

John 18–19 Study Guide for Good Friday

Jesus the Victor, Not the Victim

John 18:1-19:42 NRSV

For our Good Friday service, we have a full reading of the story of Jesus' crucifixion, death, and burial. The story begins with the betrayal and arrest of Jesus where he is bound and led through a series of false accusations, beatings, and ultimately his crucifixion and death. Through the story, we also have interspersed three accounts of Peter's denial of Jesus. The story could be, and has been, understood as a tragic tale of an innocent man caught up in the wheels of injustice, malice, and violence.

However, that is not how the gospel writers, like John, tell the story. Jesus is not a victim. What's more, he is fully in charge of what transpires. He is not caught up in a series of unfortunate events beyond his control. Early in the reading we are told that Jesus knew "all that was to happen to him." Yet he pressed forward, even stoking the flame as he went. Jesus was on the road to claiming victory over sin, death, and evil.

So, as we read the story in its entirety this evening, let John tell us the story without any of our current cultural interruptions. What we will find is a story of a Savior and King like no other. So, sit back, and let us hear what John has to proclaim about this man named Jesus.

John 18:1–19:42 — After Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his disciples across the Kidron Valley to a place where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered. Now Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place because Jesus often met there with his disciples. So Judas brought a detachment of soldiers together with police from the chief priests and the Pharisees, and they came there with lanterns and torches and weapons. Then Jesus, knowing all that was to happen to him, came forward and asked them,

“Whom are you looking for?” They answered, “Jesus of Nazareth.” Jesus replied, “I am he.” Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them. When Jesus said to them, “I am he,” they stepped back and fell to the ground. Again he asked them, “Whom are you looking for?” And they said, “Jesus of Nazareth.” Jesus answered, “I told you that I am he. So if you are looking for me, let these people go.” This was to fulfill the word that he had spoken, “I did not lose a single one of those whom you gave me.” Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it, struck the high priest’s slave, and cut off his right ear. The slave’s name was Malchus. Jesus said to Peter, “Put your sword back into its sheath. Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?”

So the soldiers, their officer, and the Jewish police arrested Jesus and bound him. First they took him to Annas, who was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest that year. Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jews that it was better to have one person die for the people.

Simon Peter and another disciple followed Jesus. Since that disciple was known to the high priest, he went with Jesus into the courtyard of the high priest, but Peter was standing outside at the gate. So the other disciple, who was known to the high priest, went out, spoke to the woman who guarded the gate, and brought Peter in. The woman said to Peter, “You are not also one of this man’s disciples, are you?” He said, “I am not.” Now the slaves and the police had made a charcoal fire because it was cold, and they were standing around it and warming themselves. Peter also was standing with them and warming himself.

Then the high priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and about his

teaching. Jesus answered, "I have spoken openly to the world; I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret. Why do you ask me? Ask those who heard what I said to them; they know what I said." When he had said this, one of the police standing nearby struck Jesus on the face, saying, "Is that how you answer the high priest?" Jesus answered, "If I have spoken wrongly, testify to the wrong. But if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?" Then Annas sent him bound to Caiaphas the high priest.

Now Simon Peter was standing and warming himself. They asked him, "You are not also one of his disciples, are you?" He denied it and said, "I am not." One of the slaves of the high priest, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, asked, "Did I not see you in the garden with him?" Again Peter denied it, and at that moment the cock crowed.

Then they took Jesus from Caiaphas to Pilate's headquarters. It was early in the morning. They themselves did not enter the headquarters, so as to avoid ritual defilement and to be able to eat the Passover. So Pilate went out to them and said, "What accusation do you bring against this man?" They answered, "If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you." Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and judge him according to your law." The Jews replied, "We are not permitted to put anyone to death." (This was to fulfill what Jesus had said when he indicated the kind of death he was to die.) Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" Pilate replied, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?" Jesus answered,

“My kingdom does not belong to this world. If my kingdom belonged to this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.” Pilate asked him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” Pilate asked him, “What is truth?”

After he had said this, he went out to the Jews again and told them, “I find no case against him. But you have a custom that I release someone for you at the Passover. Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?”⁴⁰ They shouted in reply, “Not this man but Barabbas!” Now Barabbas was a rebel.

Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. And the soldiers wove a crown of thorns and put it on his head, and they dressed him in a purple robe. They kept coming up to him, saying, “Hail, King of the Jews!” and striking him on the face. Pilate went out again and said to them, “Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no case against 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 police saw him, they shouted, “Crucify him! Crucify him!” Pilate said to them, “Take him yourselves and crucify him; I find no case against him.” The Jews answered him, “We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has claimed to be the Son of God.” Now when Pilate heard this, he was more afraid than ever. He entered his headquarters again and asked Jesus, “Where are you from?” But Jesus gave him no answer. Pilate therefore said to him, “Do you refuse to 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 the one who handed me over to

you is guilty of a greater sin." From then on Pilate tried to release him, but the Jews cried out, "If you release this man, you are no friend of Caesar. Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against Caesar." When Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus outside and sat on the judge's bench at a place called The Stone Pavement, or in Hebrew Gabbatha. Now it was the day of Preparation for the Passover, and it was about noon. He said to the Jews, "Here is your King!" They cried out, "Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!" Pilate asked 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.

