

# The Crucifixion in John

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In any number of areas of human life, we rely on eyewitness testimony. This is true both formally and informally. Obviously, our judicial system is based on the evidence offered by witnesses, but we do the same thing ourselves on a daily basis. For instance, if I want to know how my dad is doing, and I know my sister has been to see him recently, I ask her how he looked, and she will tell me what she observed.

Nowhere is eyewitness testimony more important than in matters of faith. None of us have seen Jesus for ourselves. Instead, we must rely on what the Bible says. Thankfully, the Bible itself is a record of testimony about Jesus, in some cases collected by men who weren't present, but in others, presented by those who saw for themselves. The gospel of John contains both kinds of testimony, and together, they provide some of the strongest evidence for our faith. Let's look, then, at the crucifixion in John.

## The Crucifixion

The first section of testimony that we'll be examining this morning concerns the crucifixion itself. It appears in John 19:17-30. This account begins with a focus on **THE INSCRIPTION** at the head of the cross. The first few verses of this portion describe the actual act of crucifixion. When I read this description, I can't help but be struck by the contrast with that Mel Gibson movie that came out 10 years ago, "The Passion of the Christ". Those of you who have seen the movie will remember just how gory it was, how it seemed like every scene was drenched in buckets of blood.

Not so here. John doesn't relate anything more than the bare bones of that gruesome event. This might come across as unemotional, but I think the opposite is true. Who of us, when we are talking about the death of a loved one, is going to narrate all the bitter details? In my own life, I remember a great deal about the decline and death of my mother, but I don't talk about it. There's no purpose in bringing that pain back up to the surface. So too in his account, John doesn't talk about the suffering of Jesus much at all.

Instead, he focuses on things like the inscription over Jesus' head, an inscription that ironically identifies Him as the King of the Jews, even as He suffers and dies. Strangely enough, according to John, this inscription was written and hung by Pontius Pilate himself. After Jesus had already been crucified, Pilate wrote this out, climbed up on a ladder or something, and nailed it to the head of the cross personally.

This is an extremely odd action for a Roman governor to take. What does Pilate care about some Jewish peasant? I think this is the last act of a guilty conscience. Pilate knew that Jesus hadn't done anything wrong, but the Jewish leaders manipulated him into giving the orders for Jesus' crucifixion anyway. Pilate wasn't willing to risk his own life to save Jesus' life, but at least he did honor him as he died.

This provokes a protest from the Jewish chief priests, who are also standing around at the foot of the cross, in their case, to gloat while their enemy dies. Jesus, though He is dying the death of a common criminal, is being attended in His death by a whole bunch of important people. The chief priests want to strip Jesus of even the shred of dignity that Pilate has given Him. Pilate refuses. These men have made him complicit in the death of the innocent; he's not going to do them any favors. So it is that even as He is dying on the cross, Jesus is proclaimed as the true King of the Jewish nation by the Roman government.

At the same time, though, some humbler Romans are doing something equally important: **CASTING LOTS** for the garments of Jesus. Their motivations are plain. Roman soldiers weren't paid a whole lot, Jesus wasn't going to need His clothes anymore, so they might as well take them and sell them. The tunic couldn't be divided up, so they cast lots to see who got the bonus. There can be little doubt that this happened. After all, Pilate, the chief priests, some of Jesus' own followers, a whole crowd of onlookers, and whoever happened to be passing by on the highway saw it. It was an extremely public event.

As John observes, this seemingly minor action, carried out unthinkingly by the very men who nailed Jesus to the cross, had been predicted in prophecy a thousand years before. In Psalm 22, David describes in great detail the suffering and death of a servant of God. Nothing like Psalm 22 ever happened to David, but it all happened to Jesus, right down to His hands and feet being pierced and His enemies gambling for His clothes. In earthly terms, this is inexplicable. How can it possibly be that Jesus' death lines up so closely with the prediction of a holy text that is centuries old? I see only one explanation. Some supernatural force, with

knowledge far beyond human capabilities, must have looked into the future, foreseen what would happen to Jesus, and provoked David to record it. Both Jesus and the prophecy must have come from God.

