

Before Pilate

📖 Matthew 27:11-15

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📅 April 5, 2017

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In the final week of Jesus, we have seen many things transpire that reveal that all these things are under the sovereign direction of the Lord Jesus Christ. On Saturday, Jesus was anointed by Mary with a very costly oil which Judas rebuked but Jesus rebuked Judas causing him to make his final decision to betray Him over to the chief priests for thirty pieces of silver, the exact amount prophesied by Zechariah. On Wednesday Jesus predicted His death by crucifixion on the day of Passover even while the chief priests and elders were plotting to seize Him by stealth and kill Him some time after the Passover. On Thursday Jesus kept the location of the last Passover hidden so that He would not be betrayed before the time. At the Passover Jesus predicted with total precision Judas' betrayal that very day. And yet, even in the midst of the betrayal Jesus extended grace to Judas showing the proper understanding of divine sovereignty and human responsibility. "The Son of Man is to go; but woe to the man by whom He goes." Remarkably cool and calm the Lord established the Lord's Supper for the Church in the midst of the Last Passover and betrayal. On the way to Gethsemane Jesus predicted Peter's denials not once thrice but twice thrice. In Gethsemane, we see His agony in the final hour before His predicted betrayal and arrest. At the exact time, they rise to meet the evil band head on. With two words the entire cohort is struck to the ground. Judas betrays Him with a kiss. Peter attempts to defend Him with a sword by cutting off the ear of the high priest's slave. Jesus rebukes Peter, heals the slave, permits Himself to be bound and led to the first of three religious trials. Annas, the high priest emeritus, was the real Jewish power, his decision to send Jesus to Caiaphas reveals his decision to put Jesus to death. Before Caiaphas there is total determination to put Him to death; the calling of witness after witness with no corroboration, even to the point of exasperation when Caiaphas illegally puts Jesus under oath to testify against Himself. Outside Peter is fulfilling Jesus' prophecy of denials before servant girl, soldiers and bystanders, and realizing anew that the word of Christ is the very word that upholds and controls the universe, down to the very crow of a rooster. At the last the third religious trial before the Sanhedrin at first light, a mere formality to make appear legal the illegal decision made during the night. Judas seeing that Jesus was condemned to death then felt remorse, a remorse that fell short of repentance but led him to try to return the thirty pieces of silver. The chief priests and elders refused lest the innocent blood fall upon their shoulders. Even His enemies were admitting His total innocence of any crime demanding death. Judas cast the pieces of silver into the holy place, went away and hanged himself. Having

fulfilled the prophecies of his betrayal, his body now hung on a branch which when weakened by the dead weight of Judas' body eventually gave way, fell to the ground and burst headlong, his intestines gushing out, a dramatic picture of the end of all who oppose God and His Christ. The chief priests then took the silver and used it to do something that appeared righteous, purchasing a field for the burial of strangers in the name of Judas Iscariot. Having been purchased with blood money the field was renamed the Field of Blood. This also fulfilled prophecy in that Zechariah predicted the thirty pieces of silver, the price set by Judas, would be used to purchase the Potter's Field. All of this shows that the Lord Jesus was in complete control of the events that week, one by one prophecy was fulfilled so that at the last He could say, it is finished, a reference to the fulfillment of all the Messianic prophecies related to His first coming.

Having seen the first three religious trials, we come today to the first of the three civil trials. It is Friday, the day of the crucifixion. A brief record of this civil trial is found in Matt 27:11-15. This first trial will be before Pilate, the second will be before Herod Antipas, not recorded by Matthew, but before the very man who carelessly had John the Baptists' head brought to him on a platter, and the third will be before Pilate a second time. Since Matthew does not record the trial before Antipas, he blends the first and second trials before Pilate. Luke is the only gospel to record the trial before Herod and it occurred in Matthew 27 between vv 15 and 16. So tonight the first civil trial before Pilate.

