



Potomac Hills

Presbyterian Church, PCA



By Grace Alone ~ Through Faith Alone ~ In Christ Alone

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John 19:17-22

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English Standard Version

“The Crucifixion of Christ”

This is the 68th sermon in the series on the New Testament book of John entitled,
“The Gospel of Christ.”

John 19:17-22

“So they took Jesus, 17 and He went out, bearing His own cross, to the place called the place of a skull, which in Aramaic is called Golgotha. 18 There they crucified Him, and with Him two others, one on either side, and Jesus between them. 19 Pilate also wrote an inscription and put it on the cross. It read, ‘Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.’ 20 Many of the Jews read this inscription, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and it was written in Aramaic, in Latin, and in Greek. 21 So the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, ‘Do not write, ‘The King of the Jews,’ but rather, ‘This man said, I am King of the Jews.’” 22 Pilate answered, ‘What I have written I have written.’”

INTRODUCTION: *Angels with Dirty Faces*¹

The stories that always seem to move us most deeply are those in which someone faces irreversible **loss** or **death** in order to bring **life** to someone else. There is almost no popular movie that doesn’t make some version of this its main theme. One famous example, though much older, and I doubt that many people here have seen this movie, is the movie *Angels with Dirty Faces*. It starred James Cagney, and he played a character named Rocky Sullivan, a celebrity criminal who’s the idol of all the young juvenile delinquents in the city. He is **in** prison ... and he’s about to go to the electric chair. The night before his execution he’s visited by his boyhood friend, Jerry, played by Pat O’Brien, who is now a priest trying to save inner-city kids from a life of crime. Jerry makes a shocking request, but he says it’s the **only way** that the kids he’s working with can be turned away from the destructive path they’ve chosen.

Jerry says this to Rocky, *“I want you to let them down. You see, you’ve been a hero to these kids, and hundreds of others, all through your life — and now you’re gonna be a glorified*

¹ The Introduction is adapted from *The Reason for God* by Tim Keller, pages 198-200.

hero in death, and I want to prevent that, Rocky. They've got to **despise** your memory. They've got to be **ashamed** of you."

Rocky is just incredulous.

"You asking me to pull an act, turn yellow, so those kids will think I'm no good. ... You ask me to throw away the only thing I've got left. ... You ask me to crawl on my belly — the last thing I do in life. ... Nothing doing. You're asking too much. ... You want to help those kids, you got to think about some other way."

Jerry is calling Rocky to do the Great Reversal, the substitutionary sacrifice. If you hold on to your dignity, he says, they'll die in shame. If you die in shame, relinquish your glory, the boys' lives can be saved. It's the only way to release his boys from their hero worship.

Rocky refuses.

But the next morning he walks to the execution chamber. Suddenly he begins to cry out for mercy in cowardly hysterics, and dies in humiliation, making the ultimate sacrifice. Movie viewers are always stunned. If you've ever seen it, it will leave you shaken and make you want to live your life differently.

Such is the life-affecting power of story.

Moving? Yes ... but the Gospel goes one better. These stories of sacrifice affect us emotionally ... very much so. You usually come away resolving to live more courageously and unselfishly. However, it is rare that we follow through on those resolutions. The stories move my emotions and prick my conscience, but the basic patterns of my heart remain largely unchanged.

The Gospel, however, is not just a fictional story about someone else. It's a true story about us. We're actually in it. We are those delinquent boys, and to save us Jesus gave up something infinitely greater than being a celebrity. In addition, Jesus has come to us in our prison and despite our unwillingness to be saved has taken our place.

Observing stories from the outside can emotionally affect us, but when we realize that we're actually inside Jesus' story, that can change us. And the point of change for us, the point of impact for us, is at the cross. That is where we discover just how much Jesus loves us. That is where we realize that we have a God who would let Himself be nailed to a cross for those He loved. And He would dare to die there for those He loved ... **for us**.

So, let's take a look at this cross ... at this ...

v. 17-18: CRUCIFIXION²

"So they took Jesus, 17 and He went out, bearing His own cross, to the place called the place of a skull, which in Aramaic is called Golgotha. 18 There they crucified Him, and with Him two others, one on either side, and Jesus between them.

