

## That You May Believe in the Cross, Part 3

John 19:1-22

Pastor Jeremy Cagle, November 18, 2018

Please turn with me to the Gospel of John. And as we're doing that, if you're joining us for the first time today, we're in a series in the Gospel of John called the "That You May Believe" series. Because John says that he wrote this book so that you may believe. That's the point of the Gospel of John. I just want to read this to you. If you've been with us, this is familiar to you, but at the end of the book in chapter 20:30 through 31 John says, "Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name." "That's why I wrote this book," John says. "That's why it's in the Bible, so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ and have life in His name."

We've been in this series since the month of June. We've spent a lot of time in this, and I've told you before, the word "believe" occurs 96 times in this Gospel. It's about four times per chapter. You see the word "believe" over and over and over again. And it's the word *pisteuo* in Greek, which means "to be convinced of something" or "to acknowledge it as true". When we say, "I believe something," we use it for motivational purposes to say, "I believe I can do it. I believe I can make the team or pass the test." John uses it another way to say, "I believe this is true. I believe it's a fact." The former chief of the Los Angeles Police Department tells how he would put bulletproof vests on mannequins and fire rounds at them to show that they were safe. And then afterwards, he would ask the officers, "Okay, who believes it? Who wants to wear one now?" You see, that's the meaning of this word. When you believe something, you put it on. You trust it with your life. John says you need to do that with Jesus Christ. And you especially need to do that with the cross.

John wrote about a lot of things in this Gospel, but one thing he comes back to over and over and over again is the cross and Jesus' death, because that's what saves you. Just to introduce this a little bit, to say a few words about the cross (we sang about it this morning), just to talk about it a little bit as we begin this, it's hard to explain how repulsive the cross was to a first century audience. It's kind of hard to wrap your minds around how ugly it was. And we have crosses on our buildings, we wear them around our necks. We sing about them, right? You hear sermons about the cross. They didn't do that in the first century. Nobody talked about the cross openly because it was repulsive to them. It was very, very, very ugly.

The Roman Orator Cicero, writing about a century before Jesus, writing about 100 years before the Gospel of John, said this about the cross. He said,

To bind a Roman citizen is a crime. To flog him is an abomination. To kill him is an act of murder. But to crucify him, there is no word to describe so horrible a deed. So, the very word cross should be removed from us; for it's not only the act of crucifixion, but the thought of it that's unworthy of a Roman citizen.

Cicero had seen a crucifixion before. He'd probably seen multiple ones. He had seen someone die on the cross and he said, "That's unworthy of a Roman citizen to even think about that."

Julius Caesar also writing at this time in one of his journals (the former Roman emperor) tells about the time he was captured by pirates. They held him for ransom for about a month until he got free. And when he did, he said, "I did the worst thing I could think of to them - I crucified them." The emperor of the Roman world who had all means of torture at his disposal said, "The worst thing I could do to these pirates was to nail them to a cross."

You see, we shoot people today when we want to hurt them or we give them a lethal injection needle to make it quick and painless. In the first century, there was nothing quick and painless about a cross. In fact, they even invented a word to describe the pain of this. It was the word *ex crucio*, which means "out of the cross". Some of you have had excruciating pain before. Do you ever use that word? Pain that's too horrible for words, that's what this word means. Crucifixion was excruciating. It was so painful, they had to invent a word for it.

And to think that God would do this to His Son was unheard of in the first century. That's too much. To think that God would do anything to save us was too much because to the ancient people, God didn't get involved in our problems. He didn't do anything to help us. But the New Testament says He died on a cross.

John Stott said, "The fact that the cross became a symbol for the Christian faith can mean only one thing, and that is that Jesus actually died on it. Because if it didn't happen, who would make it up? Who would invent such a death for the Son of God?" And this is why John spends so much time talking about it. This is why he refers to it over and over and over again, because this is what saves us.

