

Next Pilate seems to have attempted to make the charge that Jesus was a king ridiculous by ridiculing the man himself – see verses 19:1 – 6a:

“Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. The soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head. They clothed him in a purple robe and went up to him again and again, saying, "Hail, king of the Jews!" And they struck him in the face. Once more Pilate came out and said to the Jews, "Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no basis for a charge against him." When Jesus came out wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe, Pilate said to them, "Here is the man!" As soon as the chief priests and their officials saw him, they shouted, "Crucify! Crucify!" (John 19:1-6a NIV)

Pilate's attempt to free Jesus by way of complying with the custom of release of a prisoner at the feast having failed, he tried another tack. He had Jesus flogged, maltreated, mocked, and paraded before the mob. Although we don't know exactly which type of flogging Jesus was subjected to – the Romans practised three types of flogging of varying severity, the fustigatio, the flagellatio and the most severe the verberatio – or even if Jesus was flogged once or twice, we do know that this was a frightful punishment. But, neither John nor the Synoptics make a great play on it, there is no attempt to appeal to our emotions. I believe Pilate meant the punishment as a visual demonstration of the impossibility of taking the charge against Jesus seriously. This helpless object of violence and derision a king? Impossible! If Pilate was making such an appeal to the people he was guilty of a serious miscalculation. The only effect of it was to provoke the cry, “Crucify him!” – although it is perhaps significant that it's the chief priests who raise that cry rather than the crowd.

Pilate was gradually being pushed into a corner where he would have to render a final judgment – see verses 6b – 16a:

“But Pilate answered, "You take him and crucify him. As for me, I find no basis for a charge against him." The Jews insisted, "We have a law, and according to that law he must die, because he claimed to be the Son of God." When Pilate heard this, he was even more afraid, and he went back inside the palace. "Where do you come from?" he asked Jesus, but Jesus gave him no answer. "Do you refuse to speak to me?" Pilate said. "Don't you realise I have power either to free you or to crucify you?" Jesus answered, "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above. Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin." From then on, Pilate tried to set Jesus free, but the Jews kept shouting, "If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar." When Pilate heard this, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judge's seat at a place known as the Stone Pavement (which in Aramaic is Gabbatha). It was the day of Preparation of Passover Week, about the sixth hour. "Here is your king," Pilate said to the Jews. But they shouted, "Take him away! Take him away! Crucify him!" "Shall I crucify your king?" Pilate asked. "We have no king but Caesar," the chief priests answered. Finally Pilate handed him over to them to be crucified.” (John 19:6b-16a NIV)

Pilate's final abortive attempt to release Jesus was sparked off by the Jews' remark that Jesus had claimed to be the Son of God. This apparently struck a chord in the governor's superstitious nature (possibly affected by a dream his wife had had (Matthew 27:19)) and led him to speak further with Jesus. Confirmed in his conviction that there was no case against Jesus he tried again to set him free. But when the Jews raised the ominous issue of “Caesar's friend,”—that is, a veiled threat to let it be known in Rome if he did not sentence the Galilean as they desired—Pilate capitulated. Pilate's capitulation should be seen in the context of the historical circumstances. If Jesus' trial and subsequent crucifixion were in 33 AD (as I strongly believe and have argued in other talks) then they fell just after Aelius Sejanus' attempted coup against the emperor Tiberius who subsequently purged almost all those

appointed by Sejanus. Pontius Pilate was appointed by Sejanus and would thus have been very afraid for his life at the time and so very reluctant to seem disloyal to Rome. Therefore Jesus was delivered over to crucifixion.

John's statement of the timing of Jesus' delivery for crucifixion at "about the sixth hour" is significant. This was the time the Jews commenced their preparations for the Passover, so John is again inviting us to view Jesus as the Passover lamb. Here we shouldn't make too much of the apparent timing conflict with Mark (Mark 15:25), who says this took place at around the third hour, as timing was very approximate in those days.

The final words of the High Priest and Jewish officials are an amusing irony – see verse 15. Pilate asks "shall I crucify your king" and they reply "we have no king but Caesar". On this occasion they spoke with cynical expediency. But in fact they expressed the real truth. Their lives showed that they gave no homage to God. The truth was that they had no king but Caesar, they had broken their covenant with God, even though in their daily prayers they prayed to the Lord "may you be our King, you alone".

John then proceeds to the crucifixion itself – see verses 16b – 22:

"So the soldiers took charge of Jesus. Carrying his own cross, he went out to the place of the Skull (which in Aramaic is called Golgotha). Here they crucified him, and with him two others—one on each side and Jesus in the middle. Pilate had a notice prepared and fastened to the cross. It read: JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS. Many of the Jews read this sign, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and the sign was written in Aramaic, Latin and Greek. The chief priests of the Jews protested to Pilate, "Do not write 'The King of the Jews', but that this man claimed to be king of the Jews." Pilate answered, "What I have written, I have written." (John 19:16b-22 NIV)

John's narrative brings before us some things not recorded in the Synoptics: the information that the title over Jesus' head was in three languages and the Jews' challenge of the wording. It is to John also that we owe the information that Jesus carried his cross during the first part of the journey to Golgotha.