At the end of last week's passage, we read, **John 19:16**, "So he [Pilate] delivered Him [Jesus] over to them to be crucified." The trial of Jesus would have formally concluded with Pilate pronouncing the formula 'Ibis ad crucem' ('**You will go to the cross**'). Jesus would then immediately fall into the custody of the 'execution squad' comprising four Roman soldiers. The condemned man was forced to carry, normally not the **entire** cross, but the horizontal crosspiece

2 The Exposition of the text is adapted from *The Message of John : Here Is Your King!* (The Bible Speaks Today), by Bruce Milne, pages 276ff; *Preaching the Word: John* by R. Kent Hughes, pages 437-442; the article "Witnesses to the King" by James Dennison, Westminster Theological Seminary in California, www.kerux.com; the sermon "The Crucifixion – part 1" by John MacArthur, Grace Community Church, Sun Valley, CA, www.biblebb.com; *Reflections on the Gospel of John, Vol. 4* by Leon Morris, pages 654-661; *The Gospel According to John* by D.A. Carson, pages 608-611. C.S. Lewis quote is taken from his book *The Four Loves*, page 176.

— called the *patibulum*. It's likely, since crucifixions were relatively common, that the upright posts were permanently in place at the execution site just beside the main highway outside the city.

As Jesus sets off on that last terrible journey, carrying the wooden beam, we witness a re-enactment of the scene on Mount Moriah (the very hill on which the city of Jerusalem stood) when another son carried the wood for an altar on which he was to be secured as the victim.

Genesis 22:5-9, “*Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you."* **6** *And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together.* **7** *And Isaac said to his father Abraham, "My father!" And he said, "Here am I, my son." He said, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?"* **8** *Abraham said, "God will provide for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So they went both of them together.* **9** *When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood.”*

Isaac was what we call a “type” of Christ, a foreshadowing in the Old Testament of the New Testament. Isaac was a picture of Christ, because he was to be given as a sacrifice, just as Christ was. And, as we see in Genesis 22:6, Isaac bore his own wood to his near execution, just as Jesus bore His cross to His execution.

The Romans, never blind to the deterrent value of punishment, usually prescribed a roundabout route to the execution site, with a placard announcing the crime carried in front. Certainly the journey was profoundly draining following the scourging that Jesus went through, and Matthew tells us of Jesus collapsing under the crossbeam and requiring assistance to reach the site. The place of execution was named Golgotha, ‘The Place of a Skull’, probably a small hill at the entrance to the city. And verse 18 says, “*There they crucified Him.*”

The victim was laid out on the crossbeam and fixed to it by iron nails driven through the top of the wrists; the cross was then raised, and the feet, placed one over the other, nailed below. The victim was then left to die. This could take days; a long, slow, agonizing death, ended finally by suffocation as the victim, unable any longer push up with his feet in order to relieve the constriction of the chest, mercifully expired.

Invented by the Persians, developed by the Carthaginians, perfected by the Romans, such was crucifixion. Josephus refers to it as ‘*the most wretched of deaths*’. Cicero called it ‘*a most cruel and terrible penalty ... incapable of description by any word, for there is none fit to describe it*’. So terrible was crucifixion that no Roman was permitted to undergo it, however heinous his crime.

In undergoing this, Christ expressed how much He loved us. C.S. Lewis described it like this, as only he can ... *the buzzing cloud of flies about the cross, the flayed back pressed against the uneven stake, the nails driven through the medial nerves, the repeated torture of back and arms as it is time after time, for breath's sake, hitched up. If I may dare the biological image, God is a "host" who deliberately creates his own parasites; causes us to be that we may exploit and "take advantage of" him. Herein is love. This is the diagram of Love himself, the inventor of all loves.*

We see the diagram of love and its cost — the Son of God hanging by His arms, His muscles unable to respond. Jesus began agonized prayers as He struggled upward for breath and slumped downward again in exhaustion. He fights to raise Himself just to get one short breath. For several hours, Jesus moved slowly up and down the cross, snatching another breath, scraping His raw back with each move. Finally carbon dioxide builds up in the lungs and the

bloodstream, and the cramps partially subside. Intermittently He pushes Himself upward to exhale and gain a little more oxygen. The legacy of death by crucifixion is still with us in the word '**excruciating**,' which literally means 'out of the cross.'

This is the diagram of love. Yet, the true depth and cost of His love resides in His willingness to bear our sins and to suffer separation from His beloved Father. We must passionately weave this truth into the fibers of our consciousness.

