

37. Jesus Before Pilate John 18:28-40

Warm-up Question: Were you ever wrongly accused for something either as a child or as an adult? Share the story with others in your group.

²⁸Then the Jewish leaders took Jesus from Caiaphas to the palace of the Roman governor. By now it was early morning, and to avoid ceremonial uncleanness they did not enter the palace, because they wanted to be able to eat the Passover. ²⁹So Pilate came out to them and asked, "What charges are you bringing against this man?" ³⁰"If he were not a criminal," they replied, "we would not have handed him over to you." ³¹Pilate said, "Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law." "But we have no right to execute anyone," they objected. ³²This took place to fulfill what Jesus had said about the kind of death he was going to die. ³³Pilate then went back inside the palace, summoned Jesus and asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" ³⁴"Is that your own idea," Jesus asked, "or did others talk to you about me?" ³⁵"Am I a Jew?" Pilate replied. "Your own people and chief priests handed you over to me. What is it you have done?" ³⁶Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place." ³⁷"You are a king, then!" said Pilate. Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me." ³⁸"What is truth?" retorted Pilate. With this he went out again to the Jews gathered there and said, "I find no basis for a charge against him. ³⁹But it is your custom for me to release to you one prisoner at the time of the Passover. Do you want me to release 'the king of the Jews'?" ⁴⁰They shouted back, "No, not him! Give us Barabbas!" Now Barabbas had taken part in an uprising (John 18:28-40).

Politics has been a part of the human experience since civilization has existed. The Wikipedia definition of politics is: "(from the Greek word, *politikos*, meaning of, for, or relating to citizens")... the practice and theory of influencing other people on a civic or individual level."

The comedian, Robin Williams, has another definition of the word. He says the word politics is derived from the word "poly", meaning "many," and the word "ticks," meaning "blood-sucking parasites." For as long as political parties have existed, there has been political satire. Often, politicians promise one thing and deliver another. One comedian has defined the word politician as: "One who shakes your hand before elections and your confidence thereafter." It is hard to marry politics and truth. In the quest for truth, politics will often usurp or ignore the truth in a bid to gain or maintain power.

To understand the trial of Jesus, we need to understand that Jesus caused a political dilemma for the religious elite of His day and for the ruling leaders, especially those who were presented with the decision of his guilt or innocence. This passage shows us the difficult decision Pilate had to make when confronted with the truth Himself, the Lord Jesus. At first glance, it may seem that only Jesus was on trial, but looking closer, we can see that actually, Pontius Pilate was the one on trial for his soul. Let's look closer at the politics surrounding the ruling leaders of the day.

The Jewish civil and ceremonial law book called the *Talmud* records that forty years before the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem, two years before the crucifixion of Christ, judgment in matters of life and death was taken away from Israel. Tiberius Caesar had decreed that only the governor or procurator had the authority to execute a man. This wasn't always strictly adhered to, for a few months later there was the stoning to death of Stephen, but this was an illegal act (Acts 7) according to law.

Tiberius Caesar had entrusted administration in Rome to his right-hand man, Lucius Sejanus. Because the land of Judea (Israel) was known to be a difficult land to rule, Sejanus had picked Pontius Pilate as the procurator of Judea because he was known to be one who would take no nonsense from the people under his rule. Upon Pilate's arrival, though, he began making mistakes. He marched his soldiers up from their seaside garrison resort of Caesarea up to Jerusalem bearing Caesar's image on their standards. The Romans believed that Caesar was a god, which was, of course, objectionable to the Jewish people. Pilate was determined that the Roman province of Judea and Jerusalem should be treated as any other province of Rome. All kinds of religious protest broke out. Josephus the historian writes that, when the Roman forces and Pilate returned to Caesarea, a host of Jews followed him entreating him to hear their case:

On the sixth day [of the protest] he ordered his soldiers to have their weapons [hidden], while he came and sat upon his judgment seat, which seat was so prepared in the open place of the city, that it concealed the army that lay ready to oppress them: and when the Jews petitioned him again, he gave a signal to the soldiers to encompass them round, and threatened that their punishment be no less than immediate death, unless they would leave off disturbing him, and go their ways home. But they threw themselves upon the ground, and laid their necks bare, and said they would take their death willingly, rather than the wisdom of their laws should be transgressed; upon which Pilate was deeply affected with their firm resolution to keep their laws inviolable, and presently commanded the images to be carried back from Jerusalem to Caesarea.¹

Not long after this incident, another riot broke out and was suppressed with brute force by Pilate with many people killed, so within days, the Jewish leadership petitioned Tiberius Caesar for Pilate to be dismissed from his post. Pilate knew he had to be careful of Jewish sensitivities; otherwise, he would lose his job. With that introduction in mind, let's turn to what happened to Jesus after he left the interview with Annas and witnessed Peter's third denial that he knew Christ (Luke 22:61).

