

JOHN — WEEK 27

CRUCIFIXION



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The cover image is *Ecce Homo (Behold the Man)* by Caravaggio

Pilate, now furious with the Jews for wrangling him into sentencing Jesus, insults them by labeling Jesus as “The King of the Jews.” Then Jesus is crucified, and His clothing gambled for. In a unique act of love, He gives His mother to John.

Then He dies of dehydration and a soldier pierces him with a spear, releasing blood and pleural effusion.

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1 John 19:17–22

And He, bearing His cross, went out to a place called the Place of a Skull, which is called in Hebrew, Golgotha, where they crucified Him, and two others with Him, one on either side, and Jesus in the center. Now Pilate wrote a title and put it on the cross. And the writing was:

JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS.

Then many of the Jews read this title, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin.

Therefore the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, “Do not write, ‘The King of the Jews,’ but, ‘He said, ‘I am the King of the Jews.’ ” ’ ”

Pilate answered, “What I have written, I have written.”

Behold Pilate’s anger! How sweet it must have been for him to hear the chief priests whine about the title he put on the cross. It’s payback time.

The title Romans put on a cross states the crime the criminal being crucified for. Remember, the point of crucifixion is to suppress crime through intimidation. The thought of being crucified is an incredibly powerful deterrent. You don’t want to be “that guy.” Whatever “that guy” did, you sure don’t want to do that.

This makes what Pilate wrote massively insulting. The thing you sure don’t want to do is be The King of the Jews. And to make this as clear as possible, Pilate has it *written in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin*.

But that’s not all. Pilate is directly contradicting the chief priests. He’s saying that Jesus is The King of the Jews. Remember, he investigated the charges, and found no fault in Him.

The chief priests don’t like Pilate labeling “King of the Jews” as a major crime, but they can’t bear Pilate labeling Jesus as that king.

Welcome to payback, boys.

Pilate is furious over having been maneuvered into a corner.

From then on Pilate sought to release Him, but the Jews cried out, saying, “If you let this Man go, you are not Caesar’s friend. Whoever makes himself a king speaks against Caesar.” — John 19:12

They’re threatening to report him to Rome! That has to be a first—a Roman governor being threatened by his subjects. Kudos to Pilate for keeping his temper.

He has the power to “execute” paybacks literally.

2 John 19:23–24

Then the soldiers, when they had crucified Jesus, took His garments and made four parts, to each soldier a part, and also the tunic. Now the tunic was without seam, woven from the top in one piece. They said therefore among themselves, "Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it, whose it shall be," that the Scripture might be fulfilled which says:

*"They divided My garments among them,
And for My clothing they cast lots."*

Therefore the soldiers did these things.

There's no way the soldiers could have known that they're fulfilling Psalm 22:18; they weren't Jews. They were part of something greater than they knew and their actions were governed by things beyond their comprehension.

Had the soldiers been familiar with Psalm 22—and recalled it—it would have given them the mother of all chills.

My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me? ...

*But I am a worm, and no man;
A reproach of men, and despised by the people.
All those who see Me ridicule Me;
They shoot out the lip, they shake the head, saying,
"He trusted in the LORD, let Him rescue Him;
Let Him deliver Him, since He delights in Him!" ...*

*I am poured out like water,
And all My bones are out of joint;
My heart is like wax;
It has melted within Me.
My strength is dried up like a potsherd,
And My tongue clings to My jaws;
You have brought Me to the dust of death.*

*For dogs have surrounded Me;
The congregation of the wicked has enclosed Me.
They pierced My hands and My feet;
I can count all My bones.
They look and stare at Me.
They divide My garments among them,
And for My clothing they cast lots. — Psalm 22:1a, 6–8, 14–18*

3 John 19:25–27

Now there stood by the cross of Jesus His mother, and His mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus therefore saw His mother, and the disciple whom He loved standing by, He said to His mother, "Woman, behold your son!" Then He said to the disciple, "Behold your mother!" And from that hour that disciple took her to his own home.

Of all the powerful moments in the Bible, this has got to be one of the most gut-wrenching. Who can imagine Mary's pain as she watches her son being tortured to death?

Yes, she's spiritually mature. Yes, she understands God's absolute power and the majesty of His agenda (far more than most of us ever could). She might even have specific insight into the purpose of what she's witnessing.

Still, her suffering is beyond description.

This makes Jesus's assigning her to John all the more significant. This ministry to her began *from that hour*.

She needed it.

The gospel is, first and foremost, a love story. God's love drives everything that happens.

"And I have declared to them Your name, and will declare it, that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them." — John 17:26

But we sometimes miss the "little" love stories that are all over the New Testament. Jesus, in His agony, manages to set one of them up. He gives mom to John.

Here, that same John records, simply, *"And from that hour that disciple took her to his own home."*

John could have written books about his relationship with his new mom. Instead, we get one sentence—one that speaks volumes. In that age, widows needed to be cared for, typically by their children. Jesus was concerned for her wellbeing. His assigning her to John was deliberate and significant.

But that hints at a related issue. Why did John refer to himself as "the disciple Jesus loved?"