Just to show you what he said, to get you caught up to speed. If you look in chapter 18:1 through 3 ... this is about where we're at in the Gospel of John, a little past this, but I want to build up to it. Chapter 18:1 through 3 says,

1 When Jesus had spoken these words, He went forth with His disciples over the ravine of the Kidron, where there was a garden, which He entered with His disciples. 2 Now Judas also, who was betraying Him, knew the place, for Jesus had often met there with His disciples. 3 Judas then, having received the Roman cohort and officers from the chief priests and Pharisees, came there with lanterns and torches and weapons.

As John is giving his account of the cross, he puts it into stages, and the first stage was this right here. It was Jesus' arrest. That's how the cross starts; is with His arrest.

Verse 3 says, Judas brought a Roman cohort to arrest Him. I've told you before that referred to a detachment of 600 soldiers, 600 armed men. And it also says he brought some officers from the chief priests and Pharisees, which would have brought this number to about a thousand. If the Romans brought 600 men with them, the Jews would have brought close to that amount to even the odds, bringing the number to about a thousand; a thousand men to arrest one, a thousand

armed men to arrest one unarmed carpenter. Which sounds intimidating until you go on and read that He threw them all to the ground.

If you look in verse 6, it says, “So when He said to them, ‘I am He,’ they drew back and fell to the ground.” That's kind of ironic because they came to throw Him to the ground, right? It's kind of funny to read that because they came to knock Him over and He does that to them instead. And what's interesting about this, is that when they get up, they go on and arrest Him. I don't know about you guys, but if that happened to me, I would have stopped for a minute and said, “Maybe I should rethink this. Maybe I've got the wrong guy.” And they went on to arrest Him. Anyway, this leads to the next stage of the crucifixion, and that is the trial.

They put Jesus on trial. To kill a man in ancient Israel, you had to try him first. You had to bring him before a judge. To execute him or crucify him, you had to have the approval of the law. So, they took Him to the high priest to get that. And I told you last time, there were six phases to this trial. There were six times Jesus appeared before a judge; three before the Jews, three before the Romans, because they couldn't find anything wrong with Him. They kept trying Him and trying Him and trying Him because they couldn't find anything to charge Him with. He was an innocent Man.

It gets even worse when you read that they beat Him as well. That was part of this trial. They hit Him over and over again. If you look down in verse 19 of chapter 18, just a little description of what they did to Him. It says, “The high priest then questioned Jesus about His disciples, and about His teaching. And Jesus answered him, ‘I've spoken openly to the world; I always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews come together; and I spoke nothing in secret. Why do you question Me?’” And then if you look down in verse 22, it says, “When He said this, one of the officers standing nearby struck Jesus, saying, ‘Is this the way You answer the high priest?’”

That was the first time Jesus opened His mouth at the trial, and what did they do? They hit Him. They struck Him in the face, as the Greek word indicates. The officers of the temple would carry clubs with them. They might have hit Him with one of those. And as you read the story, you see that they did it over and over and over again. They beat Him to a pulp. It was illegal for the Jews to strike a man in court. We have those same laws, I'm guessing, here in Canada. You could pay very heavy fines for this. In fact, you could pay up to a year's worth of wages for hitting a man on trial. And they did it to Jesus over and over and over again. And they also mocked Him, which was also illegal. Prosecutors were not to play on the emotions of the jury - and they did that.

In fact, it's so bad that by the time they brought Him to Pilate, Pilate says, “Why don't you just finish Him off?” If you look down in verse 29, it says they brought Him to Pilate. Pilate says, “‘What accusation do you bring against this Man?’ They answered and said to him, ‘If this Man were not an evildoer, we would not have delivered Him to you.’ So Pilate said to them, ‘Take Him yourselves, and judge Him according to your law.’” And why did he say that? Because they'd already done that. They'd already beat Him to a pulp. So Pilate says, “Why don't you just go finish Him off? What's the point of bringing Him here?”