It was quite usual for the condemned person to carry the crossbeam or *patibulum* of his cross to place of execution – see verse 17 – the vertical upright section of the cross was generally left implanted in the ground as a warning to criminals. The Synoptic Gospels inform us that Simon of Cyrene was co-opted to assist Jesus in this task, indeed the Synoptics imply that Jesus may have been so weakened by the scourging that he needed assistance to walk to Golgotha. Jesus was crucified with two bandits, possibly henchmen of Barabbas, one on either side of him. Here John stresses Jesus' identity with sinners in his death.

In verse 18 John simply states the fact of the crucifixion without giving any of the gruesome details. Both we and popular films tend to emphasize the physical anguish of the crucifixion, but the Gospels don't do that, they simply state the fact. Their concern is with Jesus dying for our sins. The physical anguish of the crucifixion must have been terrible, but I believe that the main component of Jesus' anguish was the bearing of our sins and the consequent separation from the Father with whom he had been in communion for all eternity. He who had no sin was made sin for us. He suffered the judgment and punishment that our sins merit. We also need to remember that the fact of the crucifixion supremely affirms Jesus' identity as a man, as fully human. John's phrase "the Word became flesh" is supremely vindicated. In

contrast with every other major religion we Christians have a God who enters into our sufferings and shares them with us.

In verse 19 we are told that Pilate had a notice affixed to the cross proclaiming Jesus as the King of the Jews – it was normal custom for a sign stating the crimes of a person condemned to crucifixion to be attached that person or their cross and such notices were often multilingual. This was an ironic piece of revenge against the Jews by Pilate and John stresses the kingly royalty of Jesus right to the end.

In verse 20 John adds a piece of information not included in the Synoptics, the sign affixed to the cross was written in the three principal languages of the time and was read by many people. For me this emphasizes the universality of the kingship of Jesus. Incidentally, the fact that the inscription was in three languages will sufficiently account for the fact that divergent accounts are given of its content in the four Gospels.

In verses 21 and 22 we learn that the Jews objected to the wording of the notice affixed to the cross, but Pilate will not hear of this, with an air of finality he refuses to alter what he has written. John wants this finality to symbolize the fact that nothing can change the kingship which Jesus exercises.

John then tells us the Jesus' clothing was divided between the soldiers supervising his crucifixion – see verses 23 and 24:

“When the soldiers crucified Jesus, they took his clothes, dividing them into four shares, one for each of them, with the undergarment remaining. This garment was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom. "Let's not tear it," they said to one another. "Let's decide by lot who will get it." This happened that the scripture might be fulfilled which said, "They divided my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing." So this is what the soldiers did.” (John 19:23-24 NIV)

It was customary for the soldiers who performed a crucifixion to take the clothing of the executed man; this was a recognized perquisite of their office. In accordance with this custom the soldiers who crucified Jesus divided his clothing into four, one part for each soldier – which tells us that there were four soldiers in the execution squad, which was normal for crucifixions. Jesus' “undergarment,” instead of being made out of separate pieces of cloth sewn together, was woven in one piece, without a seam, so it was quite valuable. Thus the soldiers decided not to divide it, but to give it to one of their number and they cast lots to decide who should receive it. This was a fulfilment of the prophecy of Psalm 22:18 and John emphasises that. It is also worthy of note that the garment of the High Priest was made in the same way (although this High Priestly garment was not an undergarment), and Jesus is, of course, our supreme High Priest.

Even at the time of his suffering, Jesus was concerned to provide for his mother – see verses 25-27:

“Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing near by, he said to his mother, "Dear woman, here is your son," and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that time on, this disciple took her into his home.” (John 19:25-27 NIV)

We see that Jesus was not entirely forsaken in the hour of his death; some women and John stood by his cross. It is not certain how many there were, as John's description is not

absolutely clear, but he probably lists four, the first two described, the third and fourth named. Four believing women stood by the cross in counterpart to the four unbelieving soldiers who crucified him.

Jesus' mother is mentioned first, unnamed as always in this Gospel. It is probable that "his mother's sister" is to be equated with Salome (Mark 15:40), and that she was "the mother of Zebedee's sons" (Matt. 27:56), who was standing at a distance with the other women when Jesus died. If so, and if as I believe the beloved disciple is John the son of Zebedee, a reason for the omission of her name appears. John never names himself or his brother or any of his family, so it would be quite in keeping that he should not name his mother. Clopas is only mentioned here in the New Testament. Mary Magdalene (the woman the Synoptics tell us had seven demons cast out of her) is mentioned here for the first time in this Gospel, but in the next chapter John tells us of Jesus' appearance to her after the resurrection.

