

HE ENDURED THE CROSS

by Ray C. Stedman

Underneath the buildings that presently occupy the north side of the temple mount in Jerusalem, archaeologists have uncovered a pavement stone that bears markings of an ancient game, rather like the game tick-tack-toe, which was played by soldiers of the Roman Empire. It has almost certainly been established that that is the actual pavement of the judgment seat of the Roman governors, the spot on which our Lord himself stood as he was condemned to death by Pilate. The pavement is called "Gabbatha" ("pavement" in Hebrew).

In Chapter 19 of his gospel, John takes us from Gabbatha to Golgatha, the hill of Calvary, and finally to the tomb in which Jesus was laid. The first scene in this chapter is that of Pilate bringing Jesus before the multitude. Our Lord is bloodied and torn by the scourging he has suffered. He is still wearing his crown of thorns and the purple robe with which the soldiers had dressed him in mockery.

We begin with Verse 4:

Pilate went out again, and said to them, "See, I am bringing him out to you, that you may know that I find no crime in him." So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, "Behold the man!" When the chief priests and the officers saw him, they cried out, "Crucify him, crucify him!" Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and crucify him, for I find no crime in him." The Jews answered him, "We have a law, and by that law he ought to die, because he has made himself the Son of God." When Pilate heard these words, he was the more afraid; {John 19:4-8 RSV}

John clearly establishes the fact that Pilate was anxious to release Jesus if he could. Twice in this very paragraph he declares that he has found no crime in him. A comparison of all the gospel accounts reveals that seven times during the trial of Jesus Pilate has pronounced him guiltless. He obviously is trying to find a way to release him and sidestep the determination of the priests to crucify him. The problem is, he only will do so if it can be done at no cost to himself. John indicates that, although Pilate is trying to release Jesus, he is unwilling to pay any price to do so.

All of us at one time or another have acted similarly. We want to stand up for Jesus and show our loyalty to him up to the point when that will result in some momentary loss for us; then we remain silent. It is frightening to recognize how easily we can slip into the weakness of Pilate.

John also brings into focus the hatred of the priests. First, they are manipulating the crowd. These expert rabble-rousers utilize the same principles rabble-rousers employ today -- they begin to chant a slogan initially. Watch any television report of a pressure group demonstrating, and you will discover that they always come up with a simple chant that is repeated over and over. "Crucify him, crucify him," is the slogan of the crowd to pressure Pilate as he seeks a way to release Jesus at no cost to himself. Then there is the arm-twisting insinuation of the mob that Jesus is a dangerous man. "We have a law," they cry, "and by that law he ought to die because he made himself to be the Son of God." Pilate did not hear that statement the way the Jews intended it to be understood, or the way we understand it today. To them, this claim was blasphemous. They saw God as only one Being, far removed from man, and any man who claimed to be the Son of God was blaspheming. As a pagan, Pilate did not believe in one God but in many gods and in the children of the gods. Doubtless he heard this charge as a claim that Jesus was one of the sons of the gods, a demi-god possessed of supernatural powers who could wreak vengeance upon anyone who displeased him. His superstitious heart was struck with fear.

John goes on to say that Pilate came back in with Jesus to examine him further.

... he entered the praetorium again and said to Jesus, "Where are you from?" [i.e., "Who

are you really? Where did you come from?" Pilate is not asking Jesus where he was born, but what kind of person he is.] **But Jesus gave no answer. Pilate therefore said to him, "You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?" Jesus answered him, "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefore he who delivered me to you has the greater sin."** {John 19:9-11 RSV}

There is nothing more magnificent in the Bible than this answer of Jesus to Pilate's angry attempt to impress him with his power. In quiet dignity our Lord simply replies, "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above." He means, of course, that God is the source of all authority. Anybody who exercises any kind of power whatever does so by the permission of God himself.

Christians need desperately to recover this biblical view of life. Remember this tomorrow morning when your boss mistreats you. Remember this when the tax man cometh. (That is a good time to remember it!) When your teacher assigns more homework than you think you can handle, remember he or she has no power except that which is given him or her from above. In a thousand and one circumstances, we need to remember that God is in charge of human life. The world does not recognize this. It tries to forget God. The business of Christians is to recall that he is in charge and in control of life. This will help in wrestling with the problems of injustice, pain, heartache, cancer, war and death, whatever it may be. This is not a perfect world, nor was it intended to be. God is not trying to run the world right. Remember this when you hear people charge him with incompetence because things do not work out to their liking. Jesus could stand before Pilate, facing the injustice of his mock trial, the hatred of the priests and the vacillating weakness of this governor, and say to him, "You could have no power over me except it had been given you from above."