Graham Greene, in his novel *The Heart of the Matter*, describes his principal character, Police Lieutenant Scobie, listening in on a dispassionate conversation about the suicide of an acquaintance. The men are discussing whether their deceased friend chose the best way to kill himself. As Lieutenant Scobie examines the man's few belongings and listens, he says to himself quietly, "*Through two thousand years ... we have discussed Christ's agony in just this disinterested way.*"

Lt. Scobie is right. It's too easy to become desensitized to the reality. We hear repeated readings of the crucifixion account. We daily watch scenes of real violence, at least on television, as we pass the potatoes and gravy. As Christians we must steel ourselves **against becoming desensitized**. Christ's passion was real. True, we should not be overcome by a morbid preoccupation with the gore of the cross. Still, Christ's agony must never become a matter of dispassionate interest. Looking at the cross should never become a mere clinical exam. His physical sufferings have always been a window through which we see His greater agony as He bore the penalty for our sin.

However, I find it interesting that this description of crucifixion appears nowhere in the Bible. Not one of the Gospel writers tries to arouse our pity or play with our emotions (unlike some preachers). They all content themselves with a simple statement of the facts. The Bible doesn't tell us exactly what happened, it doesn't describe the torture, it doesn't describe the suffering, it just matter of factly says that it happened.

Amid the unfolding horror we can't lose sight of the **ultimate perspective**, which is **victory**, not **defeat**. Jesus has consistently struck this note; His death will be a '**lifting up**' on the cross, an act of elevation as well as of identification.

John 3:14, "*And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.*"

John 8:28, "*So Jesus said to them, "When you have **lifted up the Son of Man**, then you will know that I am He, and that I do nothing on My own authority, but speak just as the Father taught Me."*

John 12:32-33, "*And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to Myself." 33 He said this to show by what kind of death He was going to die.*"

John is careful to tell us that two others were crucified with the Savior, verse 18, "*There they crucified Him, and with Him two others, one on either side, and Jesus between them.*" If the cross is a diagram of His love, as C.S. Lewis says, then the positioning of the crosses is a diagram of how His love is dispensed to the world. The Lord's enemies intended the positioning of the crosses to be His final **disgrace** — Christ between two convicted robbers as if He were the worst. Instead of being a disgrace, however, that arrangement was a fulfillment of **Isaiah 53:12b**, "*... He poured out His soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet He bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors.*"

Each of the Gospel writers includes this because, from their point of view, it was important that when He died Jesus was **one with sinful people**. He didn't come to live just among the pious. He came to call sinners to repentance, and one of the insults hurled at Him was that He was a "friend of sinners." For the writers of the Gospels this wasn't an insult, but the

expression of an important truth. Jesus came to save sinners. He died to save them, and the fact that on the cross He hung between people who were obviously sinners graphically illustrated that truth. His death was **a death on behalf of sinners**, and His position when He died brought that out for those who had eyes to see. The reality was that this wasn't a disgrace, but an overt act of overwhelming love.

Not only was Jesus' cross a diagram of His love, but His cross became His throne. His crucifixion is, in reality, His ...

v. 19-22: CORONATION³

"Pilate also wrote an inscription and put it on the cross. It read, 'Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.'" 20 Many of the Jews read this inscription, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and it was written in Aramaic, in Latin, and in Greek. 21 So the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, 'Do not write, 'The King of the Jews,' but rather, 'This man said, I am King of the Jews.' " 22 Pilate answered, "What I have written I have written.""

Ironically, it is not the priestly or prophetic aspect of the work of Christ which John highlights in his narrative of the crucifixion. Rather it is the **kingly** role of Christ as the dying Savior which dominates John's account of our Lord's final hours. I say **ironic** because John's gospel does **not** feature the kingdom of God; nor does he focus upon Christ's claim to be the coming king — until chapter 18. Whereas Matthew, Mark, and Luke from the very beginning of their gospels describe Jesus proclaiming the nearness of the kingdom of heaven — the miracles of Christ as signs of the kingdom breaking-in to history — the parables (which are largely absent from John) — as parables of the kingdom. The kingdom of God and the kingship of Christ are written boldly over the first three gospels. But John's gospel is remarkable for few references to this theme — **until chapter 18**; and then, in the short space of chapters 18 and 19, the words **"king"** and **"kingdom"** literally explode on the page.

The arrest and trial of Jesus before Pilate is full of regal language: **John 18:36-37**, *"Jesus answered, 'My **kingdom** is not of this world. If my **kingdom** were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my **kingdom** is not from the world.'" 37 Then Pilate said to him, "So you are a **king**?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a **king**. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice."*

And then in **John 19:15**, *"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."*

John only mentions the words **"king"** and **"kingdom"** six times prior to chapter 18, and then the Greek words for king and kingdom appear 16 times in chapters 18 and 19. For seventeen chapters, the words **"king"** and **"kingdom"** are virtually non-existent in John. Now the words jump out at us. In fact, for the trial and crucifixion narrative, it would seem that kingship is more important in John's gospel than it was for Matthew, Mark and Luke. And so when we read John's passion narrative—that is, his account of Christ's trial and death—we need to remember that the kingship of Christ and the kingdom of Christ are of **central importance**.