Even at the time of his greatest anguish Jesus was thoughtful enough to provide for his mother and asks John, the beloved disciple, to take care of her (as her husband Joseph had probably been dead for some time (Mark 6:3)). John fulfilled this request and took her into his home. It is not quite clear why Jesus puts John rather than his brothers in this role, perhaps it was because they were not yet believers, although their conversion seems to have been brought about as a result of the crucifixion and resurrection.

John then records Jesus' death – see verses 28-30:

"Later, knowing that all was now completed, and so that the Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, "I am thirsty." A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus' lips. When he had received the drink, Jesus said, "It is finished." With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit." (John 19:28-30 NIV)

The "wine vinegar" mentioned here signifies cheap, sour wine of the kind which would have been used by the masses and this appears to have been specially provided for the crucifixion as John uses the phrase "was set there" – a better translation of the Greek than the NIV "was there". Jesus drank some, presumably because he wished to be able to make his final statement "it is finished" clearly. He then bowed his head – surely a detail from an eyewitness – and died. There seems to be a voluntary element here, at least as regards the timing. Jesus was in command to the very end and now placed himself in the hands of the Father.

John then recounts the piercing of Jesus' side – see verses 31-37:

"Now it was the day of Preparation, and the next day was to be a special Sabbath. Because the Jews did not want the bodies left on the crosses during the Sabbath, they asked Pilate to have the legs broken and the bodies taken down. The soldiers therefore came and broke the legs of the first man who had been crucified with Jesus, and then those of the other. But when they came to Jesus and found that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water. The man who saw it has given testimony, and his testimony is true. He knows that he tells the truth, and he testifies so that you also may believe. These things happened so that the scripture would be fulfilled: "Not one of his bones will be broken," and, as another scripture says, "They will look on the one they have pierced.'" (John 19:31-37 NIV)

John is the only one who recounts this incident, which again has the touch of an eyewitness.

The Preparation” (the words “day of” are not in the Greek but inserted by the NIV) had become a technical term for “the Preparation for the Sabbath,” that is, Friday. According to Jewish law the dead body of an executed criminal was not to remain all night “on the tree,” but was to be buried that same day, because “You must not desecrate the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance” (Deut. 21:23). Thus a body should be removed from a cross on the day of execution before evening. This was especially the case when the next day was the Sabbath and even more so when that Sabbath was a “special Sabbath” such as Passover. The Jews were thus insistent that the legs of the crucified should be broken – a normal part of crucifixion called *crurifagium* and a process which hastened death by making breathing more difficult – and the bodies removed. The Roman custom was to leave the bodies of the crucified on their crosses after death as a warning to others, so the Jews applied to Pilate for permission to remove them.

John’s account tells us that Jesus died more quickly than the two bandits crucified with him as he was already dead when the soldiers came to break their legs. However, the soldiers were not content just to pass him by, one of them thrust a spear into his side – perhaps to make absolutely sure he was really dead. A flow of blood and water ensued. Whatever the spiritual significance of this (we can clearly see a link to the prophecy of Isaiah 53:5 and to the Passover sacrifice whose bones must not be broken Exodus 12:46 and finally to Zechariah 12:10) or the possible medical confirmation that this was to be expected given the manner of death, it certainly tells us that the body of Jesus was a real human corpse.

In verse 35 John tells us that there is eyewitness evidence of all this, and I think it is likely that the eyewitness was John himself. Certainly no other disciple is mentioned as having been present.

John proceeds to tell us of Jesus’ burial – see verses 38-42:

“Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jews. With Pilate’s permission, he came and took the body away. He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds. Taking Jesus’ body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs. At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, in which no-one had ever been laid. Because it was the Jewish day of Preparation and since the tomb was near by, they laid Jesus there.” (John 19:38-42 NIV)

John suddenly introduces Joseph of Arimathea who appears in scripture in relation just to this incident. He was apparently wealthy and a member of the Sanhedrin and a secret believer. Although he had previously remained in the background, he was obviously deeply affected by the death of Jesus as he now approaches Pilate and asks for the body. That was a very courageous act. Jews of this time regarded a proper burial as extremely important, many would go out of their way to ensure such even for fellow Jews to whom they were not closely related. However, the Romans did not normally give such permission in the case of people executed for sedition who were usually buried in a common grave with other criminals. That Pilate gave it may be a further indication that he did not think that Jesus was guilty. This incident seems to be a clear fulfilment of the prophecy of Isaiah 53:9:

“He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth.” (Isaiah 53:9 NIV)

The Synoptic Gospels do not mention the involvement of Nicodemus, who must also have become a secret believer since his original encounter with Jesus. The anointing of the body with spices was a completely normal part of burial, although the amount of spices involved seems to have been large and indeed seventy five pounds was the amount usually used for Kings.

There was need for haste, for clearly it would be getting near to sundown when the Sabbath would start. It was necessary therefore to get the burial completed before then, so because this tomb (which Matthew (Matthew 27:60) tells us was Joseph's own tomb) was near, they buried Jesus there.