

John Chapter 19

It has been said that 95% of what we find in John's gospel is unique – facts are given by John, which are not found in the other three gospels.

The account of the Cross as given by John is, as we might expect, also unique. John is unique for not only what he puts in but for what he leaves out. This is because he has a definite object in view in writing his gospel. It is the gospel of the Son of God and in particular, the glory of the Son of God. Hence in chapter 1, John writes, "We beheld His glory, the glory of an only begotten of a Father, full of grace and truth". But surely this glory stops when we come to Calvary, for is the cross not a place of shame and humiliation? Let's see how John handles this scene in his unique way.

Verse 17 says, "And He bearing His cross went forth". Straight away, we see a change from the Synoptics. They all mention the fact that they laid hold upon Simon the Cyrenian, and compelled him to bear the Lord's cross. This would emphasise two things – the Lord's physical weakness at this point and also the shame of the cross. The Lord had passed through no less than six trials that previous night and had been beaten perhaps three times – by the soldiers of Caiaphas, Herod, and Pilate. He had been beaten by fists, and by a reed. He had been crowned with thorns, and His back had been scourged by Pilate. All this would have led to Him being physically weak at this point. So they looked around for someone to assist. They would not have asked a Jew, for every Jew knew, "Cursed is everyone that hangs upon a tree". They did not even compel a fellow Jew. Hence their eyes light upon a man of Cyrene, a stranger coming out of the country. He was perhaps a Gentile proselyte, come up to Jerusalem to worship, who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. "Him they compelled to bear His cross". It underlines for us the shame of the cross. But there is no mention of Simon in John 19. John could not have failed to notice it, for he was the only gospel writer present at the scene. But it is not John's purpose to describe either the Lord's weakness, or indeed the shame of the cross. So John says rather, "He bearing His cross went forth". Matthew, Mark, and Luke all describe the destination as "Golgotha", the place of a skull. Only Luke gives it the Latin name, "Calvary", which also means "skull". It is the place of death.

Verse 18 continues, "Where they crucified Him, and two others with him, on either side one, and Jesus in the midst". There is a remarkable omission here. Who were these two other companions of the Lord at Calvary? Surely John, being the only eyewitness to write a gospel, knew exactly who they were. But the mention of the thieves would again have added to the shame of the cross, hence the deliberate omission by John. And was it deliberate? Well in verse 32, John has a chance to redeem himself. "Then came the soldiers, and brake the legs of the first, and of the other which was crucified with Him". Again, two men are mentioned, but John does not tell us that they were thieves. John will tell us nothing that would bring shame to this occasion. Hence, in John's account, there is no mention of the taunts and cruel mockery of men, no mention of the three hours of darkness, nor of the Lord's cry, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" Rather, we are going to see that God is in control of the events of Calvary, and men will only move in accordance with the scriptures.

But now in verse 19, we come to one detail that John adds compared to the others, "And Pilate wrote a title, and put it on the cross".

In Matthew 27:37, we read, "They set up over His head His accusation written, "This is Jesus, the king of the Jews"".

In Mark 15:26 – “And the superscription of His accusation was written over, “The King of the Jews”.

In Luke 23:38 – “And a superscription also was written over Him in letters of Greek, and Latin, and Hebrew, “This is the King of the Jews””.

Matthew and Mark use the word “accusation”. It was the crime of which the victim had been accused. Above the other two crosses might have been written just one word, “Thief”. If Pilate had had his way, the accusation above the centre cross might have been that of Barabbas, “Robber, Rebel, Murderer”.

Mark and Luke both call the words a “superscription”, while John alone uses the word “title”. In the first three gospels, the superscription is written by a person or by persons unknown. It is left very vague. But John leaves us in no doubt – Pilate himself wrote the title, and put it on the cross. What we are reading in John 19 is the personal testimony of Pilate regarding the man whom he has just sentenced to die. No two of the titles are exactly the same, but John adds a particular detail that is found nowhere else – “of Nazareth”. This gospel begins almost with a question about Nazareth. The question is put by Nathaniel – “Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?” Nazareth was obviously a place of no reputation, and here Pilate is aware of the Lord’s hometown. Can any good thing come out of Nazareth – yes, the King of the Jews can. The title was read by many of the Jews, for as John alone tells us, “the place where Jesus was crucified was nigh to the city”. It is as though God has put the title where the men of Jerusalem can see it. God is saying to the Hebrews, the men of religion, “this is the King of the Jews.” Likewise He is telling the Greeks with their learning and the Romans with their military power, “This is the King of the Jews”. The message of the cross is there for all to read.