John certainly doesn't want us to miss this theme during the scourging of Christ. Jesus is given a crown — He's given a royal robe — He's given royal homage — **"Hail, King of the Jews."** In this mock coronation, Jesus submits to ridicule and injustice. But if the 19th chapter begins with a mock coronation, it continues with the presentation of the king to His royal

³ A small part of this section is taken from Expositions of Holy Scripture, Vol. 11 by Alexander Maclaren, page 263.

subjects. Jesus is led out in royal garb to receive the acclamation of His subjects. When they utterly reject Him, the royal procession begins. It is the coronation route — a road lined with onlookers — shouting, clamoring, crying out — pressing for a closer look at the man who would be king — at the king who shoulders His cross — at the king who trudges weary steps to His throne — indeed, at the king who carries His throne upon His back — at the king who carries His throne outside the gate — outside the wall to Golgotha. And there the royal procession ends; the enthronement of the king begins. He mounts His throne, affixed by nails and spikes.

John adds these details that further verify himself as an eyewitness. First, there is the matter of the inscription over Jesus' head, the one carried in front of Him on His journey through the city. Verse 19 tells us that *"It read, 'Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.'"* And it was written in the three great languages of the day: Aramaic (the local dialect of Hebrew), Latin, and Greek. The title incensed the Jewish leaders and they protested to Pilate in verse 21. But vacillating Pilate is for once relentless. It is a final gesture of contempt. If this is their king, what does it say of them as a nation? Perhaps in addition it expresses Pilate's dim yet authentic recognition that in some sense **Jesus actually is a king.**

The Palm Sunday pilgrims had set the scene for the events of the following weekend, **John 12:15**, *"Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!"* So the words of Pilate's verdict interpret the crucifixion as John depicts it, **John 19:14**, *"Now it was the day of Preparation of the Passover. It was about the sixth hour. He said to the Jews, 'Behold your King!'"* In fact, every New Testament reference to Christ's dominion is accompanied by a reference to His cross. It is therefore nothing but the simple truth that is put on the sign over His head as He hangs there, *"Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews."*

Several aspects of his kingship are particularly reflected in this section.

- ***He is a hidden king***

The claims for Jesus' reign are, on the surface, blatant fraud. Never was a person less kingly, or possessed of so little evidence to support His claim, than Jesus at this moment. One only needs to compare, even in the most superficial way, the account of the splendors of Solomon's kingdom in 1 Kings 7–10 with the opening verses of John 19 to sense the absurdity of it. The Roman soldiers as they mockingly bow before Him epitomize the audacity of the claim, yet for the evangelist, they speak the truth, **John 19:3**, *"They came up to Him, saying, 'Hail, King of the Jews!'" and struck Him with their hands.*"

From a purely rational standpoint, Jesus' story is one of **tragic failure**. It can see no God in the cross. Only through the revealing Spirit can the victory of the cross be recognized. This hiddenness needs to be acknowledged. There are times when we are called to believe, not **'because of'**, but **in spite of**. To follow Jesus Christ is to take up a cross, and that means there may be times when life's circumstances contradict our claims as surely as they did for Jesus at Calvary.

However, despite being a hidden King, we also see that ...

- ***He is a universal king***

The three different languages in which Jesus' kingship was proclaimed embrace three great sectors of human experience.

It was written in ***Greek***, the language associated historically with the development of culture, the pursuit of beauty of form and thought. The church at times has turned a jaundiced eye upon all things artistic and creative. But the world of culture is a world Christ claims no less than any other. Human creativity is the gift of Him who made all things, who is **the most creative**. If creative gifts and instincts are brought to His feet He will ennoble and enrich them, and make them the vehicle of His praise.

It was written in *Latin*, the language of government, law and institutions. Too often the church appears marginalized, unwilling to get involved in the messy, sometimes evil, world of business, politics, and power. But Christ claims that world as his own too, and He's able, through lives surrendered to His lordship, to bring the salt and light of His kingdom to the arenas of public life.