Yet Jesus recognizes also that to him who knows more, more will be required. He says, "He who delivered me to you has the greater sin." That statement, of course, refers to the priests. It was the chief priest who had handed him over to the Roman governor. Jesus infers that Pilate is a relatively ignorant man who is unaware of how God operates. But the priests do. They have Moses and the Law, the marvelous record of the Old Testament. They should have understood the demands of God for justice, love, concern and mercy toward others. Jesus points out with quiet dignity that delivering an innocent man over to this pagan governor to be crucified is indeed the greater sin.

In the next scene the wolves close in for the kill.

Upon this Pilate sought to release him, but the Jews cried out, "If you release this man, you are not Caesar's friend; every one who makes himself a king sets himself against Caesar." When Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judgment seat at a place called The Pavement, and in Hebrew Gabbatha. Now it was the day of Preparation of the Passover, it was about the sixth hour. {John 19:12-14a RSV}

That does not mean they were preparing to eat the Passover feast (that had been done the night before). Rather it refers to the day of preparation for the Sabbath which fell within Passover week, which required that they remain undefiled. That is why John puts that note in here.

Pilate said to the Jews, "Behold your King!" They cried out, "Away with him, away with him, crucify him!" Pilate said to them, "Shall I crucify your King?" The chief priests answered, "We have no king but Caesar." Then he handed him over to them to be crucified. {John 19:14b-16 RSV}

John paints the drama of this scene in vivid colors. We can almost hear the shouting priests, their faces contorted with anger and bitterness toward Jesus. We can see the vacillating, compromising governor, trying uncertainly to find a way out of this mess. All the while the lonely, silent Prisoner awaits with dignity the inevitable outcome. The priests move in on Pilate, and get to him with their threat that he is no friend of Caesar if he releases Jesus.

Every word and action of this account strips away the pretense behind which men seek to hide. John deliberately uncovers the hypocrisy, deceitfulness and dissembling of men. This is what the cross does in

everybody's life. The very fine biblical scholar, Bishop Wescott, has said,

Great occasions do not make heroes or cowards, they simply unveil them to the eyes of men. Silently and imperceptibly, as we wake or sleep, we grow strong or we grow weak, and at last some crisis shows us what we have become.

This is the way God operates in human history, constantly bringing out that which is hidden. The whole world seeks to project a false picture of who they are, but God works to unveil that, to strip away the pretense. How obvious that is here. Pilate wants to appear a fair and impartial Roman judge, capable of outwitting these scheming priests and preserving public peace. But, as one event succeeds another, he is revealed as a cowardly, compromising individual who is willing to do anything to preserve his own skin.

At this point he drops out of history. We do know that, later, he was dismissed as governor and summoned back to Rome to answer to Tiberius' charges against him. On his way there, Tiberius suddenly died. Pilate was freed from the charges and went on to southern France, then known as Gaul. There, according to tradition, he put himself to death.

In this account we can see how the priests wish to appear righteous and just men, zealous for God's glory, and loyal to his government. But, in the struggle with Pilate, they are driven to reveal themselves as jealous, petty schemers who are willing to commit murder to protect their own interests. They are forced at last to deny their loyalty to God and to openly acknowledge the rule of the hated Roman Caesar. John wants us to see that, as we draw near the cross, it is impossible to remain a deceiver. Jesus had said earlier that there would come a time when "nothing that is hidden shall remain hidden, but everything shall be revealed, that which is spoken in secret shall be shouted from the housetops." God will strip away all pretense and fantasy and reveal us for what we really are.

We venture with reverent hearts upon the scene of the crucifixion itself.

So they took Jesus, 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 others, one on either side, and Jesus between them. Pilate also wrote a title and put it on the cross; it read, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews." Many of the Jews read this title, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, in Latin, and in Greek. The chief priests of the Jews then said to Pilate, "Do not write, 'The King of the Jews,' but, 'This man said, I am King of the Jews.'" Pilate answered, "What I have written I have written." {John 19:17-22 RSV}

John records certain symbols that speak eloquently of what is happening here. The place to which they took Jesus is called "The place of the skull." From time immemorial a skull has been a symbol of death. This is God's eloquent way of saying that he intends to deal with the problem of death at the place of the skull. That hill stands a few hundred yards outside the Damascus gate of Jerusalem. It is a small rounded knob, with two large excavations on its side that look like eye sockets.

