

## Light, Love, Life ~ The Gospel of John

### Chapters 19-21

Chapter 19 picks up in the middle of Jesus' trial before Pilate. The opening sentence is startling and staggering. Flogging was an incredibly brutal practice. (Romans and brutality were nearly synonymous...it's how they kept people in line and enforced the vaunted Pax Romana...the peace of Rome.) To get an idea of the brutality involved in flogging, here's a clip of the flogging scene from *The Passion of the Christ*. (Viewer discretion is advised...this is very hard to watch.)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-K3dZqo9c-A&t=40s>

The flogging, the crown of thorns, the purple robe were all designed to mock and humiliate Jesus and were meant to demonstrate who was in charge here. This is what Rome did to troublemakers. At the same time, Pilate was not actually convinced Jesus was a troublemaker. This illustrates how little Pilate cared about actual justice. He seemed to really want this whole situation to go away and figured, presumably, that this display of violence would placate the Jewish religious leaders. As it turned out, it only ramped up their blood lust. Seeing Jesus tortured and mocked wasn't enough for them. They wanted to rid the earth of Him.

Pilate assumed logic would prevail, as he twice said, "...I find no basis for a charge against him." (19:4, 19:6) But logic rarely prevails over emotions, the emotion in this case being religious zeal. So Pilate took a little jab at the religious leaders when he responded to their shouts to "Crucify!" (19:6) by saying, "You take Him and crucify Him." (19:6) All parties involved knew that the Jews did not have legal authority to do that. Pilate was just trying to remind them who was in charge.

The religious leaders then dropped a new piece of information that it appears they had failed to mention to Pilate, "...He claimed to be the Son of God." (19:7) For a Jew, of course, that kind of claim would be blasphemy (unless it was true...but they had long forsaken any seeking of truth when it came to Jesus.) But Pilate was quite rattled by this or as John states it, "...he was even more afraid." (19:8) So what would "Son of God" have meant to Pilate? Why such a reaction?

Before I attempt to answer that, I think it's worth noting a little tidbit on this scene from Matthew's Gospel. "While Pilate was sitting on the judge's seat, his wife sent him this message, 'Don't have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of Him.'" (Matthew 27:19, emphasis added) So that was rattling around in Pilate's head at this time.

The Romans considered their emperor to be a son of god and thus in some way divine. (When you're all about having ultimate authority, go big or go home, I guess. You've got to come up with some ideology to legitimize a claim of authority.) This may explain why he went back inside to interrogate Jesus further. Notice Pilate's question, "Where do you come from?" (Recall, Jesus had earlier mentioned that His kingdom was not of this world (18:36).) If Pilate was dealing with someone more than human, someone divine, he wanted to know.

Greater authorities do not need to answer lesser authorities, so Jesus remained silent. It seems that Pilate got the message. Even with Pilate's declaration of the power he did wield (to bring either freedom or crucifixion to Jesus) Jesus reminded Pilate that there is a greater power still.

Pilate ends up finding himself a pawn in a three-way power play: the Jewish religious leaders on one side, Roman powers over him on another side, and this mysterious power/authority "*from above*" that Jesus references. Who would Pilate choose to appease? All the Gospel writers seem to agree that if Pilate had his druthers, he would have let Jesus go.

The Jewish leaders played a crafty and manipulative move, seeming to understand that if Pilate had to choose between justice and politics, Pilate would play the pragmatic political game over doing what took actual courage and character. So the Jewish religious leaders stated, "*If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar.*" (19:12) And the trap was set. They knew Pilate didn't have it in him to do anything that could raise the ire of Caesar. (Likely because he knew Caesar well enough to know he'd be less interested in justice and more concerned about a challenge to his kingship.) So Pilate signed off on the crucifixion.

It was common when a criminal was crucified that the crimes they were charged with, and found guilty of, were noted on their cross. Jesus' crime was being the King of the Jews. It is important to note that while Jesus is a religious and spiritual figure, He is ultimately a political figure. He is King; He is Lord; He is Messiah/Christ...these are political terms, not primarily religious terms. I bring this up because to simply make Jesus a religious/spiritual figure is to domesticate Him, to make Him optional, to minimize His relevance. Our culture views religion and spirituality as subordinate categories. Politics, on the other hand, is deemed relevant. So we don't have to make Jesus, the Gospel, or the Church relevant...they naturally are. We simply need to focus on being faithful and true to them. If we ever find ourselves thinking we need to make all this relevant, it's likely because we've placed them in the wrong category...a safer, tamer category. But remember, Jesus told us that in this world we will have trouble. I wonder if we miscategorize Jesus just to make things less dangerous? Faithful following of Jesus is a naturally dangerous endeavor.