It was written in *Aramaic*, a dialect of *Hebrew*, which was the language of religion. Religion is once again a relatively respectable component in the popular quest for meaning. But the world of religion is today a chaotic pantheon of spiritual ideas, of gurus, mediums, and mythologies. Christ claims this world as His own. He alone is the truth; He calls us to acknowledge Him and then, in His name, to seek to summon the lost millions who follow the empty gods of other religious visions to bow the knee before this king who is '*exalted*' on a cross. Jesus still seeks today the realization of His claim, "*And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to Myself.*"

By virtue of His rule from the cross, Christ rightfully makes demands on His followers. First and foremost, He demands that **we** yield to His lordship, which **none** of us do naturally, as one of Winston Churchill's famous one-liners illustrates so well. It was directed to Sir Stafford Cripps, one of his political opponents. One day as Cripps was passing by, Churchill said, "There, but for the grace of God, goes God."

But that's true — for all of us. If not for the constant work of God's grace in our lives, we would assume the lordship of our own lives. Christ by virtue of His sacrifice on the cross demands absolute submission. He demands to live our lives for us! Which is exactly what the Apostle Paul tells us in **Galatians 2:19-20**, "*For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.*"

Not only that, but He demands that we take up our cross and follow Him. Again, the details of the cross were well-known to the people of that day. *Take up the cross* was a colloquialism for dying to yourself, which everyone understood.

Matthew 10:38, "*And whoever does not **take his cross** and follow Me is not worthy of Me.*"

Matthew 16:24, "*Then Jesus told His disciples, "If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself and **take up his cross** and follow Me.*"

Luke 14:27, "*Whoever does not **bear his own cross** and come after Me cannot be My disciple.*"

CONCLUSION: A Universal Symbol⁴

A universally acceptable Christian symbol would obviously need to speak of Jesus Christ, but there was a wide range of possibilities.

Christians might have chosen the **manger** in which the baby Jesus was laid, or the carpenter's **bench** at which He worked as a young man in Nazareth, dignifying manual labor, or the **boat** from which He taught the crowds in Galilee, or the **apron** He wore when washing the apostles' feet, which would have spoken of His spirit of humble service.

Then there was the **stone**, which, having been rolled from the mouth of Joseph's tomb and would have proclaimed His resurrection. Other possibilities were the **throne**, the symbol of divine sovereignty, which John in his vision of heaven saw that Jesus was sharing, or the **dove**, the symbol of the Holy Spirit sent from heaven on the day of Pentecost. Any of these symbols

⁴ Part of the conclusion is comes from *The Message of Galatians* by John R. W. Stott, page 74 and *The Cross of Christ* by John R. W. Stott, page 21. This is probably the best book on the meaning of the Cross for the Christian. All of us would benefit from reading it.

would have been suitable as a pointer to some aspect of the ministry of the Lord.

But instead the chosen symbol came to be a simple **cross**. Its two bars were already a cosmic symbol from remote antiquity of the axis between heaven and earth. But its choice by Christians had a more specific explanation. They wished to commemorate as **central** to their understanding of Jesus neither His birth nor His youth, neither His teaching nor His service, neither His resurrection nor His reign, nor His gift of the Spirit, but His **death**, **His crucifixion**.

Hanging there between Heaven and earth, Jesus became the sole reconciling force between God and every person who would ever live. With His own blood, Jesus paid the penalty for our sins and drew us back under the covering of grace. The Apostle Peter would emphasize this again and again, **1 Peter 2:24**, *“He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By His wounds you have been healed.”*

Healing through wounding; wholeness through brokenness. That is the way of the cross – the way of Jesus. It is the way of the upside-down kingdom, where the King dies for His subjects.

At the cross. Today ... if your eyes should happen to fall on that precious symbol, remember ... Jesus was here. And He was lifted up for you.

The gospel is Christ crucified; His finished work on the cross. And to preach the gospel is publicly to portray Christ as crucified. The gospel is not good news primarily of a baby in a manger, a young man at a carpenter's bench, a preacher in the fields of Galilee, or even an empty tomb. The gospel concerns Christ upon His cross. Only when, **Galatians 3:1**, *“... before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified”* is the gospel preached.

This is the **gospel** — Jesus dying on the cross as a substitute **for you**.

As your substitute, He took all your sins upon Himself, then gave you His life and righteousness. Jesus' gospel is **simple**. He says, “It's My life for yours. It's My righteousness for your sin. Will you take it? There is **no other way**.”

And all who will take it said, “Amen.”

You need to pray.

Take a moment to do that, and then I'll close.

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1 Peter 2:24

“He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By His wounds you have been healed.”