
Condemned by the Romans

John 18:28-19:16

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On trial...

John presents the trial of Jesus in such a way that it is actually the Jews, the Romans and Pilate who are all on trial. Through this narrative, we are brought face to face with common excuses for unbelief. At the center of the question of belief is your answer to this question: Who is your King?

Watch how the question of kingship, authority, and truth are intertwined.

Delivered by the Jews

(v.28-32)

Jesus' life, even in these hours, is fulfilling the Scriptures...

²⁸ Then 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. 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.

Their Hypocrisy

(v. 28)

What a bunch of hypocrites. They are here to make false accusations and to have Jesus executed, but they won't enter a Gentile's house because of their made-up rules regarding their religious celebration. It is laughable. It is horrible. Yet, how often is this us?

Their Motivation

(v. 29-31)

So they drag Pilate away from his supper and his family to level their accusation. John is not telling us what the accusation is. He is exposing their motivations. Their arrogance is astonishing. "Come on Pilate, do your job. We have handed him over to you. We got the goods on him. Now execute him."

Here is their motivation. They are not after justice. They simply want to destroy Jesus. Now from their religious frame of reference, they thought they were doing God a favor. But like many in Islam, while thinking they are serving god, they are serving the devil.

Their Fulfillment**(v. 32)**

But John wants to make clear that even in that, they are fulfilling Scripture. It is a terrific irony. They think they are serving God. They are actually serving themselves and the devil. All the while, they are accomplishing the true God's purposes.

The Scriptures had prophesied a kind of execution for the Messiah, for Jesus, that the Jews did not and could not use. Their method of execution was stoning. The prophecy was of an execution by being hung on a tree. The Romans had perfected an execution on a tree. It was called *crucifixion*. It was a slow, horrible, painful, way to die – nailed naked to an X or a T. Raised up in the noon sun. Pushing yourself up on nailed feet to get a breath. Slowly, slowly, dying...

So fulfilling the Scripture meant a Roman execution on a cross. Jesus would be "lifted up." Jesus would be the brass serpent lifted up the wilderness. He would become the curse hanging on the tree.

What is your assessment of Jesus? Would you have been in that crowd? Do you believe that He is all that the Scriptures say He is?

Interrogated by Pilate**(v.33-38)**

Jesus was born to be King

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?" ³⁵ Pilate answered, "Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done?" 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." 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. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice." ³⁸ Pilate said to him, "What is truth?"

His Earthly Kingship**(v.33-35)**

Pilate asks the most important question in this text. Is Jesus the Messiah? Is He the King of the Jews? Is Jesus Pilate's King? Is He the One who was portrayed, promised and prophesied? But yet, His own people didn't believe Him or accept Him. He came to His own and His own rejected Him.

His Heavenly Kingdom**(v.36)**

Jesus redefines the nature of His Kingdom. Here was the problem for the Jews. Here was the problem for Pilate. Here is a growing problem for people in our world today.

Jesus is not here to transform the kingdoms of this world. His is not an earthly kingdom. It is a heavenly one. It will rule here. He will conquer here.

His Great Mission

(v.37-38)

This is His great mission. The “this purpose” is wonderfully ambiguous. *This purpose* in John is to die. *This purpose* here is both to die and to rule. He came as both Redeemer and Ruler. So the kingdom is coming through the truth. It is the proclamation of the truth and the belief of the truth that brings the kingdom of God into existence.

Pilate dismisses the greatest claim in the universe with a sarcastic rejoinder. “What is truth?” he says when truth personified is standing right in front of him.

Do you believe that truth doesn't matter? Do you just dismiss this great Redeemer and Ruler?

Exchanged for a Robber

(v.38b-40)

Here is where the “this purpose” intersects between the King and the cross. Here is the exchange of the Sovereign for a sinner.

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.

A Judicial Announcement

Pilate’s initial judicial announcement is accurate from our point of view. There was no fault in Jesus. In the real flow of Roman court procedure, he is paying lip service to the charges. Jesus has in fact just confessed to the charge. But he has announced the truth and it ought to convict the Jews.

A Political Custom

Instead, of simply freeing Him, he gives himself political cover by invoking a custom the Romans had established. To recognize the Jewish Passover, the Roman governors offered to release a political prisoner. So he offers to release Jesus, who is obviously a political prisoner. He is offering a political solution – the Jews will have accused Him and He will have released Him.

A Clear Choice

This presents the Jewish leadership with a clear choice. Will they accept the political solution offered? No, they are bent on destroying Jesus. They want Him crucified. So they cry out to have a man named Barabbas released. Not Jesus, Barabbas

An Insurrectionist Sinner

John comments that Barabbas was a robber or better, an insurrectionist. We know nothing about this man except his name and that he was a sinner. His name is odd in that it means “the son of a father”. But the fact is he was a criminal and a rebel against Rome. Yet they want Barabbas, the rebel instead of Jesus, their King.

Don’t many people think the same way, anything or anyone except for Jesus?

Abused by the Romans**(v.1-11)**

John goes on to contrast the power of the Romans and all being under the authority of God.