Another common feature of crucifixions is that the soldiers doing the dirty work got to divvy up the criminal's belongings, which generally wasn't much...just the clothes on their backs. (To the victors go the spoils, I guess.) In John sharing this detail about the soldiers casting lots for Jesus' tunic/undergarment, he quotes a line from Psalm 22. When a Biblical writer quotes a psalm their intent is to bring the entire psalm to the reader's mind, not just the line quoted. I would recommend reading Psalm 22 in its entirety. It is a messianic psalm. See how many references/allusions to the story of Jesus you can find.

As we've gone through John we have highlighted the Seven Signs and the Seven "*I Am...*" Statements. If we look beyond John and include the other Gospel writers, we can also consider the Seven Statements of Jesus from the Cross (three of which are found in John). We don't know for sure the exact order in which they were stated, but here is the generally/traditionally accepted (and quite plausible) order...

1. *“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”* ~ Luke 23:34
2. *“I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.”* (spoken to the thief on the cross) ~ Luke 23:43
3. *“Dear woman, here is your son...Here is your mother.”* (spoken to Mary and John) ~ John 19:26-27
4. *“Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?”* (*“My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?”*) ~ Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34
5. *“I thirst.”* ~ John 19:28
6. *“It is finished.”* ~ John 19:30
7. *“Father, into Your hands I commit My Spirit.”* ~ Luke 23:46

Please allow me to comment on just one of the statements from John. When Jesus turns over responsibility for caring for His mother to John, He essentially redefines family. Jesus had brothers to whom such a responsibility would naturally, culturally, expectedly fall in His stead. We have no reason to believe that Jesus thought that His brothers weren't up for the task. Rather, He was being consistent with something He taught, which we see in the Synoptics, *“My mother and brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice.”* (Luke 8:21; see also Mark 3:34-35 and Matthew 12:48-50) So if Jesus, being our Lord and Teacher, defines family in a particular way, our proper response is to adopt His definition of family over any other norms.

To close chapter 19 we are introduced to a new person, Joseph of Arimathea, and revisited by ole Nicodemus. They showed devotion to Jesus by taking charge of His body and preparing it for burial. Joseph, according to Matthew and Mark, was a rich man, and Matthew includes the detail that the tomb Jesus was placed in belonged to Joseph. Both Joseph and Nicodemus were members of the Sanhedrin. All indications are that these two were not on board with this whole plot against Jesus.

Between the end of chapter 19 (Good Friday) and the beginning of chapter 20 (Easter) is Silent Saturday. (Pause for a moment of silence...)

If you read all four Gospel accounts of Easter morning you'll notice that they're all different. The details don't line up...well, except for the main detail, the tomb was empty, He is Risen! That they all agree on. So what are we to make of differing details? Not much, really. Historians note that this is exactly what you would expect of a credible story. If every single little detail lined up, that would seem suspiciously like collusion.

In John's account it was Mary Magdalene who first found the tomb empty. She immediately ran to tell Peter and John. Now here John shares a little detail: he's a faster runner than Peter. Twice he mentions that he made it to the tomb before Peter (verses 4 and 8). It might be tempting to think that this little detail is completely inconsequential and just for bragging rights (not to mention that, by the time John wrote this down, Peter had been dead for quite some time and could not refute it). But it also smacks of the sort of authenticity you'd expect from an eyewitness.

Dumbfounded, Peter and John went back to where they were staying, leaving Mary alone crying (20:10-11). A question that naturally arises is why did Mary not recognize Jesus upon seeing Him? (You may recall in Luke 24 that a couple of disciples on the road to Emmaus also did not recognize Jesus while He walked and talked with them.) The most common and popular answer to that question is that the resurrected body of Jesus had a different quality to it. This concurs with what Paul says in I Corinthians 15, "*The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.*" (I Cor. 15:42-44). The same will be true of us when we are resurrected...we'll be us, but we'll also be different.