In 27:2 we introduced Pilate. "They bound, and led Him away and delivered Him to Pilate the governor." Pilate's full name was Pontius Pilate. Pontius was his family name. Pilate is mentioned in Josephus' writings on several occasions, usually with respect to his harsh dealings with the Jews which led the Emperor to rebuke him. The Emperor wanted peace in Rome and rulers who did not manage their territories eventually were reported to him. Pilate had already been reported to him and so Pilate wanted to keep the Jews happy so that he would not lose his procuratorship. Pilate's name was also discovered by archaeology, inscribed on a stone found at Caesarea by the Sea, and mentioned as ruling as procurator over Judea during the reign of Emperor Tiberius. This man had made his residence in Caesarea by the Sea, a Roman city that housed the Roman legions. His palace had been built by Herod the Great and sat overlooking the Mediterranean Sea. At Passover, and other Jewish festivities, he would go up to Jerusalem to show a strong Roman presence and keep law and order. Early in the morning of April 4, 33AD, Jesus was "bound...led away and delivered...to Pilate the governor." The parallel in Jn 18:28 says, "they led Jesus from Caiaphas into the Praetorium, and it was early; and they themselves did not enter into the Praetorium so that they would not be defiled, but might eat the Passover." The Jewish leaders did not want to enter the Praetorium because it was a Gentile residence and entering it would defile them. Since it was Passover any defilement would prohibit them from participation in Passover. Edersheim explained, "...the term Pesach, or "Passover," was applied not only to the Paschal Lamb, but to all the Passover sacrifices, especially to what was called the Chagigah, or festive offering....According to the express rule...The Chagigah was brought on the first festive Paschal Day. It was offered immediately after the morning-service, and eaten on that day—probably some time before the evening, when, as we shall by-and-by see, another ceremony claimed

public attention. We can therefore quite understand that, not on the eve of the Passover, but on the first Paschal day, the Sanhedrists would avoid incurring a defilement which, lasting till the evening, would not only have involved them in the inconvenience of Levitical defilement on the first festive day, but actually prevented their offering on that day the Passover, festive sacrifice, or Chagigah.”¹ Therefore, they took Jesus to Pilate’s residence, at the Praetorium, but they themselves did not enter the Praetorium. The irony of the situation is that while Jesus was taken inside a Gentile residence He remained undefiled; while those who remained outside would cry “Crucify! Crucify!” defiling themselves and writing their own death sentence and that of their children.

Now Pilate’s residence is said by the Gospel of John to be the Praetorium. Matthew refers to this place in 27:27 where we read, “Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the Praetorium...”. The Greek word *πραιτωριον* technically means “the governors official residence.” It was Pilate’s official residence when he came up to Jerusalem. The identification of the location of the Praetorium is important for visitors to Jerusalem. It marks the beginning of what is known as the Via Dolorosa (Lat. “way of sorrows”). During the Crusader period the Praetorium was identified as the Antonia Fortress, the Roman barracks that sat on the NW Corner of the Temple Mount. Thus, since the Crusader period the traditional Via Dolorosa has begun at the Antonia Fortress and ended at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, the traditional location of the crucifixion. The route is walked from station to station by Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox and other more ritualistic denominations of Christendom. However, a mountain of archaeological evidence has been amassed pointing to the Praetorium being identified as the Citadel of David, just inside Jaffa Gate, on the west side of the old city of Jerusalem, and not the Antonia Fortress. This would mean the true Via Dolorosa would be a route from the Citadel of David to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. I have walked both of these routes through the streets of Jerusalem today. The traditional route is a long and arduous trek that I doubt very seriously is the real route. So, while it provides some connection to the events of that day, the real route is much more likely the route from the Citadel of David. In any case, the Praetorium where the trial before Pilate occurred most likely took place in what is today the Citadel of David and not at the Antonia Fortress. That is where Jesus was taken in Matt 27:2 and that is where the Sanhedrin stood outside waiting as Pilate goes in and out of the Praetorium to administer this trial.

We come to 27:11 where we have a brief narration of the trial. **Now Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor questioned Him, saying, “Are you the King of the Jews?” And while He was being accused by the chief priests and elders, He did not answer. Then Pilate said to Him, “Do you not hear how many things they testify against You?” And He did not answer him with regard to even a single charge, so the governor was quite amazed.** The account is so brief and so many details are skipped over that it will help if we fill in from the parallel accounts. Hold your place in Matthew and turn to John 18:29. The parallel in John 18:29 says “Pilate went out” of the Praetorium “and said, “What accusation do you bring against this Man?” “They answered and said to him, “If this Man were not an evildoer, we would not have delivered Him to you.” At the start a vague accusation was made. This was an attempt to evade any discussion of the matter with Pilate and intimidate him into doing their will. They knew they could manipulate him because of the Emperor’s past rebuke