Next, John records a conversation between Jesus and some of the other **WITNESSES** to these events. Most of the male followers of Jesus were nowhere to be seen at the crucifixion, probably because they feared for their own lives, but a number of His female disciples came to watch Him die. They mostly stood some distance off, probably because they didn't want to draw the attention of the chief priests and the Roman guards, but on at least one occasion, they came close enough for Jesus to talk to them.

For some reason, whenever I imagine the crucifixion, I think of the cross as being about 20 feet high. That's extremely unlikely. The Romans were a pragmatic people, and they weren't going to go to all kinds of trouble hanging Jesus any higher than they needed to in order to kill Him. Jesus' feet were most likely no more than a few inches off the ground. It would have been relatively easy for His mother and for John to carry on a brief conversation with Him, and we can imagine the guards allowing Mary to come closer once they realized her relationship to Him. Though Jesus has several brothers, He entrusts His mother to John.

This shows us several things. First, if Jesus feels the need to do this, it is probable that His earthly father Joseph is already dead. Second, it confirms that John was of higher social status than most of Jesus' disciples. Remember: Zebedee had another fishing boat manned by servants, and John was the disciple who had the connections to get into the high priest's house when Peter couldn't. Jesus most likely chose John because He knew he had the financial resources to feed another mouth.

After these things, we come to the **DEATH** of Jesus. We've already discussed Psalm 22; this passage introduces another psalm, Psalm 69. Jesus at this point has been on the cross for about three hours. It's surprising, though, what He's thinking about. I've seen estimates that during the last 48 hours of Jesus' life, He fulfilled prophecies at the rate of about one per hour. Even His enemies have participated in this, casting lots for His clothes, mocking Him on the cross, and generally fulfilling all the Scripture.

However, there is one prophecy remaining. Psalm 69 predicts that the enemies of the Messiah will give Him sour wine to drink. As was probably part of the crucifixion protocol, the Romans had a jar of vinegar waiting nearby. This doesn't mean that the Romans were being nice to the men on the crosses; instead, my guess is that they wanted to keep them from getting dehydrated so that they would last longer and suffer more. Jesus asks for something to drink, and they offer Him some of the vinegar. At this point, the last box has been checked, Jesus' work on earth has been completed, and He can die. Whether from shock or some supernatural intervention, dying is what He does.

## **The Burial of Jesus**

Next in John, we read about the events surrounding the burial of Jesus. Let's read John 19:31-42 together. First in this section, we see **HIS DEATH CONFIRMED**. As John begins by pointing out, the Jews have a problem. According to Deuteronomy 21, if the Jews executed a man by hanging him on a tree and left him on the tree overnight, they would bring a curse on the land. Jesus had died about 3 in the afternoon, so by now, it's getting toward sundown, but the body of Jesus and the two men who were with him are all still hanging on their respective crosses. This really bothers the Jewish leaders. They don't have a problem with killing an innocent man, but they're really concerned about leaving those bodies up there.

They bring their problem to the Romans, and the Romans are willing to accommodate them. It's time for the condemned men to get on with the dying part, so the Romans break the legs of the two thieves. Here's the deal: for those unfortunate enough to be crucified, the only way that they could exhale was by pushing up with their legs against the nails driven through their feet. Once the Romans break their legs, they can't push up anymore, so they're going to suffocate within minutes.

That's the end of both the repentant and the unrepentant thief. However, when they get to Jesus, they see that He's already dead. This is a little weird. It normally took a day or two for people to die from crucifixion. The prolonged suffering was part of the point. However, Jesus has apparently died in hours.

The Roman soldiers, though, do their due diligence. They check to make sure that Jesus is actually dead by ramming a spear into His side. John and the rest have come closer to observe this gruesome spectacle, so they're able to see that the ramming has produced a mixture of fluids, blood and what looks like water, which may be fluid from Jesus' stomach, pericardial fluid from around His heart, or something else entirely. Regardless, Jesus just got speared and didn't even twitch, so the Romans conclude that He is already

dead and don't bother breaking His legs. With both the piercing and the not-breaking, they fulfill another two prophecies. The point is plain to the Romans, the disciples, and all the other witnesses: Jesus is dead.

