

The King and His Kingdom

Mark 15:1–5
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This morning we'll look at Jesus' trial before Pontius Pilate. I say 'trial,' but this is really an oversimplification of what actually happened. There were actually three trials: Jesus first appeared before Pilate, Pilate then referred him to Herod, and Herod returned him to Pilate. Mark's gospel merges Jesus' two appearances before Pilate into one seamless record.

Calling what happened before Pilate a trial is also an oversimplification for another reason. From the very beginning, Pilate wanted nothing to do with it. But the Sanhedrin kept after him, framing their accusation to embarrass him if he didn't cooperate. So, he eventually approved Jesus' execution and was, therefore, responsible for sending him to the cross. The apostles mentioned his role frequently in their sermons in the book of Acts (3:13; 4:27; 13:28) and once in 1 Timothy (6:13). It also earned Pilate the dubious distinction of being one of two mere human beings mentioned in the Apostles' Creed, the other being the virgin Mary.

The Sanhedrin's Resolution

Today's text begins early in the morning after Jesus' trial before the Sanhedrin, just before the cock crowed a second time. As the dawn approached, the chief priests called for official action. Caiaphas had already condemned Jesus for blasphemy, to which everyone consented. But, being under the authority of the Roman government, that was all they could do. They had to turn everything over to the governor, Pontius Pilate.

According to verse 1, *the chief priests held a consultation*. The Greek literally says they made a decision. Today, we would say they passed a resolution. Psalm 22 foretold this. David wrote, *For dogs have compassed me: the assembly of the wicked have inclosed me: they pierced my hands and my feet* (v. 16). And there's no doubt what their resolution included. Just look again at verse 1.

First, the Jewish officials decided to bind Jesus with ropes or cords. The one who would come into the world to set men free, who preached liberty to captives, allowed himself to be bound to save us from our sins. Actually, this was the third time they bound him: they bound him when they arrested him in the garden (John 18:12), and Annas also bound him again before sending him to Caiaphas (John 18:24). In our text, they bound him to transport him to Pontius Pilate. Of course, none of these bindings was needed since Jesus had never caused trouble. He said about himself, *Are ye*

come out, as against a thief, with swords and with staves to take me? I was daily with you in the temple teaching, and ye took me not: but the scriptures must be fulfilled (ch. 14:48-49).

Next, the Sanhedrin decided to take Jesus away. Eventually, he had to be taken outside the city like a scapegoat, because that's what he was for us. All our sins were placed on his head. This was, no doubt, when Jesus turned and looked at Peter. Peter watched as they led his scapegoat away.

And third, the Sanhedrin chose to deliver Jesus to Pilate for judgment. They had to give him over to gentiles to fulfill various prophecies of the Old Testament. Psalm 2 says, *Why do the heathen rage, and the people imagine a vain thing? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD, and against his anointed, saying, Let us break their bands asunder, and cast away their cords from us* (vv. 1-3).

As we've said before, many aspects of Jesus' trial before the Sanhedrin were illegal, including the fact that they held it at night. But the council thought it could make its proceedings look legitimate by delaying action on its resolution until morning, knowing full well that they had already determined its outcome. There was also a time crunch since Pilate conducted hearings of this kind only in the morning. As a Roman 'gentleman,' so to speak, he had to finish his work early so he could spend most of the day in leisure.

All of this went exactly as Psalm 2 predicted. The rebellion of earth's rulers was part of God's eternal plan to redeem his people and save us from our sins. The early church understood this. In Acts 4, the brethren prayed, *Lord, thou art God, which hast made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all that in them is: who by the mouth of thy servant David hast said, Why did the heathen rage, and the people imagine vain things? The kings of the earth stood up, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord, and against his Christ. For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod, and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together, for to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done* (vv. 24-28).

Jesus Before Pilate

Verse 2 gives us the core of Jesus' trial before Pontius Pilate. Pilate asked him, *Art thou the King of the Jews?* But who was this man named Pontius Pilate? What kind of person was he? What position did he occupy in the Roman government?

Officially, Pontius Pilate served as the fifth governor of Samaria and Judea, a position he held for eleven years, from AD 26 to 37, making him the longest-serving governor of the region. While this might look like a sign of his worldly success, it's actually the opposite. The governorship of Judea was

one of the least enviable positions in the Roman government because they considered the Jews troublemakers. No one wanted it, not even Pilate. Few even took it seriously.

It's easy to understand why Pilate ended up in this unwelcome position once we understand what kind of man he was. The gospels described him as arrogant (John 19:10), cruel (Luke 13:1) and probably as superstitious as his wife (Matt. 27:19). The Jewish philosopher Philo, quoting a letter from Agrippa I to Caligula, described him as "inflexible, merciless, and obstinate." He was incompetent, unable to handle delicate relationships. He enjoyed taunting the Jews, which he did frequently. On one occasion, he used money from the temple treasury to build an aqueduct. At other times, he placed Roman standards throughout Jerusalem and defiled the temple with images of Roman deities. Pilate's only concern was for Caesar to think highly of him. But he was such a bad governor that he was eventually fired. The historian Eusebius wrote that he took his own life while traveling to Rome to answer charges against him.

With such a horrendous record and being the person ultimately responsible for Jesus' death, we might suppose that his sin was second only to Judas' betrayal. But actually, two others stand before him in line for this distinction, viz., Caiaphas and Annas. Jesus said to Pilate, *Thou couldst have no power at all against me, except it were given thee from above: therefore he that delivered me unto thee hath the greater sin* (John 19:11).