I say all that because this is the point of the cross (as we're going to get into this this morning). This is the point of what He does here. The point is that God loves you enough to do this for you. The point is that the Lord loves you enough to be beaten over and over and over again for you, to save you. We forget that, don't we? We're coming to the end of 2018, we're wrapping up another year. It's kind of wild to think about, right? We got what, six weeks left in the calendar year? And some of you, as you look back on this last year, would have to say, it's been a bad year for you. Some of you would look back on this last year and say, "I don't want to ever do that again." It's been one disappointment after another. One let down after another. And you wonder if God still cares, if He still loves you. I want to remind you this morning that He does still love you. If you are in Christ, He does still care and you see this right here at the cross. He was willing to be beaten for your sins. He was willing to take your punishment on Himself.

Some of you need to remember this morning how great your salvation is. Because you look back on this past year and all you see is sin. You look back on 2018 and all you see is failure after failure after failure in your spiritual life. You can't make headway, you can't get any victory, you're discouraged and you wonder if victory is possible at all. You look at this, and I want to tell you victory is possible because of what Jesus Christ has done. Victory is possible through His death. Whatever you're going through this morning, wherever you're at in your life, we need to go back to the cross. Over and over again, the New Testament tells us to remember the cross, boast in the cross, lift high the cross.

If you were an average pagan in the first century and you heard people worshiping a crucified man, you would think they were insane. But you can't be saved without the cross. This is everything to us, which is why this is so important this morning.

To wrap our minds around this and to understand this today, we're going to talk more about Jesus' trial. Because the trial and the cross are intricately connected. You can't separate the two. We talked some about Jesus' trial last week, but we didn't get all the way through it. So, this morning we're going to kind of finish it off. And if you're taking notes, we're going to look at four phases to Jesus' trial, or four final phases to the trial. If you're taking notes, that's our outline for today; four final phases to this trial. And these are all before Pilate, the Governor of Judea. Jesus has been tried by the Jews, He has appeared before the high priest and the Sanhedrin. But now he's going to appear before the Romans to finish Him off. This is how the trial comes to a close. Next week, we'll talk extensively about the crucifixion itself. This week, let's just wrap up the trial.

The first final phase is this, it's the scourging of Jesus, the scourging of Jesus. Some of your translations are going to say "flogging". If you remember that quote from Cicero that I just gave you he said, "To flog a Roman citizen is an abomination." That's what this word refers to, and I'll say more about it in a minute.

Roman trials were tremendously brutal. If you were some type of royalty or a wealthy person, maybe they wouldn't be so bad. But if you were an ordinary person in the Roman Empire, or worse, if you were a slave or something like that, they were horrendously brutal. Not the execution, but the trial. Not the punishment, but the interrogation.

We have a principal in our courts today that says someone is innocent until proven guilty. They didn't have that back then. Back then, it was guilty until proven innocent. And you see this in Jesus' trial here. If you want to look at the end of chapter 18, just to kind of set the stage for this. Chapter 18:38 says, "When he had said this, Pilate went out again to the Jews and said to them, 'I find no guilt in Him.'" It might interest you to know that's the fourth time Pilate said that at Jesus' trial. He's going to tell the Jews six times in this passage, "I find no guilt in Him, I find no guilt in Him, I find no guilt in Him." This is the fourth of these.

And to prove that Jesus is innocent, Pilate offers a prisoner exchange. Some of you are familiar with the story, but in verses 39 through 40 Pilate says, "I find no guilt in Him," but verse 39, "But you have a custom that I release someone for you at the Passover; do you wish then that I release for you the King of the Jews?" So they cried out again, saying, 'Not this man, but Barabbas.' Now Barabbas was a robber." We don't know a whole lot about this tradition, but apparently, every Passover Feast, the Romans would release a prisoner. Pilate offers to release Jesus. They say they want Barabbas.

John calls him a robber. That's interesting because Matthew says he was a notorious prisoner and Mark and Luke say he was a murderer, an insurrectionist. In other words, this guy was as guilty as sin. This guy had a rap sheet a mile long. And the Jews said, "We want him to be free, kill Jesus." Pilate said, "He's innocent, He's done nothing wrong." The Jews say, "We don't care, give us Barabbas."