We note in passing that in the gospel of the Son of God, we note how often Pilate refers to the Lord Jesus as King of the Jews – no less than five times.

“Art thou the king of the Jews?”

“Art thou a king then?”

“Will ye that I release unto you the king of the Jews?”

“Behold your king”

“Shall I crucify your king?”

Compare this with Matthew’s gospel which is often described as the gospel of the king. There is only one reference in Matthew 27:11 when Pilate asked the question, “Art thou the king of the Jews?” So why is it John who refers so often to the Lord as king? Is it not the fact that Pilate is so impressed with the dignity and the majesty of the One who stands before him that he does indeed make all these references to the king of the Jews? God is therefore challenging the world with this title. The man you have just rejected, the despised Jesus of Nazareth, is nonetheless the king of the Jews. And how has the world responded to the challenge? It is interesting how the religious world is happy to remember the babe of Bethlehem at Christmas time. It is happy also at Easter to remember His death and resurrection. But what about the king? A king must have a kingdom and must have his subjects. But men are not willing to bow to Him today, far less acknowledge that they will have to bow to Him when He comes again as the king in His glory. The religious world is silent about the appearing in glory for then they might be challenged to bow to Him.

The Jews are the first to receive the challenge and they reject it as the next two verses show. In verses 21 and 22, we have an incident unique to John. Not content with having Him condemned, the chief priests now cavil with Pilate regarding the title he has written. They want it to be amended. “Write not, the King of the Jews, but that He said, “I am the King of the Jews””.

But what a difference those two words would have made. It was a total denial by the priests of the title written by Pilate. It isn’t

true what is written, it is only what He said. But remarkably, the man who has gone down in history for his weakness and his vacillation now takes a firm stand. "What I have written, I have written", and he will not be moved. Pilate believed the words he had written. Jesus of Nazareth was the King of the Jews. And yet perhaps we are only now seeing the real Pilate. Here is the man of whom we read concerning certain men in Galilee, "Whose blood Pilate had mingled with the sacrifices".

From verses 23 to 24, we come now to the activity of the soldiers who are now seated at the foot of the cross. We are going to learn what happened to the garments of the Lord Jesus. All four gospel writers mention the fact that they parted His raiment, casting lots. But John goes into the greatest detail regarding this incident. He will tell us eventually that it was in order that the words of Psalm 22 might be fulfilled, as also does Matthew in chapter 27. But John gives us the reasoning of the soldiers. They had already divided His raiment into four parts. But His coat or His tunic was left over and it presented a problem. Only in John's gospel in fact, do we read about His coat. The first three gospel writer tell us that "they parted His garments among them and cast lots". But John goes further and mentions "His coat". It was a seamless garment, not easily divided. Hence the reasoning, "Let us not rend it but cast lots for it, whose it shall be". This the logic behind what the soldiers did, but in reality, they were but fulfilling the words of David written a thousand years earlier in Psalm 22, "They parted my raiment among them, and for my vesture they did cast lots". John is going to show in his gospel that the soldiers in their ignorance and cruelty only fulfilled the scriptures regarding His death.

In verse 25, we read of certain women who were present at the cross.

- His mother
- His mother's sister
- Mary the wife of Cleophas
- Mary Magdalene

Matthew also speaks of :-

Mary the mother of James and Joses The mother of Zebedee's children

Mark adds the name of Salome, while Luke mentions no one by name.

It is possible that some of the women are described twice, but apart from this, there was obviously a sizeable little group of women present. Mary Magdalene was one of that special band of women who had followed Him from Galilee. While disciples forsook Him, this band of women remained faithful to the end, and as the other gospels say, they followed His body to the tomb and watched how His body was laid.

From verses 26 to 27, we read of the provision that the Lord made for Mary His mother. This is after all the gospel of the Son, and a son must provide for his parents. As He looks down from the cross, He sees His grief-stricken mother. The words of the old man Simeon have been fulfilled regarding Mary. "A sword shall pierce thine own soul also". But Mary had a large family. Four brothers are mentioned by name, and also His sisters. The Lord was therefore one of a family of at least seven. So why could they not have cared for their mother? John chapter 7 tells us regarding His brothers, "Neither did His brethren believe in Him". It was for the most part an unbelieving home back in Nazareth. It was an act of pure grace when we read in I Cor 15 that the Lord appeared to James, His brother. He did not appear to any other unbelieving man after His resurrection. It is lovely then to read of how Mary and His brethren were gathered with the disciples in Acts chapter 1. So here in John 19, the Lord says to Mary, "Woman, behold thy son", and looking toward John He says, "Behold thy mother". He truly is the man that Paul later wrote about who "thought not on His own things but also on the things of others". And here on the cross, the Son

takes time to provide for His mother. We see other examples of this care for others during His last few hours. We read in John 14:1 of how He says to His disciples, "Let not your heart be troubled". This comes from One who is aware of the fact that within a few hours He will be suffering the pain and the suffering of Calvary, not to mention His abandonment by God. Again in John 18:8, He is in Gethsemane and He says to His captors, "If therefore ye seek Me, let these go their way".

