joseph's dead.

Mary was a woman of spiritual virtue or she never would have been chosen to be the mother of the Lord Jesus Christ, right? Sure, we understand that. And for that role she deserves honor and respect, and she was given that even by her cousin Elizabeth. But Mary was a sinner and she says that when she praises the Lord in Luke 1 and she identifies God as, "God my Savior." She humbles herself and calls herself a bond-slave of God who needs mercy. To offer prayer to her or to consider her as some kind of co-redemptrix with Christ is to go way beyond anything Scripture says. It is to invent things, and it is to deny her her own confession.

The silence of the epistles which form the doctrinal core of the New Testament, the silence of the epistles should indicate you that Mary plays no role in anybody's redemption. If she were to receive prayers as some kind of an intercessor between us and Christ the New Testament would have spelled that out. How could God save His people if she was necessary to it and He didn't tell us that?

Nor do Roman Catholic teachings about her virgin birth – not her giving virgin birth to Christ, but her being also born of a virgin – and her bodily assumption, which means she didn't die. Catholic theology says she was born without a human father, and she didn't die, she just assumed into heaven. That's all fabrication; none of it is in Scripture.

There is something that is specifically said about her in Scripture, and it's way back in Luke, verse 2, and it was when Jesus was taken to the temple and Mary was told this: "A sword will pierce through your own soul." So here thirty-plus years later, the sword has gone through her soul.

We have heard virtually nothing about her through His life and ministry except once when He was twelve, and Joseph and Mary had headed back toward Nazareth and left Jesus in the temple. But this is the moment which was prophesied when a sword would go through her own soul, the agony of watching her Son die. He was pierced, and she was pierced as well. It must have been a certain kind of almost paralysis, almost baffled. She must have cultivated in her heart the hope that He would be welcomed eventually, He would be received, and He would establish His kingdom.

But it ends here. There's no hysteria on her part. There's no uncontrollable anguish; there's no fainting; there's no crying. She suffers in unbroken silence realizing this is the sword that was promised. The crowds are mocking, the thief is taunting, the soldiers are gambling, maybe gambling for a robe she made. Her Son is bleeding; she is watching.

And by the way, in verse 26, Jesus when He looks at her says, "Woman, behold, your son!" Woman? What happened to mother? I think if I walked up to my mother when she was here and said, "Woman," it would not go well. But there's no disrespect here, there's just a profound recognition of a different relationship.

And there was her sister also unnamed, but most Bible scholars think this is the woman called Salome who was the wife of Zebedee, the mother of John and James. That's based on Matthew 27:56 and Mark 15:40. Then there is Mary the wife of Clopas. That would be the mother of James the son of Alphaeus. Alphaeus is kind of a different way to say Clopas. So another mother of another apostle, James the son of Alphaeus. And Mary Magdalene. Luke 8 says she had seven devils cast out of her. And please, by the way, there's nothing in the Bible that ever says she was a prostitute.

So you have three Marys and a Salome. And by the way, Mary was a very common name. I mean three out of four, not coincidence, because Mary is simply a form a Miriam, the Old Testament name of Moses' sister. And Moses' sister was a heroic woman, maybe the most heroic woman in the Old Testament, because she rescued Moses.

And by the way, Mary means "bitterness." Jesus three feet up off the ground at least could easily be touched from there. We don't know how close they were, but they were there.

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