This sets the stage for **TWO COURAGEOUS DISCIPLES:** Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus. Before the day of Jesus' death, both of these men have been doing a lot of fence-sitting. On the one hand, they believe in Jesus enough to become His disciples. On the other hand, they're sufficiently afraid of the other Jews that they conceal the fact. Joseph is a secret disciple; Nicodemus comes to visit Jesus at night. Perhaps they're particularly motivated by the fact that both of them are members of the Sanhedrin, so if they fall from favor, they've got a long way to fall. Regardless, they do what they can to keep Jesus safe.

This evening represents what they must see as their final failure. Jesus is dead, they think He was wrongfully killed, so what are they going to do about it? Mark says that Joseph "gathered up courage", and that's a good way to put it. It reminds me, in fact, of the night Macy died, when the doctors came to me and said, "We're sorry, but your daughter is dead. Do you want to tell your wife, or do you want us to?" I told them I would, and I gathered up courage. It was an almost-physical pulling myself together to do something that I really didn't want to do, but that I knew was the right thing to do.

So too with Joseph and Nicodemus here. Joseph asks Pilate for the body and takes it down; Nicodemus brings a hundred pounds of spices—no small investment—to prepare it for burial. This is a rush job. The sun is setting, and after the sun goes down, it's going to be the Sabbath, when neither these men nor the female disciples of Jesus are going to be allowed to work further on preparing the body. Nonetheless, they're going to do the best they can in the time allotted, and both of them are finally off the fence.

Next, we see the actual **BURIAL OF JESUS.** The clock is ticking here too. They need to get the body of Jesus someplace where it will be protected from wild animals, and they need to do it quickly, before the sun sets. In the end, they choose a nearby tomb that happens to belong to Joseph. This was never meant to be Jesus' long-term resting place. At most, His body would only have spent a year in the tomb, and then His relatives would have collected His bones and placed them in an ossuary. It may even be that they planned to move the body again on Sunday to some location more convenient for Jesus' family. Regardless, this nearby new tomb was the best they could come up with in the limited time available.

Before the Lord's Supper, then, let's consider one somber truth. There are those who argue that Jesus never actually died on the cross, that instead He fainted and made His way out of the tomb Himself. As John's account makes clear, this is fanciful. Instead, Jesus' closest associates, who wanted Him to live more than anything else, stood there and watched Him die on the cross. They watched as the Romans confirmed His death by thrusting a spear into His side. They took His body down from the cross, wrapped it for burial, and placed it in a tomb. Jesus died, and He died for us. Let's consider this as we partake.

### **The Resurrection of Jesus**

If the story of Jesus ended with His burial, it would be a grim story indeed! However, John completes it with the story of His resurrection. In this vein, we could consider the entire remainder of the gospel of John, but instead, we're only going to read John 20:1-18.

This context begins with the shocking discovery of **THE EMPTY TOMB.** Today, when we talk about the empty tomb, it's a symbol of our hope, but those who actually encountered it originally saw it very differently. The stone in front of the tomb had been sealed by Pilate, a Roman guard had been set to prevent His disciples from taking the body, yet when Mary Magdalene shows up on Sunday morning before the sun has come up, she finds the stone rolled away from the entrance and the body gone.

She is not at all happy about this. The first thought in her head isn't, "Yippee! Jesus has risen from the dead!" Instead, it's, "Somebody has come and stolen the body!" She is as distressed as we would be if we visited the spot where one of our loved ones had recently been interred and discovered a gaping hole in the ground with neither casket nor body in it. Mary has no idea who "they" might be, but she's so upset about it that she takes off back into Jerusalem, tracks down Peter and John, and tells them about it.

Indeed, **PETER AND JOHN** are our eyewitnesses for the next part of this narrative. They're so horrified by the apparently bad news that the tomb is empty that they run back outside the city gates to check out the situation for themselves. John is in a little bit better shape than Peter, I suppose, so he leaves his companion behind and reaches the tomb first.