Verses 28 to 30 now describe the last moments of the Lord before He dies. He is not only the devoted Son of Mary, He is also the devoted Son of God. He must also finish His work for God before He leaves this life. To understand this section, we must appreciate that there are three English words in our Authorised Version which are all the same word in Greek. The words "accomplished" and "fulfilled" in verse 28 are the same in Greek as the word "finished" in verse 30. The word has the sense of being completely fulfilled. It is not the word for fulfilled which is used for example in verse 24 regarding Psalm 22 or the words of verse 36 regarding Exodus 12. There individual verses are fulfilled. Rather, the Lord is thinking of the scripture ie the totality of all that the Old Testament scriptures have had to say about His life and His death. The obedient Son cannot rest until the scripture has been completely fulfilled. Hence verse 28 should read, "Jesus knowing that all things were now fulfilled, that the scripture might be fulfilled saith, "I thirst"". It is difficult to state exactly what scripture is in view here. Certainly in the Psalms we read of the dreadful thirst of a crucified man – "my tongue cleaveth to my jaws". "My tongue is dried up like a potsherd".

While the first three writers all mention this second offering of the vinegar to the Lord, only John records the fact that the vinegar was given in response to the Lord's words, "I thirst". In Matthew and Mark, for example, the vinegar is given in response to the cry of the Lord Jesus, "Eli, Eli, Lama sabachthani (My God, my God, why has Thou forsaken Me)". When they heard this cry, some thought that He cried for Elias, and this prompted them to get the vinegar and offer it to Him. But in John's gospel, God is ever in control, and it is response to the Lord's own request, "I thirst", that the vinegar is offered. Why does the Lord do this? So that the scripture might be fulfilled. He is the instigator of the action in John's account.

The Lord had previously refused the drink offered to Him, the vinegar mingled with gall. This is reckoned to have been a stupefying drink to dull the senses and hence the pain of the cross. That drink, the Lord refused.

The end of verse 30 describes His last moment. "He bowed His head, and gave up the ghost." Each gospel writer gives a slightly different account of the Lord's dying breath.

In Matthew 27, we read that the Lord cried with a loud voice, and tremendous things happened all around Him. The rocks were rent, the earth did quake, the veil of the temple was rent in twain, and graves were opened and the bodies of the saints which slept arose after His resurrection. In Mark and Luke's account, only the veil is mentioned but Matthew mentions three other things that happened as well. Hence Matthew is emphasising the effects of His cry. Why such dramatic effects in Matthew? Because in Eccles 8:4 we read, "Where the word of a king is, there is power". Even on the cross, in His moment of apparent weakness, the word of the King creates such dramatic happenings as those described by Matthew in the gospel of the king.

And what about Mark's gospel? Mark also describes the loud cry, but he describes not the effects upon things, but rather the effect that it had upon the centurion. Mark 15:39 reads, " And when the centurion which stood over against Him, saw that He so cried out, he said, "Truly this man was the Son of God"". Mark emphasises the point that the centurion was standing next to the cross. What impresses the centurion was not what was said but how it was said. He saw, not heard, how He so cried out. This was not the last gasp of a dying man. This was a man crying out in all his strength

and vigour. What is this telling about the Lord Jesus. It is telling us that He is no ordinary man. Eccles 8:8 tells us that "No man has power in the day of his death". Men die out of weakness, but this man cried with a loud voice and then died. No wonder the centurion said, "Truly this man was the Son of God".

There is a different emphasis again in Luke chapter 23. Here the Lord's last words are, "Father, into Thy hands I commend my spirit". Here we have the death of the dependent man as described throughout Luke. Hence only Luke tells us that He prayed at His baptism. "Being baptized and praying". Also as He prayed on the Holy Mount, His countenance was altered. He is the man of prayer in this gospel, hence His final prayer is to commend His spirit to the Father. Yet it also shows that He was more than just a man like any other. The verse in Eccles also states, "No man hath power over the spirit to retain the spirit: there is no discharge in this war". Hence man dies out of weakness and has no power to retain his spirit. It leaves him out of weakness. In Luke 23, the Lord is about to die but He had power over His own spirit, and here He chooses the moment to dismiss His spirit. It did not simply leave Him, He dismissed it of His own will.