It is fascinating to recall that *that* hill was the very spot upon which Abraham was called to offer his son Isaac in sacrifice to God and was stopped at the last moment by the voice of God. In a wonderful picture of Jesus bearing his cross, Isaac had to bear the wood for the sacrifice up that hill. At the foot of it, right where the road passes by today, the ancient road also passed. There was the site of the crucifixion, near the city, where every passerby could read what Pilate had written and placed over the cross.

It is clear from this account that God wanted the whole world to know that Jesus was indeed King of the Jews -- it was written in three languages so no one could miss it. When the Jews tried to get Pilate to change the wording he suddenly turned stubborn and refused to do so, remarking in that double-meaning phrase, "What I have written I have written." It has often been pointed out that this is true of all of us.

It is sobering to think that you cannot change the past, you cannot take back words you wish you had not said. What we have written we have written. Pilate speaks for all of us in his remarks on the impossibility of changing the past. Only God can cleanse it.

Once again John underscores the predictions that were fulfilled in the crucifixion of Jesus.

When the soldiers had crucified Jesus they took his garments and made four parts, one for each soldier; also his tunic. But the tunic was without seam, woven from top to bottom; so they said to one another, "Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see whose it shall be." This was to fulfil the scripture, "They parted my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots." So the soldiers did this; {John 19:23-25a RSV}

Two others were crucified with Jesus to fulfil the word of Isaiah 53, "He was numbered with the transgressors," {Isa 53:12 KJV}. John now quotes from Psalm 22, that amazing prediction of One dying upon a cross who had been pierced and whose garments were divided among his murderers. John does not say this, but the clear implication here is that when the garments of Jesus were divided among the soldiers that meant that Jesus was hanging stark naked to the public gaze. The apostle remarks upon the fact that this was a clear fulfillment of Scripture.

John's focus in this account is not on these events, but on the words of Jesus from the cross. From the other gospels we learn that there were seven things he said, but out of them John chooses only three words that reveal tremendous things about the heart of Jesus as he hung on the cross:

The first one John could never forget, that word of tender loving concern which Jesus addressed to his own mother.

... 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 saw his mother, and the disciple whom he loved standing near, he said to his mother, "Woman, behold, your son!" Then he said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother!" And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home. {John 19:25b-27 RSV}

It is incredible to think of the terrible agony that Jesus had been suffering for hours and hours upon end, yet despite his own pain and anguish he had regard for his mother, giving to her what every mother needs, a son to guard her and keep her, and to John what every son needs, a loving, understanding mother. The remarkable thing about this is that Mary had four other sons who could have taken care of her, and probably would have, though they were not yet believers in Jesus (that did not happen until after the resurrection). But John could give to Mary what they could not -- a compassionate understanding of her sorrow, and God-given comfort in this hour. A further remarkable thing is that John's own mother was standing right there at the cross. The second woman mentioned here, "His mother's sister," is the mother of James and John, who were cousins of Jesus, yet Jesus gives his mother to John. John accepts the responsibility and takes her into his own home. What a beautiful revelation this is of Jesus' understanding of our humanity and his concern that the emotional needs of mothers and sons be met. I cannot think of a more beautiful passage for Mother's Day.

Next there comes a word revealing the terrible anguish and physical agony of the cross.

After this Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfil the scripture), "I thirst." A bowl full of vinegar stood there; so they put a sponge full of the vinegar on hyssop and held it to his mouth. {John 19:28-29 RSV}

Scientists tell us that thirst is the most agonizing of all pain. A pinched nerve, a wound, an ache caused by some bodily malfunction can result in tremendous pain, but nothing is more terrible to bear than thirst. Every cell in the body cries out for relief, and the pain gets worse and worse as time goes by. There is something remarkable revealed here. John records that Jesus cried out, "I thirst," only because it was necessary to do so to fulfill the Scripture. In other words, it clearly implies that if he had not been required to fulfill Scripture he would have borne this agony of thirst without a single word of complaint. But in order to faithfully do what God had said should be done, our Lord revealed his anguish by crying out, "I thirst."

Finally, John records the last word from the cross, a word of triumph and achievement.