of Pilate for handling the Jews with a heavy hand. So, they are simply trying to push Pilate around and they have no substantial evidence anyway. Pilate knew the real reason they turned Him over was because of envy. He knew Jesus had done nothing worthy of death. But they had to bring Him before Pilate because he was the only one who could issue the death penalty. And it was true, Pilate was the only person in the territory who could issue the death penalty. But Pilate was not a pushover. He said in John 18:31, "Take Him yourselves, and judge Him according to your law." What Pilate is trying to do is extricate himself from the situation. As bad a rap as Pilate gets Pilate readily did not want to crucify Jesus. In fact, as we will see, he exhausted every possible alternative to save Him, except the most plain and simple decision of dismissing the case altogether. The leaders' response to Pilate was that they were "not permitted to put anyone to death." This indicated to Pilate that they indeed sought the death penalty and he could not pursue this avenue to extricate himself from the situation. The parallel in Luke 23:2 says that they then made three accusations. First, we found this man misleading our nation. This accusation means that Jesus was plotting sedition against Rome. This couldn't have been further from the truth. Second, we found this man forbidding to pay taxes to Caesar. This too could not be substantiated, for just that Tuesday Jesus had said, "Render unto Caesar, the things which are Caesar's; and the things which are God's, unto God." Third, we found Him saying that He Himself is Christ, a King. Pentecost said, "Any one of these three accusations left Christ open to the charge of treason against Rome. A charge of treason was one that no Roman court could ignore. The third charge was the most dangerously treasonous. Was Jesus claiming to be **King of the Jews?** That is the charge that Matthew chose to emphasize. Why? Because that is a major theme of Matthew, that Jesus is the King of the Jews. This is the second time this phrase has been used in Matthew. The first was in Matt 2 when the wise men came looking for the one born **King of the Jews**. Now, this charge must be investigated by Pilate. He went back into the Praetorium and said to Jesus in Matt 27:11, "**Are you the King of the Jews?**" Was Jesus trying to rule in Caesar's jurisdiction? Caesar was the king of the Jews. Was Jesus trying to claim to be the King of the Jews in the same sense? When Pilate asked Him this, the parallel in John 18:34 says Jesus asked him, "Are you saying this on your own initiative, or did others tell you about Me?" What Jesus was asking was whether Pilate had come up with this idea or had been fed to him from the Jews. If it was his idea, then Jesus was being accused of treason by Rome. If it had been fed to him from the Jews, then He was being accused of treason by the Jews. Pilate answered, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests delivered You to me; what have You done?" Jesus now knew that the Jews had fed him this idea. All Pilate was doing was investigating the accusation. In this Pilate was acting in full accordance with Roman law. He was required to investigate such a charge. Then Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm." The meaning of this verse, so often misinterpreted, is that His kingdom is not *derived* from this world. His logic is that if it was *derived* of this world then it would be acquired by Him in the same way that kingdoms of this world are acquired, by raising a human army to fight. But Jesus had already quelled Peter's actions of war by rebuking him and healing the slave's ear. Therefore, Jesus' kingdom must not be derived from this realm, it must be derived from above. That is one reason the Gospel of Matthew refers to

Jesus' kingdom as "the kingdom of heaven." That special phrase, found in Matthew alone, means that the kingdom is derived from heaven, sourced in heaven, in the sense that it will come from heaven to earth. It does not mean that the kingdom is in heaven. It is not the kingdom in heaven. It is the kingdom of heaven. Jesus was telling Pilate the nature of His kingdom. As Toussaint said, "The significance of the King's reply to the question of the procurator is great. It indicates the nature of Christ's kingdom." Its nature is heavenly, derived from heaven, not earthly. Pentecost said, "If Christ's kingdom originated in this world, He would have summoned an army to fight against Rome. Since His kingdom was not of this world, it would not be established as a worldly kingdom would be established." Pilate was quick to understand "and said to Him, "So You are a king?" And Jesus answered, "You say correctly that I am a king. For this I have been born and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice." Pilate said to Him, "What is truth?" The significance of Pilate's response cannot be underestimated. The concept of truth to the Romans was captured by the greatest Roman historian Gibbon, when he said, "while all religions were to the people equally true, they were to the philosopher equally false, to the magistrate equally useful." Fairbairn said, "...Pilate was in these respects a true Roman magistrate. His attitude to the Jews is expressed in the history of his government, his careless sacrifice of life, his insolent affronts to their deepest and dearest convictions. His attitude to religion is expressed in the question, asked in cynical impatience, "What is truth?" Meaning "What is your truth to me? Fools may reason about it, statesmen cannot rule by it; he but wastes his time who seeks it." To Pilate Jesus' claim to be a King was just that, "a claim" and nothing more, something true for Jesus but not true for anyone else. Therefore, Jesus was no threat to Caesar who was really king. Pilate considered such convictions of religious truth to be a waste of time. The text says "And when he had said this, he went out of the Praetorium again to the Jews and said, "I find no guilt in Him." In other words, there was no substance to Jesus' claim to be king or their charges that He had claimed to be king. Therefore, as far as Pilate was concerned, there was no basis for condemning Jesus to death. He had not committed treason. Jesus was innocent of a capital crime in a Roman court of law.