Finally we come again to John 19:30. Now there is no loud cry, no earthquakes or rent veil, no opened graves, no confession by the centurion. After saying, "Finished", He bowed His head and gave up the ghost. There is a quiet dignity here. It is the death of the One who is the Son of God. We find the word for "bowed" in that verse which says that the Son of man has nowhere to lay His head. He had no place to call His own. He pitched His tent amongst us. But at last on the cross when the work is done and the scripture has been fulfilled, He laid down His head upon the cross. It is no falling forward of the head in weakness. It is the same verb as that used by the two at Emmaus when they said to the Lord, "The day **is far spent**". The sun was gently reclining in the evening sky. With a quiet dignity, the Lord reclined, laid down, His head. In so doing, He gave up the ghost. The word for to give up is the word for to betray as used of Judas. The literal meaning of the word is to deliver up. Hence it was not Judas who delivered up the Lord to Pilate who took His life. Nor was it the rulers who delivered Him up to Pilate who took His life. The Lord laid down His head and delivered up His spirit.

In verse 31, we read of the request made by the Jews to Pilate that the legs of all three victims might be broken, "That the bodies should not remain on the cross on the Sabbath day". Here again, we see the religious hypocrisy of these men. Earlier in this chapter, they would not go into Pilate's judgement hall lest they should be defiled and so that they might eat the Passover. They have just committed the most awful crime that history has ever known. They have brought about the crucifixion of the Son of God. Now, they ask that the legs might be broken to hasten the moment of death. It was evidently the case that the victims of crucifixion could linger on the cross for days – they died out of weakness and exhaustion rather than the wounds of the nails. Even after Pilate had given his consent to the breaking of the legs, he still marvelled that the Lord had already died when Joseph came to request the body. He sent for the centurion for His death to be confirmed.

But what was this Preparation day that John and others mention? It begs another question. On what day of the week was it that our Lord died. We know from scripture that He rose on the first day of the week ie our Sunday. But did He die, as is commonly assumed, on Friday; or as men call it, Good Friday? I have a problem with Friday because the Lord prophesied that as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the fish, so He would be three days and three nights in the bowels of the earth. This would rule out a Friday as there would be only two nights between Friday and Sunday morning, hence it is more than likely that the Lord was crucified on the Thursday of that week. The Preparation day would be the Friday and the normal

Sabbath would fall on the Saturday. The Preparation would be a high day as it was the day before the most important Sabbath of the year, during the week of the Passover, the feast of unleavened bread, and the feast of First Fruits. Thursday would seem to fit into other important dates. If Thursday was the 14th day of the month Abib, then the 10th day would be the Sunday of the triumphal procession into Jerusalem, the day which men call Palm Sunday. The 17th day would be the following Sunday, the day of His resurrection. The 10th day of Abib was the day in which the Passover lamb was chosen and brought into the home to be kept for 4 days. The 14th day was the Passover itself. The 17th day was the day in which the ark rested on the mount of Ararat, speaking of a new beginning. But these dates are really less important than other truths in this section.

From verse 32 to 37, we see the final activities of the soldiers at the cross. This whole section from verse 31 to 37 is unique to John ie the breaking of the legs of the thieves and the soldier with the spear. John again is showing us that while the soldiers appear to be acting in a random fashion, every action taken or not taken was in fulfilment of the word of God. So, in verse 32, the soldiers come and break the legs of the other two victims – again, as we have noticed, the identity of the thieves is kept from us by John. When they came to the Lord, they observed that He was dead already, so they had no need to break His legs. Then one of these soldiers in an act of apparent random cruelty and disrespect, takes a spear and with it pierces the side of the Lord. Why are these extra details given us? Firstly, that a scripture might be fulfilled, for in Exodus 12:46, it was written concerning the Passover lamb, "A bone of him shall not be broken". The Lord knows how to keep the bones of the righteous hence He was spared from the cudgel. But He was not spared from the spear. Why was this? Because another scripture says, this time Zechariah 12:10, "They shall look upon Him whom they pierced". This scripture will not be fulfilled until the Lord returns again to Israel and they look upon the pierced One. Verses 34 and 35 mention a particular outcome of the pierced side. "Forthwith came there out blood and water". This evidently is most unusual for a dead body, hence the fact that John underlines this fact. He, the only eye-witness to write a gospel re-affirms, "He that saw it bare record, and his record is true". John is saying, "I was there and saw it for myself". So what is the significance of the water and the blood? The blood, as we learn from John's first epistle is for cleansing from sin. "The blood of Jesus Christ, His Son, cleanseth us from all sin". Water is for purifying. The blood deals with sin initially, the water is for daily sanctification.