So they took Jesus, and carrying the cross by himself he went out to what is called the Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha. There they crucified him and with him two others, one on either side, with Jesus between them. Pilate also had an inscription written and put on the cross. It read, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews." Many of the Jews read this inscription because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and it was written in Hebrew, in Latin, and in Greek. Then the chief priests of the Jews 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." When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his clothes and divided them into four parts, one for each soldier. They also took his tunic; now the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from the top. So they said to one another, "Let us not tear it but cast lots for it to see who will get it." This was to fulfill what the scripture says,

"They divided my clothes among themselves,
and for my clothing they cast lots."

And that is what the soldiers did. Meanwhile, standing near 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 beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home. After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfill the scripture), "I am thirsty." A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the wine, he said, "It is finished." Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

Since it was the day of Preparation, the Jews did not want the bodies left on the cross during the Sabbath, especially because that Sabbath was a day of great solemnity. So they asked Pilate to have the legs of the crucified men broken and the bodies removed. Then 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. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out. (He who saw this has testified so that you also may believe. His testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth, so that you also may continue to believe.) These things occurred so that the scripture might be fulfilled, "None of his bones shall be broken." And again another passage of scripture says, "They will look on the one whom they have pierced."

After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission, so he came and removed his

body. Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews. Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

As we spend a few moments of reflection upon this text we take note that Jesus did not go to Calvary as a helpless casualty of circumstance. Did you notice how Jesus was always calling the shots. He was clearly in control of every aspect of the journey to the cross. Nothing took him by surprise and he was never reacting to what was going on around him. Everyone around him was reacting to him. Therefore, the writer of Hebrews could write, "For the joy set before him, he endured the cross." Not because the suffering itself was pleasant, for it was truly agonizing no doubt. But Jesus knew what his self-giving sacrifice would accomplish. He freely offered his life so that we might share in his relationship he has with the Father. He was no fool, and he had no regrets. The price was worth paying, and he did it with joy.

Maybe some of you here tonight have heard this story told as if Jesus were a tragic victim like someone caught in a terrible accident of history or trapped in a cosmic dilemma beyond his control. Maybe you have heard some emotional appeals that cast Jesus, and even his Father as passive victims to forces stronger than themselves leaving us to respond with pity rather than praise.

But Jesus is not the tragic hero these misguided portrayals paint. He is the victorious Servant-King. He moves with purpose, intention, and sovereign authority. John begins the story with a betrayal in one garden and ends it with Jesus' burial in

another. Through it all Jesus is never out of control or overpowered. He is the true Gardener who remains faithful to his Father and plants himself as the seed that will spring up into new life. He knows exactly what awaits him, and he moves toward it with unwavering determination, confident in the joy that lies beyond the suffering.

We should also be reminded that the Father and Son were not in some way on different pages regarding the cross. The Father wasn't some stern judge venting wrath on a reluctant Son. And the Son wasn't using his suffering as an attempt to persuade an angry Father to be merciful to sinners. This is not a courtroom drama where Jesus manipulates divine justice. Such distortions fracture the unity of the Trinity and introduce a tragic tension into the heart of the gospel. But Scripture offers no such picture. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are never at odds. They share one will, one purpose, and one mission to reach down in Jesus Christ for our salvation.

Did you notice in the story the several instances that certain individuals became unwitting proclaimers of the gospel and who Jesus is? For example, we are told that "Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jews that it was better to have one person die for the people." Caiaphas said far more than he realized. Also, the account of Pilate writing the inscription "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews" and placing it on the cross. The chief priests were not happy with that claim of truth. But they could not persuade Pilate to change his inscription to "This man said, I am King of the Jews." Even as Jesus' hands are nailed to the cross you can still see a divine finger using events to point to who Jesus is. Also, there are the accounts of fulfilled scripture that bear witness and show a divine sovereignty at work. It's difficult to read the story and assume these details are just accidental or coincidence. No, nothing is happening to Jesus outside of God's oversight. Jesus is right where he wants to be doing his Father's will. Nothing by chance is occurring. What we are

seeing in the story is a deliberate sending by the Father of the Son in the power of the Spirit. The Son offers himself freely, joyfully, unblemished, through the eternal Spirit. And the Spirit strengthens the Son to undo evil, liberate the oppressed, and open blind eyes. This is the Triune God acting in perfect unity to rescue us. No accidents or bad luck, but rather purposeful intent and will.

So, tonight as we recount the story of Good Friday, we do not gather for a pity-filled lament. We gather in awe, thanksgiving, and worship, knowing Jesus was the victor and not the victim and he gives us a victory to proclaim. May we leave tonight with the reminder that Father, Son, and Spirit were joyfully committed to saving us and bringing us into their own life of communion. In that assurance, we move forward in anticipation of a grand celebration on Easter morning. Amen!

Discussion Questions

- Have you heard the story of Jesus' death and crucifixion in a way that painted Jesus as a helpless victim? Have you heard the story told in such a way that the Father is made out to be a ruthless tyrant who must be appeased by the payment of death? Discuss how these depictions affect your understanding of who God is and what he has done for us in Jesus Christ.
- By reading the story with the understanding that Jesus is the victor and not a victim, were there any particular parts that stood out to you that confirmed this truth? Share!
- What affect does it have in knowing that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all of one mind, will, and purpose in the work done in Jesus on the cross?
- Any further observations from the story you would like to share?