As for the details of Jesus' trial before Pilate, we have to look at all four gospels for a complete understanding of what happened. When we do this, this is what we find:

- First, when Jesus first appeared before Pilate, Pilate asked the Jews to specify the charges against him. John 18:29 says, *Pilate then went out unto them, and said, What accusation bring ye against this man?* The Jews never really answered the question. They said, *If he were not a malefactor, we would not have delivered him up unto thee* (v. 30). Pilate, not quite as dull as they imagined and completely insensitive to their concerns, responded, *Take ye him, and judge him according to your law* (v. 31). But the Jews made it clear that they wouldn't be satisfied with anything less than death. That's where this was going, one way or the other. They said, *It is not lawful for us to put any man to death* (v. 31).
- Second, the Jews took away from this initial conversation with Pilate that they had to formulate charges against Jesus that would stand up in a Roman court. Blasphemy wouldn't cut it. So, Luke wrote that the Jews came up with three accusations, claiming that Jesus was guilty of *perverting the nation, and forbidding to give tribute to Caesar, saying that he himself is Christ a King* (Luke 23:2). They accused Jesus of being a revolutionary and insurrectionist, knowing that Pilate couldn't ignore such things without incurring the wrath of Rome. But Pilate, still determined to find a way out of this mess, took Jesus inside the judgment hall to

question him privately, knowing the Jews wouldn't follow him because it would have prevented them from participating in the passover. John 18:33 says, *Then Pilate entered into the judgment hall again, and called Jesus, and said unto him, Art thou the King of the Jews?* (Jn 18:33; cf. v. 28).

- Third, this is where our text picks up. Verse 2 says: *And Pilate asked him, Art thou the King of the Jews?* Both Pilate's question and Jesus' answer emphasize the word *you*. Pilate said, 'You are the king of the Jews?' Jesus was standing before him bruised and probably mostly naked and covered with blood. 'How could this man possibly be a king?' Pilate thought. He looked more like a defeated servant than a mighty ruler. And Jesus responded, 'You are saying it,' i.e., 'It's exactly as you say!'

Again, John's gospel fills in the details of this part of the conversation. When Pilate asked Jesus if he was the King of the Jews, he answered with a question of his own: *Sayest thou this thing of thyself, or did others tell it thee of me?* (John 18:34). Was he being sarcastic? No, he just wanted Pilate to think about his own question because he couldn't give him a simple yes or no response. 'Yes' would have suggested that Jesus thought he was a political figure, a rival to Caesar himself, just as the Jews claimed. But 'no' would have meant that Jesus didn't consider himself a king at all, which wasn't true. He was a different kind of king. So, how Pilate understood his own question would make all the difference.

Pilate's response shows that he knew exactly what Jesus meant. He denied being a Jew, so the Jews' concerns meant nothing to him. But he still had to look into their accusation because of its political implications for him. Knowing that the Jews were moved solely by envy, he wanted to know what Jesus had done to rile them up (Matt. 27:18).

Jesus then explained the nature of his kingdom to Pilate. Here's how the conversation proceeded, as we find it in John's gospel: *Jesus answered, My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is my kingdom not from hence. Pilate therefore said unto him, Art thou a king then? Jesus answered, Thou sayest that I am a king. To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Every one that is of the truth heareth my voice* (John 18:36–37).

Jesus' kingdom wasn't a worldly kingdom like Persia, Greece or Rome. It was more than that. It was a kingdom that would fill the whole world and rule all other kingdoms. Remember the stone in Nebuchadnezzar's dream that smashed the image? This stone represented the kingdom of Jesus Christ — a kingdom that would never be destroyed and would break in pieces all the kingdoms of the world (Dan. 2:44–45). And what about Psalm 2, which we've already mentioned several times?

The kings of the earth conspired against Jesus only to be broken with a rod of iron and dashed in pieces like a potter's vessel. This being so, David admonished his readers: *Be wise now therefore, O ye kings: be instructed, ye judges of the earth. Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and ye perish from the way, when his wrath is kindled but a little. Blessed are all they that put their trust in him* (Ps 2:10-12).

But what about all the nasty things the Jews said about Jesus? Pilate asked. Did Jesus have nothing to say against such obviously trumped-up charges? He kept quiet. Pilate was amazed. He had tried a lot of other men before Jesus, but he never met anyone like Jesus. Others had defended themselves vigorously, like the Fulton County DA did this week, but Jesus refused to address the accusations against him. Maybe he was also impressed by the tremendous inconsistency between the picture the Jews painted of Jesus (claiming that he was an aggressive and dangerous insurrectionist) and what he saw with his own eyes (a meek lamb being led to the slaughter). The contrasts couldn't have been greater.

Ultimately, Pilate found nothing worthy of death in Jesus, and went out on the steps of the palace to inform the Jews of his decision (John 18:38). Yet, he condemned Jesus anyway, as we'll see in the coming weeks. Our catechism explains what happened. Question 38 asks, "Why did He suffer 'under Pontius Pilate' as judge? Ans. That He, being innocent, might be condemned by the temporal judge, and thereby deliver us from the severe judgment of God, to which we were exposed." Pilate condemned Jesus for our sins. The apostle Paul wrote, *For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him* (2 Cor. 5:21).

Just as Jesus confessed the truth and acknowledged that he's the only rightful King of the universe and Savior of his people, so must we. Listen to what Paul wrote to Timothy: *I give thee charge in the sight of God, who quickeneth all things, and before Christ Jesus, who before Pontius Pilate witnessed a good confession; that thou keep this commandment without spot, unrebukeable, until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ: which in his times he shall shew, who is the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords; who only hath immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen, nor can see: to whom be honour and power everlasting* (1 Tim. 6:13-16).

We may not all be preachers of the gospel, as Timothy was, but we must all confess that Jesus is our King and that his kingdom of life and salvation rules over all. This is what it means to confess Christ before men. Amen.