So, in verse 1 of chapter 19, it says this, "Pilate then took Jesus and scourged Him." It's a very short sentence in English and it doesn't say much, but to the original audience, it would have said quite a bit. The word "scourged" there is the Greek word *mastigao*, which referred to "whipping someone to the point of death". It referred to almost whipping the literal life out of them. This shows you how corrupt the Roman judicial system was because after pronouncing Him innocent, Pilate does this. He hasn't pronounced Him guilty yet. But His thinking was, "If I do this, if I whip Jesus brutally, the Jews will be satisfied and I won't have to kill Him."

Now what was the scourging like? I had to do a little study on this, and I came across this. Alexander Metherell was a research scientist at the University of California, who wrote extensively on the subject of the cross and the trial of Jesus. And he had a very interesting statement on scourging. I don't want to be too gruesome here, but I do want you to understand what this was like. So, let me just read this in its entirety.

Alexander Metherell said,

Roman floggings or scourgings were known to be terribly brutal. They usually consisted of 39 lashes, but frequently were more than that depending on the mood of the soldier giving the blows.

The soldier would use a whip of braided leather thongs with balls woven into them, known as the "cat of nine tails" because the balls were made out of nine different substances such as metal, glass, and bone. When the whip would strike the flesh, the balls would cause deep contusions or bruises, and they would cut the flesh severely.

The back would be so shredded that part of the spine was sometimes exposed by the deep, deep cuts. The whipping would have gone all the way from the shoulders down to the back, all the way to the back of the legs. It was horrible...

Some of you have seen Mel Gibson's movie, "The Passion of the Christ". And if you remember in that movie, they whipped Jesus and then they turned Him around and whip Him again. The whip that they would have used would have gone all the way to His stomach and come back and cut through His back, so they would not have turned Him around.

...One physician who studied Roman beatings (this is Alexander Metherell here speaking) said, "As the floggings continued, the lacerations would tear into the underlying skeletal muscles and produce ribbons of quivering bleeding flesh." A third century historian named Eusebius described the flogging this way, by saying, "The sufferer's veins were laid bare and the very muscles, sinews, and bowels of the victim were open to exposure."

Now again, I don't say that to be gruesome. Just to say this is what John is describing in this very short sentence. You can see why he was so brief with this. It was probably horrific to even write about it. John was at the trial. John saw this, but this is what Pilate did to Jesus. Before the trial was over, before he found Him guilty and said, "Crucify Him," he had Him scourged to the point where He looked like this. I mention the movies about the cross. We've all seen those movies with Jesus on the cross with a little bit of blood here and a little bit of blood there. You wouldn't put this on a movie screen. Nobody would watch it.

And I bring this up to say, this is how much God hates sin. I mean, if we're going to apply this to our lives, this is the application. This is how much He hates it: enough to scourge it, enough to whip it to death. Several years ago, a well-known Christian leader sat down with the president of one of the leading television stations in the US and he said, "You know, if you played better shows, your ratings would go up. If you did more Christian family programming, the church would watch it more." And the network president said, "What are you talking about? The church watches the same thing the world does." He says, "If you do studies on this, there's no difference in the audiences." I think that's because we forget this. We forget how much God hates sin. I'm not saying you shouldn't watch TV, it's fine if you do. I'm just saying you shouldn't watch the same thing as the world does, because God hates sin. I meet Christian people who say, "Well, that doesn't bother me." That's not the point. The point is that sin should bother you, amen? They say, "I'm okay with it." That's not the point. The point is you should not be okay with things that are displeasing to God.

We can look at that another way and turn this around and say, you can't be self-righteous either. Some Christians would never watch an evil show, they would never look at anything bad, which is good. But they want to look down on everyone else who does. You can't do that either. All of us have sinned. All of us have fallen short of the glory of God, and this is what Jesus had to do to save all of us. Albert Barnes said it this way, he said, "Such was God's love for us, that He was willing to stoop to any sacrifice to save us. He was willing to go to the cross, which leaves no room for boasting and no room for judging others."