It is truly a tender moment when Jesus calls Mary by name and she recognizes Him. We can imagine Mary wrapping her arms around Him with no intention of letting go. To paraphrase Jesus, "*You've got to let go of Me. My mission isn't completed quite yet, and I have an errand for you.*" (20:17) And Mary becomes the first person to testify of the risen Lord. What an honor! It also adds to the legitimacy and historicity of Jesus' resurrection. If this was a made-up story, you'd never have a woman be your primary witness. Sadly, by the culture of the day, a woman's testimony wasn't viewed as credible. The only reason the Gospel writers would say a woman was the first to see the risen Jesus was because, in fact, that's what happened...and they weren't going to compromise the truth for the sake of appearances. (Faith in the resurrection has a way of emboldening men and women alike.)

To further prove the point that resurrected bodies are qualitatively different from normal bodies, later that evening Jesus simply appears in a locked room filled with His disciples. (Let's see one of y'all show up to Table Group like that.) I suspect the sheer shock of His appearing like that may have led to Jesus needing to tell them twice, "*Peace be with you.*" (20:19, 21)

Each Gospel writer has their own unique spin on the "Great Commission". John's is the simplest, "*As the Father has sent Me, I am sending you.*" (20:21)...there's something elegant in simplicity, don't you think? Followers of Jesus are a "sent" people. It is important for us to have that mindset. Another way of saying it is that we are missionaries, or we are ambassadors, of God's Kingdom sent to represent Him and proclaim the Gospel (in word and deed) to the world around us. It is also helpful to keep in mind that "sent-ness" is as much (if not more so) a posture toward the world around us as it is actually going somewhere. It is a posture that takes initiative in pursuing relationships. Thankfully, we are also sent WITH the Holy Spirit. Thus, we are fully equipped for the task at hand.

Apparently Thomas wasn't present at this appearance of Jesus to the disciples. When he heard about it, let's just say it was too much for him to believe. Well, you know what can happen when you're not at a meeting you should have been at...either you get volunteered for something or, as in this case, you get a new nickname. (I'm joking...kind of...but this is why we know him as "Doubting Thomas".) Quite graciously, a week later, Jesus appears again and eases Thomas' doubt. This resulted in Thomas' confession, "*My Lord and My God!*" (20:28)

Thomas was given undeniable proof: he saw, and even touched, the resurrected Jesus. I'm sure that's something we'd all like to experience. But notice what Jesus says, "*Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.*" (20:29, emphasis added) Jesus is talking about you and me. How cool is that?

Chapter 20 ends with John's purpose statement for this book, "*Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name.*" (20:30-31)

Chapter 21 functions as an epilogue. John could have easily ended this book at the end of chapter 20. But I'm sure we were all wondering about Peter...how were things left after his denials? John was kind enough to tell us.

We're not told why a few of the disciples decided to go fishing. Were they bored? Did they need money? Were they unsure of what to do next, so they just did what they were familiar with? We don't know.

Apparently it was a frustrating experience, as they caught no fish. Then some guy from the shore calls out asking how their catch was. That must have been aggravating. Then that same guy had the gall to tell them to throw their net out again. At this point the disciples might have been having a *deja vu* moment. In Luke chapter 5, we read another story of some of the disciples (notably Peter) having a frustrating night of fishing and Jesus saying to try again. Interestingly, Luke's account was when Jesus initially called them (notably Peter) to follow Him. So we're seeing a little poetic symmetry with Peter's initial call to discipleship and what would be his reinstating.

Upon catching more fish than their boat could hold, they (notably John) realized it was Jesus on the shore. Now some cultural thing must be going on here that I don't fully grasp. I don't know about you, but if I were going to jump in the water and swim a hundred yards, I would disrobe as much as I could (or to the degree that would be appropriate). For some reason, Peter put his clothes on and swam to shore. Weird.

Jesus already had breakfast ready for them. With his belly full after a long night of fishing, Jesus and Peter have a little heart-to-heart talk. It is not coincidental that Jesus asked Peter three times if he loved Him (the same number of times that Peter denied knowing Jesus). Each time Peter affirmed that he did, indeed, love Jesus. And each time Jesus charged Peter with what would become his life mission.