John declines to tell us anything of Jesus' trial before Caiaphas. Many think that John wrote his gospel after Matthew, Mark and Luke, so it is possible that he didn't want to write the same things as the others. After the interview with the High Priest Annas, Jesus is sent over to Caiaphas for the trial before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling elders. This was an illegal trial in so many ways. For one thing, it was conducted during the night, and Jewish law forbade a trial at such a time. Also, Jesus had no defending attorney while the High Priest was trying to intimidate him. The witnesses also could not agree with one another, so finally Caiaphas straight out asked Christ.

¹ Flavius Josephus, *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged* (trans. William Whitson; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987), p. 392

⁵⁷Then some stood up and gave this false testimony against him: ⁵⁸We heard him say, 'I will destroy this man-made temple and in three days will build another, not made by man.' ⁵⁹Yet even then their testimony did not agree. ⁶⁰Then the high priest stood up before them and asked Jesus, "Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?" ⁶¹But Jesus remained silent and gave no answer. Again the high priest asked him, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?" ⁶²**"I am,"** said Jesus. **"And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven."** ⁶³The high priest tore his clothes. "Why do we need any more witnesses?" he asked. ⁶⁴"You have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?" They all condemned him as worthy of death. ⁶⁵Then some began to spit at him; they blindfolded him, struck him with their fists, and said, "Prophecy!" And the guards took him and beat him (Mark 14:57-65).

Notice again Jesus' use of the Greek form of the Hebrew name for God, *I AM*. This reply is what sealed Jesus' fate as it concerns the Jewish elite ruling elders. Bravely, Christ stood up to the High Priest and claimed that He is the One who was written about by the prophet Daniel, the One called the Son of Man, the Messiah, who will sit on the throne of David:

¹³In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a **son of man**, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. ¹⁴He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, **nations and men of every language worshipped him**. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed (Daniel 7:13-14 Emphasis mine).

After the Sanhedrin and Caiaphas had passed judgment on Him, Mark tells us that Jesus was spat upon for saying such a statement of blasphemy; then, His eyes were covered so that He could not anticipate the blows that were raining upon Him. Luke tells us that they struck Him with their fists and beat Him before leading Him to Pilate.

The Demand for the Execution of Jesus (John 18:28-32)

This appearance of Jesus before Pilate must have been expected because the large detachment of soldiers that arrested Jesus during the night must have had Pilate's permission. It was now daylight and probably around 6 a.m. When the procession of elders, the Lord Jesus, and the High Priest got to Pilate's headquarters situated to the west side of the Temple Mount, the residence built by Herod the Great, the Jews would not enter the building. There was a scribal law that the homes of Gentiles were not ceremonially clean for a Jew. Alfred Edersheim, in his book, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, brings out the fact that the Jews believed that the Gentiles aborted their babies and put the remains down the drains. Being in contact with a dead body required seven days of ritual cleansing.² Passover law also stipulated that, days before the Passover, the home had to be meticulously swept clean and all leaven (yeast) had to be removed before the seven days of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the first day of which was Passover

² Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, Hendrickson Publishers, page 865.

(Exodus 12:15). Ritual cleansing after being in a Gentile residence would take anywhere between one day and seven days, depending on what was touched in the residence.

In one place, Jesus had accused the religious leaders and Pharisees of straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel (Matthew 23:24). What does that mean, and how does this passage relate to it?

So often church people sweat the small stuff, while leaving out more important things of the spiritual life. The Jews of the time were meticulous in their religiosity by separating the seeds from their garden and tithing on them, nine for me, one for the Lord, but omitting justice, mercy and faithfulness for the widows and orphans and love for God and people (Matthew 23:23). In our passage today, the religious leaders had illegally hauled their Messiah into an illegal court and omitted justice and mercy; instead, they had beaten and bruised Him for telling them the truth about being the Messiah.

Pilate comes out to the crowd in the courtyard. He asks them, “What charges are you bringing against this man?” The chief priests and Pharisees do not like being asked this question because they do not have a charge against Christ for a Roman court. Their charge is a religious one, the charge of blasphemy against God. That charge they knew would not hold up before Pilate. Instead of an accusation, they thought they already had an agreement with Pilate. ³⁰“If he were not a criminal,” they replied, “we would not have handed him over to you.” Pilate already knew of the jealousy and hatred for Jesus and distrusted them, telling them to take care of it on their own, outside of his court. Perhaps, it was at this point that Pilate’s wife came out to him with a strong message. Matthew tells us:

¹⁹While 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).