That leads the next phase to this trial, I'll go through this next one a little quickly. But the first one was the scourging of Jesus where His back was beaten and ripped to shreds like this. It leads to another phase to this trial, and that is the crown of thorns and the purple robe. John says, after Jesus was whipped like this, the Romans put a crown of thorns on His head and a royal robe on His back to humiliate Him further. As if the scourging wasn't enough, it goes on. And if you look in verses 1 through 3, this is what happens as the trial goes on. It's almost hard to even call this a trial, isn't it? I mean, it's not really a trial. This is a lynching. It says,

Pilate then took Jesus and scourged Him. And the soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on His head, and put a purple robe on Him; and they began to come up to Him and say, "Hail, King of the Jews!" and to give Him slaps in the face.

Crucifixion was not just a death in the ancient world, it was a humiliation as well. That's what made it so bad. They didn't just kill you, they wanted to degrade you and take away all your dignity. To the point that anybody who saw you would say, "I don't want to do what he did. I don't want to mess up like that." So, for murderers, they would sometimes chain you to the person you murdered before crucifying you, and you would drag their corpse around through the streets. Or for runaway slaves, they would brand you with a large "F" on the forehead for *fugitivus* - fugitive. And you would go around with this branding on your face. I mean, sometimes they would do that and they wouldn't crucify you. You would just live with that on your face. But other times, that would proceed crucifixion. If you professed to be a king, they would do things like this. They would put a crown of thorns on your head and a royal robe on your back, and they would say, "Hail, King of the Jews," and slap you.

Matthew says they also spat in His face. I don't know if you've ever been spat in the face before, but there's few things that are more degrading than that. They put a reed in His hand and they hit Him with it. Just a few comments about some of these things. Israel was a desert country, so it would've been very easy to find thorns. Thorny plants were everywhere, especially in the south where Jerusalem was. So, the soldiers would have had no trouble finding thorns that were several inches long, twisting them together. They were experts in torturing people. So, they were very adept to this.

In regard to the robe, verse 2 says, it was a purple robe. Which is important because purple was the color of royalty. I'm not wearing purple today for that reason. My wife just picked this shirt out, but it has nothing to do with that today. But kings and queens wore purple because it was the most expensive color to make. And the other Gospels say that between the two trials before Pilate, Pilate sent Jesus to Herod who gave Him a purple robe to complete the outfit. Herod was a very evil man. He said, "You got a crown, you got a scepter or a reed. I'll give you a robe."

The significance of the robe...and not to dwell on this but the significance of this robe is that they put it on Him after flogging Him. They put it on Him after His back had been torn to shreds. So that when the wounds healed up, they would have stuck to the robe forming a scab. And when they took the robe off to crucify Him, the scabs would have come off with it. In other words, this was excruciatingly painful. The word "excruciating" fits here. To breathe on a cross, your body was in the exhale position, so you had to push up with your feet and rub your back against the cross to inhale. And people died oftentimes either by loss of blood or they just suffocated

because they were too tired to push up to breathe. And every time you pushed up with a back like that, it would rub up against the wood. The pain was just ... it's hard to even articulate it.

In fact, theologians have wrestled for centuries with whether this was necessary, and couldn't God save us some other way. Couldn't He stone Jesus like the Jews would do - put Him down in a pit or put Him on the ground and throw rocks at Him until He died? Couldn't God have beheaded Him like He did with the Apostle Paul? Paul was a Roman citizen. Roman citizens were not supposed to be crucified. Couldn't He behead Jesus? And what they've come up with is a doctrine known as the doctrine of Consequent Absolute Necessity. I'll say that again if you want to write it down, "Consequent Absolute Necessity." Which means that as a consequence of our sin, as a result of our sin, it was absolutely necessary for God to do this. As a result of our evil, because God hates it so much, He had to put His Son through this in order to save us. I mean, goodness gracious, don't you think if there was another way to do this, God would have done it? Don't you think in His infinite wisdom, if there was any other way to punish our sin and bring us into heaven, He would've thought about that? But this is what it took