The actions of the soldiers is therefore amazing. As far back as 1,000 yers God had written that soldiers would be at His cross who would gamble for his coat, That His legs would not be broken like the transgressors but His spear would be Pierced. No wonder Paul wrote later, "Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures".

From verse 38 to 42, we come to John's account of the burial of the Lord Jesus by Joseph and Nicodemus. In verse 38, we read first of all of Joseph of Arimathaea. He is described as "a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews. Taken together, the 4 gospels tell us quite a lot about this man.

Of Arimathaea

A disciple but secretly

The father of Alexander and Rufus

A rich man

An honourable counsellor

Which waited for the kingdom of God

A good man and a just

Not consented to the counsel and deed of them

Eight things are said of him, and only one thing is detrimental. I suppose that for a

member of the Sanhedrim to confess Christ, it would cost him everything. It was only at the cross that this man takes his stand. Yet I suppose that God needed a man just like Joseph at this point in time. Joseph is an honourable man who would have commanded the respect of Pilate. He was a man in authority and he used that place to gain an entrance to Pilate to beg the body of Jesus. He was a rich man, and could provide the linen cloth to wrap the body and the tomb wherein to bury Him. Only a man like Joseph could have done these things at this point in time. The mention of Alexander and Rufus is interesting. Obviously these two sons are well known to the recipients of Mark's gospel. Does this suggest that this incident had such an effect upon Simon that at least his sons became believers, and perhaps also Simon himself?

In verse 39, we read of another rich man, who was also like Joseph a man of authority. "There came also Nicodemus". John here reminds us, "Who came to Jesus by night". He is described in this way in all three chapters where he is found in scripture. First of all, he comes to Jesus by night in John chapter 3. It has often been said that he came by night because he didn't want to be seen in the company of this Jesus. He had heard about His works and acknowledged that God was with this man. The last thing he expected was to be told that He had to be born again, born from above. He must have gone away and thought about it deeply. We next read about Nicodemus in chapter 7. Animosity against the Lord is beginning to mount. They have sent officers to take Him but they return empty-handed. In the midst of such opposition, there is a voice that speaks up for the Lord Jesus. "Doth our law judge any man before it hear him". It is not an open confession but a faint word in His defence. Again in John 7, we read of Nicodemus, "which came to Jesus by night". Now in John 19, we come to Calvary. The cross is what makes the difference. Like Joseph, Nicodemus now nails his colours to the mast and comes out into the open. He brings a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pound weight. Again, it is the offering of a rich man, for only a man of considerable wealth could have done this. But notice, the Spirit of God speaking through John has nothing to say about the value of this mixture. Contrast this with John 13 where Mary of Bethany brings a pound of ointment to anoint the Lord Jesus. The Bible says of this pound that it was "very costly". It is the same expression as that used in Matthew 13 regarding the one pearl "of great price". This "great price" is the same as "very costly" of John 19. So why doesn't the bible speak thus of the one hundred pounds brought by Nicodemus. Thus was nothing secret about the discipleship of Mary, but Nicodemus was a secret disciple up until the cross.

The experience of these two rich men highlights for us the true meaning of the cross. We ought, in fact, to differentiate between the death of the Lord Jesus and His cross. Christ **died** for our sins. It is His death that deals with sins for the "Wages of sin is death", and we needed someone to die on our behalf. When it comes also to the Rapture, our place is secure by the One "who **died** for us" (I Thess 5).

On the other hand, the Cross is the great dividing line for the Christian where we learn to judge all that would hinder us. Hence the Bible speaks of self, the flesh, the world, the law of ordinances, and the old man all finding themselves crucified - nailed to the cross.

In verse 41, John adds another detail that is unique to himself. "Now in the place where He was crucified there was a garden". We would never have known that the tomb was in a garden apart from John. It is the same with Gethsemane - apart from the comment in John 18, we would never have known that it was a garden. There are many ways of looking at these gardens. One might contrast them with Eden, a place of beauty and fragrance and the presence of God. Gethsemane on the other hand was a place of darkness and betrayal, of satanic presence, and failure even on the part of the disciples. Then at the garden tomb, there is death and burial. What fragrance and

beauty there is in these two gardens is seen only in the person of the Lord Jesus who glorified God in His death.