

John 18:28-40
Deuteronomy 21
Psalm 74

“My Kingdom Is Not of This World”

October 25, 2020

“A hanged man is cursed by God.”

How is it that Jesus – the man who never sinned –
could be cursed by God?

There is only one way in scripture for an innocent man to be cursed by God:
hang him on a tree.

Deuteronomy 21 says that a hanged man needs to be buried the same day that he dies –
otherwise the land will be defiled –
because a hanged man is cursed by God.

Only in this way the innocent suffering servant could come under the curse of God.
He must be lifted up on a tree.

Our Psalm of response is Psalm 74.

Psalm 74 is a song of the exile –
a song of the people of God lamenting over the destruction of God’s house.
In Psalm 74 the temple has been destroyed.
The house of God has been defiled.

And the Psalmist asks God “how long?”
How long until you vindicate your name?

Have regard for your covenant!
Remember your promises!

Sing Psalm 74 (PHSS)
Read John 18:28-40

In our passage today we see four interactions:
the Jews before Pilate;
Jesus before Pilate;
but then, in an odd reversal, Pilate before Jesus –
and then Pilate before the Jews.

Pontius Pilate is one of three people mentioned in the Apostles’ Creed.
There is Jesus.
There is Mary.
And there is Pontius Pilate.

Why is Pilate so important to the Christian faith that he gets named in our Creed?

Well, think about how he is named:

“he suffered under Pontius Pilate...”

The point is that Jesus lived at a particular time in history.

Jesus is not just a “spiritual” figure with a “meaningful” story.

He suffered under Pontius Pilate – that very particular 1st century Roman governor.

The philosophers could all tell you how to live “the good life.”

The Christian message is not about how to live “the good life.”

The Christian message is the *gospel* – the Good News that Jesus is the Christ –
the Son of God –

and that he suffered for us under Pontius Pilate –

he was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate.

And when Jesus suffered under Pontius Pilate,

he began those sufferings that constituted him the Savior of the World.

1. The House That Defiles: the Jews Before Pilate (v28-32)

²⁸ *Then they led Jesus from the house of Caiaphas to the governor's headquarters. ^[L] It was early morning. They themselves did not enter the governor's headquarters, so that they would not be defiled, but could eat the Passover. ²⁹ So Pilate went outside to them and said, “What accusation do you bring against this man?” ³⁰ They answered him, “If this man were not doing evil, we would not have delivered him over to you.” ³¹ Pilate said to them, “Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law.” The Jews said to him, “It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death.” ³² This was to fulfill the word that Jesus had spoken to show by what kind of death he was going to die.*

Then they led Jesus...

John doesn't say who “they” are,

but “they led Jesus from the house of Caiaphas to the governor's headquarters.

It was early morning.

They themselves did not enter the governor's headquarters,

so that they would not be defiled, but could eat the Passover.”

We know from the other gospels that “they” are the Sanhedrin,

the chief priests together with the rulers of the Jews.

But here it is simply “they.”

“Those people”–identified with Annas, the patriarch of the high priestly family,

and Caiaphas, his son-in-law, the reigning high priest.

By doing this John highlights the contrast:

they are unwilling to defile themselves by coming into a Gentile's house,

but they are willing to condemn an innocent man to death.

Meanwhile Jesus will become defiled.

He will go into Pilate's house and be reckoned unclean.
He will be taken outside the camp,
removed from the protection of the law—both ceremonial and civil,
and will die the cursed death of the cross.

What was the point of the Passover?

What was the point of the moral purity laws that they are observing?

The point was Christ.

The purity laws and the sacrifices were shadows of Christ,
as Paul says in Colossians 2.

So here we see the Jews living in the shadows,
but they have so distorted those shadows,
that when Jesus comes, the body that cast those shadows back into the OT,
they cannot recognize him.

What, after all, from the OT,
would forbid you from going into a Gentile's house during Passover?

Nothing.

This was an "additional" law that the Jews had adopted.

They reasoned that if you were not supposed to have any leaven
in your house during Passover,

then that meant that you could not go into any house that *did* have leaven,
and since Gentiles' houses usually had leaven in them,

therefore you could not enter a Gentile's house during Passover.

They stand at the threshold of Pilate's house,
and push Jesus through the door.

They will make him unclean—unfit to participate in the rest of the Passover.

But only unclean *in their eyes* – not in God's eyes!

But, you may say, didn't Jesus already celebrate the Passover with his disciples?

Why does John say that they wished to "eat the Passover"?

There are two possibilities:

one is that Jesus and his disciples ate the Passover a day early
(which often happened since each lamb had to be slaughtered by the priests),
the other, which is perhaps more likely,

is that John is here referring to the rest of the Passover,
since the feast of unleavened bread was 7 days long.

It was important to remain clean throughout the whole of the seven-day feast.

But as Jesus is declared ceremonially unclean,
as he is cast outside the boundaries of the Law (by a manmade rule!),
we also see that he will be exalted above the Mosaic Law.

Pilate, respecting the traditions of the Jews, came out to them and asked what accusation they had against Jesus.

They reply, “if this man were not doing evil, we would not have delivered him over to you.”

Smelling a rat, Pilate responds, “take him yourselves and judge him by your own law.”

But the Law of God is not sufficient for them.

They need the Law of Rome to do their dirty work for them.

“It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death.”

John tells us that this was to fulfill the word that Jesus had spoken

to show by what kind of death he was going to die.

Jesus had said in 12:32-33 that he would be lifted up in death, signifying that he would die on a cross.

Only the Romans could crucify, so this all happened in order that he might die on a cross.

Why do they want to crucify him?

Because the Law said – “cursed is anyone who is hanged on a tree.”

This is why there are no crucified Jewish martyrs.

The Romans had figured out that the Jews loved their martyrs.

But because of Dt 21, the Jews believed that anyone hanged on a tree was cursed by God.

And so the Jews would never consider a crucified man to be a martyr.

The chief priests do *not* want Jesus to be considered a martyr.

Since only the Romans could execute *they* need Pilate to sign on.

But they don't give him much to go on.

Pilate urged them to conduct the trial.

Judge him according to your law—and then bring him to me.

But they refuse.

They need a scapegoat.

If the crowds rally to Jesus' defense,

they need to be able to point to Pilate as the culprit.

All they say is that they have good reasons for believing that he is worthy of death.

And then they leave.

And John says that all of this happened to fulfill the word of Jesus.

If the Jews had tried him and sentenced him to death (even with Pilate's concurrence),

he would have been stoned to death.

But Jesus *must* be crucified.

He must be lifted up in his death—exalted to heaven even as he endures the wrath of God.

Why must Jesus be crucified?

There several reasons.

But John focuses on two:

1) if the Jews stoned him to death, then the Jews alone would be responsible for it.
But Jew and Gentile alike work together to crucify the Lord of Glory.
No one can rightly say that the Jews alone are guilty of the death of Jesus.
The Gentiles had the opportunity to deliver Jesus.
Pilate could have set him free.
But the whole world conspired against the Son of God.
Therefore he is rightly declared the Savior of the World as well.

2) But second, think back to John 3 – as the serpent was raised in the wilderness,
so the Son of Man must be raised up before the world. (John 3)
To be stoned is to be covered up.
To be crucified is to be openly displayed to the world.
“Moses raised the brazen serpent on a rod in order that a whole people,
a whole community of those who were wrapped in death’s folds,
might see it.”
The lifting up of Christ is a sign of redemption to all who look to the cross in faith
The crucifixion, then, is not only the nadir of Christ’s humiliation,
it is also the pinnacle of his exaltation.

The Jews may cast him out of the temple, the synagogue, the realm of Moses,
but God had them do this so that he might be exalted far above Moses,
as the faithful Son.

The earthly temple was but a shadow of Christ, the heavenly temple;
the earthly temple was a place where earth and heaven met.
The glory of God dwelt in a house of wood and stone.
But now, in Jesus, the glory of God dwelt in human flesh.
The Word became flesh and tabernacled among us.

And now he has been handed over to Pilate.

He has left the realm of Moses and has now entered the sphere of Roman authority.
This is no longer a purely Jewish story.
It is our story.

2. The King of the Jews: Jesus Before Pilate (v33-36)

³³ So Pilate entered his headquarters again and called Jesus and said to him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” ³⁴ Jesus answered, “Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?”

Pilate knows a thing or two about this Jesus.

So he cannot simply ignore him.
Jesus has been accused of fomenting rebellion against Rome,
and of teaching people not to pay taxes to Caesar.

These charges are false,
but a Roman governor cannot ignore the public furor that surrounds Jesus.
If Jesus is guilty, he must act swiftly,
but he must be careful not to incite public hostility.
After all, just 20 years ago Judas the Galilean had led a revolt against Roman authority.
Now another Galilean stands before him.

“Are you the king of the Jews?”

A simple yes or no question.

But Jesus is not going to give him the answer he wants.

“Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?”

In other words, Jesus is making the same reply to Pilate that he made to Annas.

“I have said nothing in secret.” I have taught openly.

As Roman governor you would know if I had proclaimed myself king.

This is a false charge—and you know it.

If you want to know about my kingship, ask me.

Pilate answered (verse 35)

³⁵ *Pilate answered, “Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done?”*

You must be here for some reason.

Why are you here?

This is the question Jesus wanted.

Yes, Pilate, I am a king.

³⁶ *Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world.”*

This is dangerous.

By admitting that he is a king,

Jesus has opened himself up to a guilty verdict.

But Jesus says, my kingdom is not of this world.

What does that mean?

Gallons of ink, and, I fear, gallons of blood, have been poured out over this question.

But think about what John has been saying about the world.

He is the one through whom the world was made:

“He was in the world, and the world was made through him,
yet the world did not know him.” (1:10)

The world is hostile to God.

But God so loved the world – how did he love the world?
He loved the world thus: that the Father sent his only-begotten Son,
that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

Jesus' kingdom is not *of* this world.
It is not *from* the world.
That last phrase in verse 36 means "it is not from here."

Kingdoms that are "from here" – kingdoms that are "of this world" –
are kingdoms fortified and extended by violence.
Jesus' kingdom does not come about through the power of this age.
It is always a perversion of the kingdom of Christ
when the cross is emblazoned upon an army's banner.
Jesus' kingdom never foments rebellion against the state.
"It carries no sword of steel,
but it holds in its hand the two-edged sword of the Spirit." (2.327)

The kingdom of God seeks reformation and renewal.
It calls all men to repentance—even Pilate when he sits in judgment.

3. What Is Truth? Pilate Before Jesus (v37-38a)

³⁷ *Then Pilate said to him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth.*

Jesus demonstrates for us our proper attitude toward the state as he stands before Pilate.
He is not cowed by the authority of Rome.
He wields a greater authority by far.
Indeed, you begin to wonder who is really on trial!
Pilate is beginning to see what Jesus is getting at.
"So you are a king? he asks.
You are a king—but of a different order.

"You say that I am a king," replies Jesus.
Yes – Jesus says – you have said rightly that I am a king.

"For this purpose I was born,
and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth.
Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice."
Jesus' kingdom is a kingdom of truth.

Long before Michel Foucault popularized the phrase,
Jesus of Nazareth taught that knowledge is power.
There is a kingdom whose authority is not based on brute force,

but upon the Word.

In the beginning was the Word...

And we beheld his glory, glory as of the only-begotten of the Father,
full of grace and truth.

And those who know that Word—those who believe on his name—
wield a power beyond the comprehension of the world—
to them he gave power to become children of God.

Do you want to know what it means to render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's
and unto God that which is God's?

Look to Jesus.

Standing before Caesar's governor, the Lord of Glory yields due honor to this politician.
His kingdom will never seek the overthrow of Rome.
He speaks plainly, answering Pilate's questions.
He tells him openly about his kingdom,
and quietly submits himself to Pilate's judgment.

He respects the God-given authority of Pilate,
and speaks the truth,
calling even Pilate to listen to his voice.

If you, O Roman governor, are of the truth, then you will listen to my voice.

Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice."

³⁸ *Pilate said to him, "What is truth?"*

It is not at all clear what is Pilate's tone of voice here.

Is it sarcastic? "What is *truth*?"

Is it in earnest? "What *is* truth?"

But whatever the tone, Pilate does not expect an answer.

He does not think that this Jewish radical has any answer worth his time.

Whether he is a seeker or a skeptic, Pilate is not of the truth.

He does not listen to Jesus' voice.

Because John's point is not about Pilate.

It is about Jesus.

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory!

The incarnate Son of God stands before this Roman judge,

but Pilate cannot see.

Jesus has endured the judgment of Caiaphas and the judgment of Pilate.

The high priest sits upon the mountain of Jerusalem in the temple.

The governor sits upon the mountain of Rome in his palace.

Caiaphas speaks on behalf of the Jews; Pilate speaks for the Gentiles.
Humanity has refused to listen to him.

4. You Have a Custom: Pilate Before the Jews (v38b-40)

*After he had said this, he went back outside to the Jews and told them, "I find no guilt in him.
³⁹ But you have a custom that I should release one man for you at the Passover. So do you want
me to release to you the King of the Jews?" ⁴⁰ They cried out again, "Not this man, but
Barabbas!" Now Barabbas was a robber.^[g]*

Now Pilate goes back out to the Jews.

He declares to them that he can find no guilt in Jesus.

Jesus is no threat to Rome.

So he offers to release him.

This is not a verdict, but a test.

Pilate wants to see how serious the priests are.

You have a custom that I should release one man for you at the Passover.

"Do you want me to release to you the King of the Jews?"

Now Pilate stands before the Jews.

In reply, the Jews scream out,

"Not this man, but Barabbas!"

John says that Barabbas was a robber.

Acts 3 says that he was a murderer,

and Luke says that he was guilty of insurrection and murder.

In other words, Barabbas is truly guilty of plotting against Rome.

The priests are making their claim that Jesus is a worse criminal than Barabbas.

And there is a sense in which they are right.

Because in a sense, Jesus will do far greater damage to the Roman world
than Barabbas ever did.

The Roman world will be turned upside down by a bloodless revolution.

Did I say bloodless?

No, not bloodless.

Because the kingdom of God comes through the blood of Jesus Christ.

And Rome will murder countless thousands of those who bear witness to Jesus.

Jesus can only revolutionize the Roman empire if he is lifted up on the cross.

Only if Pilate and the priests conspire together can the kingdom of God reform Rome.

But even that way of speaking

makes it sound as though the object of the kingdom is secular reform.
Christ's kingdom is not of this world.

It does not use the weapons of this world.

It does not have the agenda of this world.

It is the kingdom of heaven.

The kingdom of God is not an alternative political party,
but an alternative politics.

It reorients your focus so that you do not seek worldly power,

but again, as John puts it in his prologue,

to those who believe, he gave the power to be sons of God.

The heavenly kingdom comes through the preaching of the Word.

The heavenly kingdom comes through the breaking of bread.

The heavenly kingdom comes through the church living as the people of God
in the midst of this present evil age.

In other words,

as Christ stood before Pilate,

so do we stand before the world.

A godly society is not the goal and purpose of the church;

it is the byproduct of the kingdom.

And every time the church has turned its focus towards building a godly society,

the church has evaporated into the world.

Rather the church is to live as the kingdom of God in the midst of this evil age.

I look at the debauchery of our culture, and I am not nearly as pessimistic as many.

What else would you expect from godless pagans?

In this world, you will have trouble –

but take heart, I have overcome the world!

No matter who gets elected next month,

we will have trouble.

But take heart, Jesus has overcome the world!

He won!