It makes this next phase also very interesting. The next phase, the third phase of this trial, of the end of the trial is that He bore His own cross. After he scourged Him and they put a crown of thorns on His head and a robe on His back, it says that they made Him bear His own cross. If you read on in the passage, you'll see that Pilate just goes back and forth with the Jews on this. He doesn't want to kill Jesus. He knows He's an innocent man, but when he does finally say, "He's guilty, crucify Him," the humiliation continues. It doesn't just stop.

If you look in verse 16...we're skipping over just a little bit here...But in verse 16, it says, "So Pilate then handed Him over to them to be crucified. And they took Jesus, therefore, and He went out bearing His own cross, to the place called the Place of a Skull, which is called in Hebrew, Golgotha." Now, like the rest of the sentences in this whole chapter, we could spend a whole sermon on that one verse. But if you go to Israel today and you ask them where Jesus was crucified, they'll take you to a place called the "Church of the Holy Sepulcher". Has anybody been there before? Yeah, it's an interesting place, isn't it? But it's got a lot going on in this church. Today, there's an Ethiopian monastery on top of it and a tomb down below. But legend has it that Constantine's mother, Helena, asked someone to show her where Jesus died in the fourth century, and they took her to this place where she built a beautiful church that today is called the "Church of the Holy Sepulcher" or "The Holy Tomb".

And the interesting thing about it is today it's inside the city's walls, but back then it wasn't. Over the centuries Jerusalem's walls have expanded as the city has grown. But in the first century, the Romans did not crucify someone inside the city's walls. It was too revolting of a thing to do. They always did it outside the walls. Hebrews 13:12, if you want to write that passage down, it says, "Jesus suffered outside the gate." He suffered outside the city. Some believe it might've been an old abandoned rock quarry because verse 17 talks about, it says it looked like a ... it was called the "Place of a Skull". A rock quarry would have looked like a skull with all of its marks and holes in the ground. It would have looked like a Golgotha. That's a scary word, right?

But wherever it was done, to get there, it says Jesus had to bear His own cross. To crucify a man, the Romans would drive a vertical beam of wood into the ground called a crux, and they would

make you carry the horizontal beam called a “patibulum” to the place of execution. The beam would have been very heavy. Could have weighed as much as over 100 pounds, maybe 200 at the most. And you would carry it to the place where you died, and all along the way, as you're carrying this thing, people would shout at you and throw rocks at you and other things. Mark 15:21 says, Jesus made it most of the way, but they had to get Simon of Cyrene to help Him because he was too exhausted. And the significant thing about this, if you look in verse 17, this is one of those things you kind of skip over as you're reading this.

But the significant thing if you look, it says Jesus went out. It means He followed the guards. Most people who were crucified were dragged, kicking and screaming to the cross. As you can imagine, they didn't want to go. I mean, if you were being crucified, you would do that. I would do that. Jesus went out, He followed them, because He wanted to die for the sins of the world. In John 10:18 the Lord said, “No one takes My life from Me, but I lay it down of My own initiative.” Earlier here in John chapter 19, if you look in verse 11, right above this, in that passage that we skipped over, Jesus told Pilate, He said, “You would have no authority over Me unless it had been given you from above.” He could have stopped this at any time. He could have ended it, but He wanted to die. And this is a good application of this today.

I told you earlier that God loves you, but do you know this is how much He loves you? I told you that He cared, but do you know this is how much He cared? Not only did He die for you, but He willingly died for you. Not only was He crucified, but He volunteered for the job. He wasn't dragged, kicking and screaming. He wasn't killed against His will. R. C Sproul says, “People often ask, why do bad things happen to good people? Well, there was only one good person and this happened to him because he chose it.” That's unbelievable. And what it means is that you have to respond the same way. You have to love Him back. I don't know how many of you were dragged to church this morning, but Jesus wasn't dragged to the cross.