Let's pause here to consider one of the alternative explanations for the empty tomb, an explanation that the Jewish leaders themselves advance in Matthew 28. This explanation goes that the disciples of Jesus came and stole the body while the Roman guard slept so that they could claim that Jesus had risen from the dead. This simply doesn't pass the smell test. Mary Magdalene is one of the 20 closest disciples of Jesus. If there had been a body-snatching conspiracy, she would have been in on it, and she certainly wouldn't have gone back to the tomb to finish preparing the body she knew wasn't there.

For the sake of argument, though, let's assume that Mary is a dupe. What about Peter and John? These two are the two closest followers Jesus has. If there is a conspiracy, they are going to be the ringleaders. So, let's say that Peter and John have stolen the body, and then, as they're sleeping in after a long, hard night of body-stealing, Mary comes banging on the door and announcing that the body isn't there—which they already knew. What are they going to do? Are they going to go tearing off to look at the empty tomb that they themselves emptied? Or are they going to sit there, smirk, and say, "Yay! Mary! Jesus is risen from the dead!" Clearly, Peter and John are acting not conspiratorial, but clueless.

John, then, wins the footrace to the tomb, sees the stone rolled away, glimpses the discarded wrappings, but doesn't go in. Most likely, he is afraid. Wouldn't you be? Imagine being the first to go to a viewing, but then, when you go up to pay your respects to the body, all you see is an empty suit of clothes. That would be creepy! I would be backing away from the coffin, hoping the zombie wasn't about to jump out and grab me. Regardless, John isn't about to crawl into this dark hole where the body isn't.

Soon, though, Peter arrives on the scene. He's an impulsive man, and so he ducks into the tomb and checks it out. It sure doesn't look like the scene of a grave robbery. Not only have the grave wrappings been left behind, which I wouldn't do if I were trying to steal a corpse, but the face-cloth has been separated and neatly rolled up. Peter stares at this and thinks, and John pokes his head in and stares and thinks, and John, at least, starts coming to some conclusions. He starts remembering all the passages, including Psalm 22, that talk about God rescuing His Anointed from death. For that matter, he starts remembering all the things that Jesus Himself said about rising from the dead, which had never made a lick of sense before.

John starts adding things up, and he believes. It's like the big reveal scene in a movie, except this is real life. Nobody took the body of Jesus. Jesus rose from the dead. This was surely a stunning realization, and both disciples kind of wander off separately as they try to get their heads around what has happened.

From there, the story shifts back to Mary Magdalene and to her encounter with **THE ANGELS**. After Peter and John have left, she comes back to the tomb, still upset about the body-snatching that she believes has occurred. She looks into the tomb, looking for who-knows-what, and instead of the grave clothes, she sees two angels. She clearly does not process this well. Just like Balaam started arguing with his donkey when the donkey started talking to him, when the angels ask Mary why she's weeping, she repeats her complaint about "they", whoever they are, taking the body of Jesus to some undisclosed location.

The angels, though, don't offer an explanation to Mary as they do to some of the other women. Instead, they leave the explanation to the final encounter we'll discuss this morning, the encounter between **MARY AND JESUS**. As she is still speaking with the angels, Jesus arrives, or perhaps simply appears, behind her. He repeats the question that the angels asked. As He does on a number of other occasions, Jesus is apparently concealing His identity here.

In any case, Mary doesn't recognize Him. Instead, she concludes that He is the gardener, and what's more, she decides that He might also be the body-snatcher. Without bothering to explain the situation to Jesus, she turns back to the tomb and starts asking where He took the body.

A real gardener might have said, "Whoa! Whoa! Slow down! What are you talking about?" Jesus replies with a single word, "Mary!" Earlier in the chapter, I think we saw the male reaction to the resurrection, as Peter and John do some thinking about the Scripture and try to make sense out of the incredible. I think this is the female reaction. Mary turns, recognizes Him, cries "Rabboni," and flings herself into His arms. She's not concerned with the doctrinal implications. All she cares about is that Jesus is alive.

After a little bit, Jesus disentangles Himself from her and gives her a message to carry to the other disciples. This she does. The same woman who began the morning weeping, distraught, almost irrational over the death of Jesus now announces to her friends that the Lord is alive. Even as we smile at the change in Mary, we need to appreciate the importance of her experience and her testimony. That single word that she heard might be the most significant ever uttered by human lips, because it showed that Jesus had risen.