When Jesus had received the vinegar, he said, "It is finished"; and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. {John 19:30 RSV}

This word, "It is finished," is one word in the Greek. According to the other accounts, Jesus "cried with a loud voice, 'It is finished,'" {cf, Mark 15:37, Luke 23:46}. There is relief in that word. The agony is over, the terrible ordeal is finished. But there is pride in this word as well. The race is run, the work is completed, the enemy is defeated. In those mysterious three hours when the sun hid its face and a strange darkness covered the whole land, Jesus cried out those terrible cries, "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" {Matt 27:46}. It was then he was involved in a fearful grapple with the power of evil. But now it is over. The way to the heart of God is achieved. The writer of Hebrews describes this in these words, "Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way which he opened for us, through the curtain, that is through his flesh," {Heb 10:19-20 RSV}. This is all completed now. When the work was over, when the foundations of redemption were fully laid our Lord cried with a loud voice, "It is finished."

Then, as John records, "He dismissed his spirit." Jesus once said that it was not required that he die. "I have power to lay down my life and I have power to take it again" {John 10:18 RSV}, he declared. Paul tells us he "became obedient unto death," {Phil 2:8}. That could never be said of any of us as we have no choice in the matter. When our time comes we have to die. But Jesus did not. He became obedient unto death and surrendered his spirit, "dismissed it," and fell into death.

John goes on to give another prophecy of Scripture being fulfilled:

Since it was the day of Preparation, in order to prevent the bodies from remaining 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. So the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first, and of the other who had been 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 at once there came out blood and water. He who saw it has borne witness -- his testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth -- that you also may believe. For these things took place that the scripture might be fulfilled, "Not a bone of him shall be broken." And again another scripture says, "They shall look on him whom they have pierced." {John 19:31-37 RSV}

The apostle wants us to understand the impossibility of breaking the Scripture. Jesus once said, "Scripture cannot be broken." Again and again through this account we have this word, "the scripture was fulfilled," "it was to fulfill the scripture." Here are two more instances where Scripture is clearly fulfilled.

Further, John wants us to understand that Jesus was really dead. This is his purpose in saying, "that you also may believe." There he gives the lie to the theory that Jesus only swooned on the cross; that when they put his body in the tomb he was merely in a coma and in the coolness of the tomb he was revived and came back out again. But notice how John is careful here to take an oath, a solemn vow that when the soldier pierced the side of Jesus his blood, which had already separated into the plasma and the hemoglobin, came pouring out together. That only happens when the circulation has stopped and death has occurred.

After this Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly, for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus, and Pilate gave him leave. So he came and took away his body. Nicodemus also, who had at first come to him by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes about a hundred pounds' weight. They took the body of Jesus, and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews. {John 19:38-40 RSV}

It is remarkable that these two secret disciples, who were afraid to confess Jesus while he was alive, did in death what they would not do during his life, openly acknowledging that they belonged to him. With boldness Joseph goes to Pilate and asks for his body, while Nicodemus, at great expense, gathers the burial spices.

They lovingly wash the body of Jesus and wrap it with a cloth, intersperse the spices and prepare him for burial. And they do not care who sees them doing it.

Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb where no one had ever been laid. So because of the Jewish day of Preparation, as the tomb was close at hand, they laid Jesus there. {John 19:41-42}

Knowing John's sensitivity to the use of symbols, it is almost certain that he intends us to see here three remarkably eloquent symbols surrounding the burial of Jesus. Our Lord was:

- Buried in a garden;
- In a tomb where no one had ever been placed before; and
- It was near to the cross.

What is John conveying by this?

It is striking that the Bible records that sin began in a garden, in the Garden of Eden, when the serpent got to Eve and then to Adam and sin found its genesis. I am sure John has this in mind as he records that sin met its conqueror in a garden. There where Jesus entered into death he also conquered sin and loosed its hold upon our race.

Furthermore, in that Garden of Eden man entered into an experience he had never been in before: He entered into death. In Romans 5, Paul declares, "death came by sin and death passed upon all men for all have sinned, therefore, all have died," {cf, Rom 5:12 RSV}. Death came into our race in the Garden of Eden. But here in the garden in Jerusalem was a new tomb where no one had ever lain, and in that new tomb death was conquered for the first time. This is clearly an eloquent testimony from the pen of John.

But the last thing he tells us is that the tomb was near to the cross. There in that beautiful garden, just a few yards from the cross, was this tomb where no one had ever lain, and there they put the body of Jesus. This is John's way of saying that this is true of life as well: When we have been to a cross, when in God's wisdom something has broken our pride and undermined our self-sufficiency, when we find ourselves bankrupt in spirit, broken, and desperately crying out for help, the place of resurrection is just around the corner. Jesus said in the beatitudes, "Blessed are the poor in spirit for they shall be comforted," {cf, Matt 5:3-4}. This is the message John leaves with us: The tomb is near to the cross.

When you are standing at a cross, the resurrection is just ahead if you walk with God.

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