I told you about the young man who said he grew up with a drug problem. His mother drugged him to church, right? I mean, I don't know how many of you were drugged to prayer or Bible study this week. How many of you are going to be drugged to care group this afternoon? Jesus wasn't dragged to this. He wanted to die for you. I've heard it said that love doesn't walk, it runs to those it loves. This is Jesus running to His death. It's also been said, you can't love someone halfway. If you love, you hold nothing back. He held nothing back in this.

A pastor once told a young, rebellious teenager who was coming to his church. He said, “I want you to go look at the painting of Jesus dying on a cross in the foyer ...” (“Foy-er” - it's going to take some time with that one guys. I've been working on some of the other ones. How about we call it the “lobby”? Did I say that right? The lobby. Okay.) He said, “I want you to look at the painting of Jesus dying in the lobby, and I want you to say to it three times, ‘You did all of this for me, but I don't care anymore.’” And the young man went out and he said it once and he said it again, and the third time he choked up. Listen, you have to care when you read this. You have to be amazed at the love God has for sinners.

That leads to a fourth phase to this trial, a fourth final phase before they kill Him. Just to review, we've looked at the scourging of Jesus and we've seen the crown of thorns and the robe on His back and the humiliation of all that, the brutality. We've seen Him carrying His own cross

willingly, graciously. No one had to drag Him to His death. No one forced Him to die. As a matter of fact, when He's about to die, what does He say? He says, "Father into your hands, I commit My spirit." Only the Son of God will die like that. It leads to a fourth phase to this trial, and that is this, is the sign hanging over His head. The trial actually ends with the sign hanging over His head. John connects it to the crucifixion here, but the sign was actually produced at His trial, and He carried it to His crucifixion. But if you look in verse 18 it says,

18 There they crucified Him at Golgotha, and with Him two other men, one on either side, and Jesus in between. 19 Pilate also wrote an inscription and put it on the cross. It was written, "Jesus the Nazarene, the King of the Jews." 20 Therefore many of the Jews read this inscription, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, Latin and Greek. 21 So the chief priests of the Jews were saying to Pilate, "Do not write, 'The King of the Jews'; but that He said, 'I am the King of the Jews.'" 22 And Pilate answered them, "What I have written I have written."

As part of the crucifixion process, the Romans would hang a sign over the criminal's head on the cross, telling everybody what he did. They would hang it around their neck when they walked through the streets, and then when they were crucified, they would hang it over their head there. The judge would actually write it in court. Which is why I'm connecting this to the trial. He would write it up as he pronounced sentence and the sign would say something like "murderer" or "thief" or "rebel". But the amazing thing about Jesus' sign is that it has no crime on it, because he was innocent. It has no charge. The best he could come up with was "Jesus the Nazarene, the King of the Jews." Nazareth was a very humble town and Israel is very poor. So, that's the worst Pilate could come up with. And even when the Jews tried to tell Pilate to change it to saying, "He said He was the King of the Jews," Pilate refuses to do it out of spite, because he knew he was an innocent Man.

He wrote it in Hebrew, Latin and Greek, so, it was written three times. Those were the main languages spoken by everyone in that world at the time. At a feast like Passover, you would have Jews from all over the world coming to Jerusalem. So, anybody could have read this. It would've required no translation. But this is what saves us. Our Saviour was innocent. This is what brings us into heaven. He committed no crime. Second Corinthians 5:21 says, "God made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God."

Just to tie all this together for a moment, if you would turn over to Luke chapter 23 with me. (I don't usually do this, I like to stay in the same passage with you, but Luke 23 gives us an interesting perspective on this.) We're talking about all of this from John's perspective, and he did see all of this. John was at the trial and at the cross. But Luke 23 tells us what this looked like from someone who was hanging on the cross next to Jesus. I don't know about you, but I can't think of a more interesting perspective than that. And if you look in verse 39 of chapter 23, it tells us this about this man. Luke 23:39. It says, "One of the criminals who were hanged there was hurling abuse at Him, saying, 'Are you not the Christ? Save Yourself and us.'" It's kind of interesting that he throws "and us" in there. He didn't seem to really believe Jesus was the Christ. But hey, if there's a chance, right? It says,

40 But the other one answered, and rebuked him, saying, "Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?" 41 And we indeed are suffering justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but this Man has done nothing (you get this) wrong." 42 And he was saying, "Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom!" 43 And He said to him, "Truly I say to you, today you will be with Me in paradise."