Mocking His Kingship**(v.1-5)**

¹ Then Pilate took Jesus and flogged him. ² And the soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head and arrayed him in a purple robe. ³ They came up to him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" and struck him with their hands. ⁴ Pilate went out again and said to them, "See, I am bringing him out to you that you may know that I find no guilt in him." ⁵ So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, "Behold the man!"

Pilate takes Jesus and allows the Roman soldiers to mock His Kingship. Jesus is beaten, crowned with thorns, slapped and dressed in kingly robes. Then in this painful and pitiful state, He is paraded out before the Jews. After all this abuse, Pilate announces once again that Jesus is innocent.

Rejecting His Kingship**(v.6-7)**

⁶ When the chief priests and the officers saw him, they cried out, "Crucify him, crucify him!" Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and crucify him, for I find no guilt in him." ⁷ The Jews answered him, "We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has made himself the Son of God."

So, the Jews still want Jesus crucified. Even though He is constantly being declared innocent, they scream for His death. In desperate and despicable anger, they up the ante. It is not enough that He claims to be the true King, they accuse Him of being equal with God. Imagine that, He is accused of what He has claimed.

Exercising His Power**(v.8-10)**

⁸ When Pilate heard this statement, he was even more afraid. ⁹ He entered his headquarters again and said to Jesus, "Where are you from?" But Jesus gave him no answer. ¹⁰ So Pilate said to him, "You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?"

Now we start to see the real Pilate. He is afraid. He is afraid of the Jews. He is now afraid that he may be dealing with a deity or a maniac. So he asks a question that is framed by John with more delicious irony. The Roman gods were always from "somewhere." All through John's gospel, Jesus has claimed to be God because He is from the Father. Jesus recognizes that a simple true answer will be misunderstood. So, He does not answer. Silence.

Pilate is not pleased. After all, he is a Big Man. He has authority. He holds Jesus' life in his hands. How dare Jesus not answer him!

Asserting His Authority (v.11)

¹¹ Jesus answered him, "You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin."

Now we come to what this is all about: who has the greater authority? Jesus statement is so simple, so matter of fact and so incredibly stunning. "You Pilate, the local representative of the might and power of Rome, you who think you have all this authority, you who can put Me to death, you are nothing if the God of the universe, My Father, had not given you this authority."

Since this is so, and since the ones who have handed Jesus over to him are supposed to be worshipping, serving and obeying God, they are even more accountable than Pilate.

So here is the question for you today: How will you respond to this King? Make fun of Him? Question Him? Dismiss Him? Or bow to Him?

Condemned to be Executed (v.12-17)

In this simple paragraph, the long Jewish regency comes to its final end.

The Threat against Pilate (v.12)

¹² From then on Pilate sought to release him, but the Jews cried out, "If you release this man, you are not Caesar's friend. Everyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar."

So the Jewish leaders threaten Pilate. This is serious. This is political manipulation at its best. Pilate's relationship with Rome had been rocky. This is hitting below the belt. This is going to worry him a lot.

The Rejection of Jesus (v.13-15)

¹³ So when Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judgment seat at a place called The Stone Pavement, and in Aramaic Gabbatha. ¹⁴ Now it was the day of Preparation of the Passover. It was about the sixth hour. He said to the Jews, "Behold your King!" ¹⁵ They cried out, "Away with him, away with him, crucify him!" Pilate said to them, "Shall I crucify your King?" The chief priests answered, "We have no king but Caesar." ¹⁶ So he delivered him over to them to be crucified.

Here is a conscious rejection of the promised Messiah and His rule over them. And here is a conscious affirmation that they have embraced the Gentile rule.

Look at all the connections John is making. Here is a pagan Gentile sitting in judgment on the Jewish King. The Jews accept Caesar's rule over them and consign Jesus to death. They call for His crucifixion.

It is in the Passover week. The great sovereign Lion who is also the sacrificial Lamb is handed over to die. And it is dark. But the dawn is only three days away.

The Place of Execution**(v.16-17)**

So they took Jesus, ¹⁷ and he went out, bearing his own cross, to the place called The Place of a Skull, which in Aramaic is called Golgotha.

What an evocative verse. Taken. Dragging His own cross. Out past the city dump and the place of execution, fittingly called, the Place of a Skull. Time to die.

Who then will you worship? Will you worship Jesus or will you worship an earthly king?

Reflect and Respond

This story of Jesus' trial is intended to confront you with several important questions. How you answer them reveals whether you believe in a saving way or not.

Do you believe that truth does matter? Do you just dismiss this great Redeemer and Ruler? Do you see that to believe in Jesus is to believe the truth about Jesus?

Do you want anything or anyone except for Jesus?

How will you respond to this King? Make fun of Him? Question Him? Dismiss Him? Or bow to Him?

Who then will you worship? Will you worship Jesus or will you worship an earthly king?

Believers are challenged by this story in a different way.

Where do we tend to be pompously religious and hypocritical?

How do we treat the truth of the Word of God in how we read it, listen to it and live it?

Do we really bow to Jesus? Is every one of our desires submitted to His Kingly Lordship?

Do we see the cross in some syrupy sentimentality or in the sharp, edgy, Technicolor pain that it was?

Finally, does this bring us to our knees in grateful worship...