Pilate gives them permission to judge Christ themselves. Why didn't they just take Pilate at his word and execute Him immediately? (John 18:31).

“But we have no right to execute anyone,” they objected. This took place to fulfill what Jesus had said about the kind of death he was going to die (John 18:32). Jesus had prophesied some time earlier that He would die by being lifted up, saying, “But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself” (John 12:32). The Jewish leadership wanted to disprove His claim to be Messiah (Christ) by putting a curse upon Him. They wanted Christ to die by crucifixion rather than by the Jewish way of execution, which was to be stoned to death. For a man in Israel to be hanged on a piece of wood (a tree) was to be cursed of God.

²²If someone guilty of a capital offense is put to death and their body is exposed on a pole,
²³you must not leave the body hanging on the pole overnight. Be sure to bury it that same day, because **anyone who is hung on a pole is under God's curse**. You must not desecrate the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance (Deuteronomy 21:22-23).

Paul the apostle wrote to the Galatian church that there was a reason that God allowed His Son to be hung on a tree and bear a curse upon Him:

¹⁰For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse, as it is written: **“Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.”**

¹¹Clearly no one who relies on the law is justified before God, because “the righteous will live by faith.” ¹²The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, it says, “The person who does these things will live by them.” ¹³**Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us**, for it is written: **“Cursed is everyone who is hung on a pole.”**

¹⁴He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit (Galatians 3:10-14).

Commentator William Barclay tells us that crucifixion "originated in Persia; and its origin came from the fact that the earth was considered to be sacred to Ormuzd, the god, and the criminal was lifted up from it that he might not defile the earth, which was the god's property. From Persia, crucifixion passed to Carthage in North Africa; and it was from Carthage that Rome learned it."³ The Romans crucified at least 30,000 Jews during the Roman occupation of Israel, just to warn people that this is what happens to people who go against Rome. The Jewish leadership wanted the worst possible death for Jesus and, at the same time, to shock the common people by putting a curse on the one they thought to be the Messiah.

Pilate Questions Jesus about His Kingship (John 18:33-38a)

Pilate already did not like the way this was going. He brought Jesus aside from the religious elite and spoke to Christ privately from inside his quarters. Inside his heart, he felt that Jesus was innocent, but he needed some kind of charge if he was to give in to the Jewish elders.

What do you think causes Pilate to begin to cave in to the pressure of the ruling elders? What causes a man to compromise his values?

Pilate felt the pressure from these rulers of the Jews because he already knew that they would take the matter further and complain to Caesar, thus making him look incompetent to handle this situation. The fear of losing face or his position is a strong motivator to compromise his inner values. He says to Jesus, **“Are you the king of the Jews?” (John 18:33)**. The Lord wanted to know the context for the question. If Pilate is asking the question from a political or worldly standpoint, then no, in that respect He is not a king. His kingdom is not one of force and intimidation, but if Pilate is asking the question from a scriptural point of view—then yes, He is the King of the Jews, and he has come to bear witness to the truth of God and will conquer and bring to nothing Satan’s rule over the earth. Christ’s rule is of a completely different order. His answer is wise and skillful. He gives no evidence for Pilate to convict Him of being one who will take up arms against Rome. Jesus said, **“The reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.”** The Lord was hinting to Pilate almost as if to appeal to the heart of the man. If a man has an honest heart and is searching for

³ (The Gospel of Matthew, vol. 2 [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975], p. 365).

the truth, the truth will have a certain ring to it. When truth is presented to us, there is a dividing line that comes, a choice, either we will respond with hunger for more, or we will close our mind and heart to it and reject the truth of God.

Do you remember a time when you first heard the truth of the gospel? Were there painful circumstances that caused you to search for the truth?

Jesus is saying that all who love the truth listen to Him, almost as if the Lord was hinting to him, “Do you want to hear the truth, Pilate?” When we hear the truth about Jesus, we each fall on one side or the other. There is no middle ground, no fence on which to sit, and we either reject or listen for more. Truth is an awesome thing. If a man is on the side of truth, he will listen and draw near to the person of Christ, the living embodiment of truth—I am the Way, **the Truth and the Life** (John 14:6). Many of us have rejected the truth about Christ when we were younger, not understanding the full weight of the work of Christ, but later on, the god of this age (Satan) was forced to take his veil from our eyes so that we could see the light of the gospel. Many who are perishing are still blinded to the truth. Paul the apostle wrote: ³“And even if our gospel is veiled, *it is veiled to those who are perishing.* ⁴*The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God”* (2 Corinthians 4:2-4 Emphasis mine). Pilate was blinded to the truth and answers with an abrupt and sharp, “What is truth?” Truth is what the victors of any war make it, he thinks. Unfortunately, he does not enquire further to seek the truth from Jesus’ lips.