For whatever reason, John doesn't tell us a lot about these criminals. He mentions them, but he kind of just passes them by. But Luke goes into some detail here and he says, there was one on one side, one on the other, hanging on the cross.

One of them, he says, hurled abuse at Him. Did you see that phrase? He didn't just insult Him, he hurled it at Him. You know how ridiculous it is to be crucified beside a guy who's making fun of you? Who's being crucified as well? I mean, how stupid? That's what this guy was ... his heart was so hard that he went to hell abusing the Son of God. But the other guy, on the other side, says, "Jesus, remember me when you come into Your kingdom."

The Gospel of Mark says that they were both insulting Jesus before he said this. So, both men were hurling abuse at him, but something changed in the second man. What was it? He saw Jesus die. He saw an innocent Man hanging on the cross. He had seen people crucified before - they all had. And he was a criminal, so he knew what a criminal was like. And he knew that this guy was not like a criminal. He was something entirely different. We could say it like this, this man was converted on the cross. He was saved while he was dying next to Jesus. Charles Spurgeon said he was Jesus' last companion on earth, and His first companion in heaven. Isn't that good? This man was His last disciple. In fact, Jesus died taking this man with Him. He died saving a sinner. What a story? Amen? What a Saviour?

And I want you to notice what Jesus doesn't say in this passage. He doesn't say to this guy, "You've got to get down off the cross and be a good person and then, today, you will be with Me in paradise." He doesn't say that. He could have said that. He could have snapped at him. I don't know about you guys, but if I'm dying on a cross, I'd probably be a little grouchy. I'd probably be very selfish. Jesus wasn't that way. He doesn't say, "Come down and be baptized and take communion, and donate a bunch of money to the church." He says, "Today, you will be with me in paradise, because you believe in Me. You trust in Me. Everyone else around you is saying horrible things about Me. Everyone else around you are hurling abuse at Me, and you're saying, 'Remember me when you come into Your kingdom.'"

Jesus never looked less like a king than at that moment in time, that makes sense? And this man knew something was different. I say that because maybe some of you need to hear that this morning. Maybe you need to remember that you don't have to do all this kind of stuff to go to heaven. You don't have to be a good person first and earn your way there and work, work, work, work. You just need to believe first. Trust in Christ first. That was enough for this man, it'll be enough for you. That was enough to bring him into heaven, it will be enough for you. Maybe you think you've done too many bad things, maybe you think it's too late for you. Let me tell you something, if it wasn't too late for this man, it's not too late for you, amen? If time hadn't run out on him, it has not run out on you. There is hope if you will trust in Christ. Would you do that this

morning? As we take the Lord's Supper, would you remember and reflect on all the Lord has done for you? And on this story of this wicked evil man who was saved at his dying breath. What a Saviour! Let's close in a word of prayer.

Father, we thank you Lord for this message of salvation and this work that Your Son has done on our behalf. It was such a work. It was such a perfect work. It was so perfect, it would save a guy like this at a time like this. I mean, we've heard of deathbed confessions, but this is a death cross ... I mean, this is something beyond all that, because You are a wonderful Saviour. Lord, may You be glorified in our hearts this morning as we apply this to our lives, as we reflect back on what Christ has done. Would You be honoured as we worship Him, as we remember the cross.

Father, would You help us to go out and tell a dying world about what the Saviour has done, and tell them that it's never too late to be saved.

Thank you Father for Christ, and for the message of Him crucified. May we honour You with it this morning as we take the Lord's Supper. We pray this in Jesus' name, amen.