Sure, John was in Jesus's inner circle, but so were Peter and James. And Peter and James would go on to play bigger roles in the early church. Yet, John rates himself solely as "the disciple whom Jesus loved." What happened that distinguishes him in this way?

This passage might be the answer. Jesus giving His mother to John wasn't some cute colloquialism; John and Mary took it seriously and implemented it. Mary was now well cared for.

That's love.

4 John 19:28–30

After this, Jesus, knowing that all things were now accomplished, that the Scripture might be fulfilled, said, “I thirst!” Now a vessel full of sour wine was sitting there; and they filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on hyssop, and put it to His mouth. So when Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, “It is finished!” And bowing His head, He gave up His spirit.

Frederick T. Zugibe, in his indispensable 2005 work “The Crucifixion of Jesus: A Forensic Inquiry” concludes that Jesus died of hypovolemic shock—dehydration and loss of blood.

Zugibe also details how thirst is dominant in crucifixion and that dying of thirst is one of the most horrible ways to die.

Water is so basic to one’s survival that individuals have reacted both inappropriately and violently when deprived of it. Individuals suffering from dehydration can lose all sense of rationality, and survival becomes the all-encompassing mental focus. The agony associated with thirst is clearly portrayed in the article by LeBec (Catholic Medical Guardian, October 1925), who quoted an Arab scribe, al Sujuti, who in 1247 described a young Turk who was crucified in Damascus: “His worst agony was thirst. An eyewitness told me that he looked constantly from side to side imploring someone to give him a little water.” — Zugibe, pp 130–131

And Jesus was thirstier than most. He had just pulled an all-nighter, plus this curious tidbit.

Then He took the cup, and gave thanks, and said, “Take this and divide it among yourselves; for I say to you, I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.” — Luke 22:17–18

Jesus didn’t drink at the last supper! This made Him unusually weak.

Now as they came out, they found a man of Cyrene, Simon by name. Him they compelled to bear His cross. — Matthew 27:32

The events of that night dehydrated Jesus—even more than usual for someone being crucified. The all-nighter, the not drinking at the last supper, the scourging, the crown of thorns, and the purple robe (which ripped the blood clots from the scourging off His back) all weakened Him. He couldn’t carry His own cross and then He died quicker than the two thieves crucified with Him.

It was classic understatement when Jesus said, “*I thirst!*” He was about to die of thirst.

We’re all familiar with the idea of Jesus dying for our sins—and we know it was a painful death.

But it’s useful to ponder the irony that he died of thirst for our sins.

Jesus answered and said to her, “Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life.” — John 4:13–14

5 John 19:31–37

Therefore, because it was the Preparation Day, that the bodies should not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), the Jews asked Pilate that their legs might be broken, and that they might be taken away. Then the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first and of the other who was crucified with Him. But when they came to Jesus and saw that He was already dead, they did not break His legs. But one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately blood and water came out. And he who has seen has testified, and his testimony is true; and he knows that he is telling the truth, so that you may believe. For these things were done that the Scripture should be fulfilled, “Not one of His bones shall be broken.” And again another Scripture says, “They shall look on Him whom they pierced.”

This is one of those cases where modern science illuminates a Bible passage. Taking the bodies down from the cross was very uncommon. The Romans liked to leave them up so that they would stink, and the vultures would pick them apart. Remember, it’s all about deterrence through intimidation.

Furthermore, Jesus’s rapid death was unusual. The Romans wanted folks to make a lot of noise for a long time on the cross—again as a deterrent.

So, the piercing with a spear was quite abnormal. The Romans would, on occasion, break the legs to hasten death, but premature death on those occasions would be unexpected.

But then something curious happened. Instead of just blood coming out, it was blood and water. John couldn’t have known this unless he saw it.

As Frederick Zugibe explains, the “water” was Pleural effusion from the pericardial sac.

The spear pierced the right atrium of the heart (right upper chamber), which would have been filled with blood because just prior to cardiac arrest, the heart contracts and ejects the blood into circulation for the last time. In response, the right atrium fills up with blood because of the increased pressure through the circulation. A massive pleural effusion (fluid around the lungs) that had slowly accumulated in the hours following the brutal scourging (pleural effusion is commonly seen a few hours following beating about the chest) was already present. The sudden thrust of the spear into the chest by one of the soldiers penetrated the pericardium and the right atrium. The quick, jerking motion used to pull out the spear then carried out blood that had adhered to the blade and some of the pleural effusion from the pleural cavity, resulting the phenomenon of “blood and water.” — Zugibe, pp 139–140

Once again, science helps confirm scripture.

Despite their clear guilt, my heart goes out to the two thieves. Imagine the horror of seeing the soldiers approaching with (so the experts say) an iron mallet big enough to break their leg bones.

Note: the thieves quickly bled to death through the large arteries in their legs. Zugibe showed, conclusively, that being hung on a cross does not interfere with breathing.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. What great quotes have come from a court?
2. Before Christ, what did the Jews think of Psalm 22? Would they sing it?
3. What are your favorite words of love?
4. Have you ever been seriously dehydrated?
5. What is another example of science helping confirm scripture?

Items for prayer: