

## **Jesus is Tried before Pilate (John 18:28-40)**

In order for Jesus to die by crucifixion it was inevitable that His path to the cross would include a trial by the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. In the political setting of the day only Pilate could authorize a death sentence in Judea. The Jewish leaders had already determined that Jesus must die, and they formalized this decision during Jesus' religious trials. Now the civil trials would begin. Although Pilate would find no basis for putting Jesus to death he would, nonetheless, send Jesus to the cross. In the midst of this great injustice was the justifying work of God. Through Jesus death we can be justified, declared right with God. Because the world did not acknowledge Jesus for who He is, it sent Him to the cross. The way of the world stands in dark relief to the brilliance of Jesus and His sacrificial death.

### **False piety fails to see the need for Jesus (18:28-32).**

The religious leaders, having tried Jesus and found no substantial charges against Him, took Jesus to the Roman court to secure a death sentence while trying to maintain their ceremonial purity for Passover. The irony is astounding. In their false piety the Jewish leaders condemned an innocent man. They failed to see their deep and desperate need for Jesus.

***The Jewish leaders took Jesus to Pilate while maintaining their ceremonial purity (18:28).***

Jesus stood trial before Annas, then Caiaphas, and then the entire Jewish Sanhedrin. John records only the first of these three religious trials and merely indicates that the Jewish leaders led Jesus from Caiaphas to Pontius Pilate for the civil trials. Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, maintained his administrative capital in Caesarea, but during the Jewish festivals he relocated to Jerusalem. The precise location of Pilate's palace in Jerusalem is debated, but it would have been near enough to the Temple to monitor any subversive activity. Pilate would have conducted official business early in the morning, so the Jewish leaders arrived early on that Passover morning. They would not enter Pilate's palace since entering the residence of a Gentile would render them ceremonially unclean and unfit to engage in the Passover meal. They needed to maintain their ceremonial purity in spite of their nefarious actions.

***The Jewish leaders attempted to get Pilate to condemn Jesus without any significant evidence (18:29-30).***

Pilate harbored no love for the Jewish people and their practices, but he had learned to accommodate some of their demands in order to maintain peace. He, therefore, met the Jewish leaders outside his palace and asked what charges they had against Jesus. The Jewish leaders dodged the question by stating that they would not have delivered Jesus to Pilate if Jesus were not guilty of something evil. In fact, the Jewish leaders could barely trump up charges against Jesus significant enough to warrant their own legal condemnation. They had no case to offer the Roman governor.

***The Jewish leaders indicated to Pilate that they wanted Jesus put to death (18:31).***

Pilate, no doubt irritated with this shabby indictment, told the Jewish leaders to take Jesus and judge Him according to their own laws. Clearly this was a religious matter. But the Jewish leaders stated plainly that they were seeking the death penalty. Under Roman jurisdiction the Jews were restricted from putting anyone to death. In their sinful minds, Jesus must die.

***Jesus had already predicted that He would die by crucifixion (18:32).***

Jesus would indeed die, but not for the reasons the Jewish leaders had in mind. Jesus would die as the sacrifice for our sins. John indicates that the nature of Jesus' civil trial and the actions of the Jewish leaders worked to fulfill Jesus' own prediction about the nature of His death. Jesus had warned His disciples that He would be crucified (Matthew 16:21; 20:17-19; John 12:32). Only the Romans could inflict the death penalty, and that penalty would be carried out by crucifixion. In their false piety the Jewish leaders maintained their ceremonial purity while unjustly delivering Jesus to Pilate for crucifixion. They failed to see that, in fact, they needed Jesus to wash away their sins.

**Rejected truth fails to recognize  
the identity of Jesus (18:33-38a).**

If the Jewish leaders were guilty of false piety, Pilate became guilty of rejecting truth. In so doing, he failed to recognize the true identity of Jesus.

***Pilate interrogated Jesus about His claim to be the King of the Jews and Jesus probed Pilate's perspective on this claim (18:33-34).***

Back inside his palace and away from the scrutiny of the Jewish leaders, Pilate summoned Jesus and began the interrogation. He asked Jesus, "Are you the king of the Jews?" Apparently this was the charge which the Jewish leaders had communicated to Pilate. This charge would necessarily raise concerns with the Roman government in spite of the fact that there was no evidence of insurrection. Jesus engaged Pilate in a discussion, asking the governor if this charge came from him or others. This may, in fact, have been a gracious question on Jesus' part inviting Pilate to consider the nature and reality of this claim. Was Pilate prepared to accept the truth about Jesus?

***Pilate questioned Jesus about His activities and Jesus indicated that His kingdom is not of this world (18:35-36).***

Pilate answered Jesus' question with another question. "I'm not a Jew am I?" He then placed the blame for Jesus' trial on the Jews. Pilate stated that it was Jesus' "people" and "chief priests" who had handed Him over for trial. So Pilate asked Jesus to confess whatever actions may have led to His arrest. "What have you done?" he asked. Jesus replied by declaring that He was indeed a king. However, Jesus' kingdom "is not of this world." Jesus wasn't attempting to raise a political kingdom in opposition to Rome. Otherwise His servants would have struggled to

prevent His being turned over to the Jewish authorities. Instead, Jesus declared that His kingdom “is not from here,” not of this world. Jesus’ kingdom is heavenly in origin, spiritual in nature, and more powerful than any political kingdom can ever hope to be. This truth was completely counterintuitive to someone like Pontius Pilate.

***Pilate concluded that Jesus claimed to be a king and Jesus stated that He is a king who testifies to the truth (18:37-38a).***

Pilate understood Jesus correctly, asking expectantly, “So then, you are a king?” Jesus affirmed Pilate’s conclusion and added that He was born for this purpose. He had come into the world to be a king. Jesus’ miraculous birth and heavenly origin, lost on Pilate, were laden with divine, royal authority. This royal purpose included the proclamation of truth. Jesus came to be a king who would witness to the truth. Jesus had earlier stated that He is the embodiment of truth (John 14:6). His heavenly origin and His authoritative teachings revealed His divine nature, the ultimate source of truth. Furthermore, Jesus stated that everyone characterized by truth would listen to Him. Since Jesus is the embodiment of truth, those who value truth value Jesus and follow Him. At this point Pilate ended the interrogation with his infamous, rhetorical, cynical question, “What is truth?” Had Pilate been more spiritually astute he would have asked, “Who is truth?” But by rejecting truth Pilate failed to recognize the true identity of Jesus, the King of the Jews, the Lord of heaven, the Savior of the world.

**Personal expediency fails to honor  
the supremacy of Jesus (18:38b-40).**

Having interrogated Jesus without arriving at a satisfactory conclusion, Pontius Pilate now sought a path of expediency. He wanted to release Jesus while acknowledging the charges of the Jewish leaders. But in his attempt he, along with the Jewish leaders, failed to honor the supremacy of Jesus.

***Pilate declared to the Jewish leaders that he found no legitimate charges against Jesus (18:38b).***

Pilate went outside his palace and once again confronted the Jewish leaders. He stated his legal opinion about Jesus, saying, “I find no crime in him.” The case against Jesus carried no legal merit. Jesus had said and done nothing worthy of the death sentence. This decision should have ended the matter, but Pilate sought to appease the Jewish leaders.

***Pilate offered to release Jesus in fulfillment of a longstanding Passover custom (18:39).***

Even though Jesus was innocent, Pilate was willing to acknowledge guilt in Jesus and then release Him according to a longstanding practice of magnanimity. The very fact that Pilate proposed this solution indicates that he was willing to unjustly declare Jesus guilty of a crime. During previous Passover celebrations Pilate had granted the release of a Jewish prisoner. Pilate suggested that he release “the king of the Jews,” Jesus. Had the Jewish leaders accepted this

recommendation Pilate could have smoothed over the problem. He had no reason to view Jesus as anyone special, certainly not a king of any kind of kingdom. Pilate failed to see in Jesus the supreme ruler of the universe.

***The Jewish leaders shouted their desire to have Barabbas released and Jesus executed (18:40).***

Apparently the Jewish leaders were prepared for Pilate's suggestion and they already had in mind someone to be released in fulfillment of the custom. Therefore, they "cried out" to Pilate not to release Jesus but to release instead a man named Barabbas. They were unwilling to let Jesus walk away. They preferred Barabbas over Jesus. Barabbas, John notes, was a rebel. For the sake of expediency, Pilate had suggested the release of Jesus. Out of hatred the Jewish leaders asked for the release of Barabbas. They failed to honor Jesus supremacy—His supreme moral character, His supreme spiritual authority, His supreme nature as God in the flesh. Jesus is above all, but was valued below a common criminal. Because the world did not acknowledge Jesus for who He is, it sent Him to the cross. The way of the world stands in dark relief to the brilliance of Jesus and His sacrificial death.