Pilate Finds Jesus Not Guilty (John 18:38b-40)

Pilate realizes that he cannot appease the ruling elders by convicting this man before him; there is just no evidence at all. He goes outside into the courtyard again and speaks to the crowd that is now gathered and gives his verdict: not guilty. The crowd, though, does not take this answer, and Luke tells us that at this point the crowd shouted out that Jesus had stirred up problems in Galilee and everywhere He went. Pilate sees that he can pass the decision onto Herod when he realizes that Jesus is from Galilee, under the dominion of Herod Antipas, who just happened to be visiting Jerusalem at the time (Luke 23:6-12). John mentions nothing in his gospel about this appearance before Herod, but Luke tells us that this, too, is fruitless for Pilate. Jesus is sent back to him after being humiliated and saying nothing and doing no miracle to appease Herod’s curiosity of Christ. Pilate has to make a decision about the One before him. Inside his heart, he sees something different about the Lord Jesus and is in an inner battle wanting to release Jesus. When Jesus comes back from Herod, the crowd in the courtyard is getting bigger and even more unruly. Religious fervor is a scary thing for Pilate as well as it would be for any of us.

Suddenly, an escape clause came to him; he remembered that at Passover there was a tradition of releasing one prisoner as an act of grace and mercy. With the crowd before him, Pilate raised his voice and suggested this act of clemency to them. He gave them a choice, feeling sure that they would choose Christ. After all, only a few days previously the common people had been laying down palm branches before Christ as He came into Jerusalem riding on a donkey. They were crying out then, “Hosanna to the Son of David” (Matthew 21:9). Surely they would pick the Son of David over the criminal and insurrectionist, Barabbas! He felt sure that the ruling elite did not want a revolutionary, such as Barabbas. The ruling elite liked the status quo and was making lots

of money through their moneymaking schemes using religion for profit. They would not want Barabbas, he thought, for it was possible that Barabbas was after changing the corruption that was going on.

I want you to imagine that Barabbas was in the dungeon underneath the courtyard. He couldn't hear individual conversations, but he could hear the crowd shouting. When Pilate gave the choice to the crowd, Jesus or Barabbas, they shouted at the top of their lungs for Barabbas. Down in his dungeon, Barabbas did not know how long he had before his execution. He would have wondered why his name was being shouted. Up in the courtyard, Pilate then went back to the crowd:

²⁰But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus executed. ²¹Which of the two do you want me to release to you? asked the governor. **Barabbas**, they answered. ²²What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called Christ? Pilate asked. They all answered, **“Crucify him!”** ²³Why? What crime has he committed?” asked Pilate. But they shouted all the louder, “Crucify him!” (Matthew 27:20-23).

It would have been a scary thing to Barabbas to hear after his name, “Crucify him, Crucify him!” Imagine what it would have been like moments later to hear a Roman soldier coming down the hallway with the sound of keys in his hand. Barabbas must have thought to himself, “This is it, my time is up. They’re coming to crucify me.” Imagine his shock to be told that he was being released and that someone else had taken his place—he was free to leave and go wherever he wanted. All charges against him were dropped! I like to think that later on, as he got out of the city of Jerusalem, he saw Jesus crucified in his place as his substitute.

[Can you relate to Barabbas? Can you think of any things that you have in common with him?](#)

Like Barabbas, we too have deserved a just penalty for our sin. Like him, we, too, have been given grace. Jesus has taken our place and gave Himself as the substitute for all sin. This substitutionary death is charged to your spiritual account when you place your faith and trust in His finished work on the cross. Imagine if Barabbas had chosen to stay inside his small cell, and chosen not to walk outside into the light. Would that seem crazy to you? If such a thing were to happen, the grace imparted to Barabbas would have done him no good at all. We, like Barabbas, have all at one time been in a prison of our own making. Thank God, Jesus has set us free. Who are you most like today? Pilate or Barabbas? When the truth is presented, do you wish to compromise as Pilate did, or walk out of your cell like Barabbas and thank God for sending a substitute?

Prayer: Thank you, Father, for sending Your Son into the world to forgive me of the debt of my sin. Today, I ask Christ to come into my life and forgive me for all sin—I want to be clean and free from my prison of slavery to sin. Amen!

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