Now there is a little something lost in translation unfortunately. Jesus asked Peter if he loved (agapao, in Greek) Him. And Peter responded that he did love (phileo, in Greek) Him. Jesus posed the same question a second time, using the same word for love He used before, and Peter responded with the same answer as before, using the same word for love he had used before. The third time Jesus changed and asked Peter if he loved (phileo) Him. This cut Peter to the heart. We can assume Peter made the connection at this point that he was being asked three times to coincide with his three denials. Peter never used the word agapao in return when responding to Jesus. In Greek, agapao is the highest form of love (a love of commitment, a love of the will). Phileo is a brotherly/familial/friendship type of love. I think we could take this as Peter having a dose of humility and having learned not to think of himself so highly.

We also don't want to miss that Jesus' charge to Peter uses shepherding imagery. This should draw our mind back to chapter 10 (I am the Good Shepherd). Twice Jesus tells Peter to "feed" His lambs/sheep (the first and third time), but the second time He says to "tend" or "take care of" My sheep. Tend/take care of is the word "shepherd/pastor" in Greek. Jesus seems to be reminding Peter of the role and responsibility of a shepherd (which is very different than that of a fisherman) as well as subtly contrasting between a good shepherd and a bad shepherd or hired hand (again, see chapter 10).

Jesus then, somewhat cryptically/enigmatically, predicts Peter's future. Again, this was written after Peter had actually died, so John could sort of make sense of Jesus' words. To paraphrase Jesus, *"There will be some tough times ahead, stay focused, follow Me."*

Then Peter did what all of us are prone to do, I suspect. He compared himself to someone else, *"What about him?"* (21:21). As humans we like to know how we line up with, or stack up with, others. We are relational creatures, so comparison helps us know how we relate. We evaluate how we're doing relative to others. But the primary relationship Jesus wants us to be concerned about is our relationship with Him. To paraphrase Jesus, *"Don't worry about him...you just concern yourself with following Me."* To say it another way, our measuring stick is Jesus, not others.

It's time to wrap up our study of John. I hope you have found it enlightening, inspiring, and faith-building. To end, I'll simply use John's final words to his readers...

*"Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written."* (21:25)

### Possible Discussion Questions

- What is the most violent thing you've ever personally witnessed (so, not in a movie or TV, but in real life)? As you reflect on that, what effect did it have on you?
- Pilate ultimately made his decision based on fear, likely with some ambition added in. When have you made a poor or wrong decision based on fear or less-than-noble motives?

- Jesus is actually more of a political figure than a religious/spiritual figure. Why do you think we (people) like to relegate Him to the arena of faith?
- Read Psalm 22. How many references to Jesus (or what happened to Jesus) can you find?
- How do you define family? How does that compare to how Jesus defines family? If there is a difference between your working/functional definition and Jesus', what do you do with that? (Or, what would it look like—what would change—to embrace/adopt Jesus' definition of family?)
- We customarily gather on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday and obviously on Easter Sunday. But what about Silent Saturday? What do you think would be a good way to observe Silent Saturday?
- We are at the mercy of eyewitness accounts of the resurrected Jesus. What brings you confidence in their accounts and trustworthiness/credibility?
- “Peace be with you!”...To what area of your life would you like Jesus to bring some peace? What's your role in that, and what's Jesus' role in that?
- What do you think/feel about being a “sent” person? How are you living into your sent-ness?
- In the final chapter of the book, Jesus and Peter have a heart-to-heart talk, at Jesus' initiation. What might Jesus want to have a heart-to-heart conversation with you about?
- Peter seemed to want to compare his life or calling with John's. Who are you tempted to compare yourself to? Who do you tend to measure yourself against?

### Soul Training Exercise ~ Celebrate!!!

He is risen!!! Hallelujah!!! This is cause for celebration. In fact, there is no greater cause for celebration. So how are you going to celebrate?

Celebration can actually be considered a spiritual discipline/practice. When was the last time you really celebrated...when you let your hair down and just gave yourself to the joy and delight of the present moment? What was the cause/source of your celebration? How has your faith and your relationship with Jesus caused celebration in your life? (Or does Jesus just get the reserved side of us?)

This week, in the afterglow of Easter Sunday, allow the resurrection of Jesus to form and inform all you do. Give/allow celebratory flair to all you do this week...from your morning coffee, to making and eating dinner, to household chores, to work or school. The reality of the resurrection

literally changes everything, and our lives can/should reflect that. Allow the joy of the resurrection to infect all you do and all you are. It is, after all, our reason for hope, joy, peace, and love.

And, like most good celebrations, spend extra time with people this week, reflecting together on how life-altering the resurrection of Jesus is.