Matthew 27:12 picks up at this point where **He was being accused by the chief priests and elders**. The parallel in Luke 23:5 says they kept on insisting that "He stirs up the people teaching all over Judea, starting from Galilee even as far as this place." They started hurling all kinds of accusations against Him in order to pressure Pilate to reverse his judgment. But as Pilate listened he heard them mention the Galileo. This was the key to Pilate's next decision, but note is made of the fact that he was amazed that Jesus kept silent despite all the charges. He asked in 27:13, **Do you not hear how many things they testify against You? And He did not answer him with regard to even a single charge, so the governor was quite amazed**. This is the second of three notices that Jesus kept silent. Lenski, quoted by Walvoord, said, "this is the second important silence of Christ, the first being in Matthew 26:63 and the third in John 19:9." Pilate marveled that Christ could keep silent under the circumstances. The fact is that after Pilate pronounced Him innocent, Jesus was under no obligation to answer the Jews further; and, if more investigation was required, it was up to Pilate to refer his former judgment and

continue the examination. It was in the course of further accusation by the chief priests and the scribes that Pilate learned that Jesus was from the Galilee and used this as an occasion to refer the whole matter to Herod." Having concluded the first civil trial, Pilate's decision was that Jesus was innocent of treason against Caesar. The other charges that were slung at Him were non-capital nature. Thus, the testimony of Pilate is that Jesus was innocent. The testimony of the Jewish leadership is that they were corrupt and the testimony of the King is that He is marvelous.

The second civil trial is found in Luke 23 so turn there. In Luke 23:6 we read, "When Pilate heard it, he asked whether the man was a Galilean. And when he learned that He belonged to Herod's jurisdiction, he sent Him to Herod, who himself was in Jerusalem at that time." What is Pilate doing here? Trying to extricate himself from the situation. He doesn't want to crucify Jesus. He's trying to find a way out without offending the Jews. Here was a perfect opportunity. Jesus was from the Galilee, Herod Antipas, also known as the fox, had jurisdiction over the Galilee. Jesus was his subject. And fortunately, Antipas was in Jerusalem for the festivities as well. Now we know this Antipas from Matt 14. Antipas was the one who had arrested John the Baptizer because John was a nuisance. Antipas had married Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip, and John kept pointing this out in public. So, Antipas had him arrested and put in prison in Machaerus, on the other side of the Jordan. During that time, we gather that John and his message about Jesus being the King and Messiah had an impact on Antipas. But when his birthday came Herodias' daughter did a provocative dance that prompted him to promise on oath to give her whatever she asked. Being prompted by her mother, she asked for the head of John the Baptizer on a platter. Although Antipas was grieved and wanted to save John, he was more concerned about saving face, and issued the unjust command to have John beheaded and his head brought on a platter and given to the girl. So, we know who Jesus is being sent to here; one who is interested in Jesus but who is corrupt and unjust. Now we see what Luke reports in 23:8, "Now Herod was very glad when he saw Jesus; for he had wanted to see Him for a long time, because he had been hearing about Him and was hoping to see some sign performed by Him." What he wanted to see was some magic tricks. We doubt very seriously it was more than that because of Jesus' response. In verse 9 "And he questioned him at some length, but He answered him nothing." This is Jesus' third significant silence. He is fulfilling the prophecy of Isa 53:7, "Like a lamb that is led to slaughter, And like a sheep that is silent before it's hearers, So He did not open His mouth." What they are doing and what Jesus is doing are all fulfilling prophecy. This is why the King is projected here to be so marvelous. He is on a march to victory, fulfilling prophecy after prophecy after prophecy. If one prophecy fails, He is not the Messiah.

In Luke 23:10, "And the chief priests and the scribes were standing there, accusing Him vehemently. And Herod with his soldiers, after treating Him with contempt and mocking Him, dressed Him in a gorgeous robe and sent Him back to Pilate." Again, this is doing what? Fulfilling prophecy. Isa 53:7, "He was oppressed and He was afflicted, Yet He did not open His mouth... By oppression and judgment He was taken away." By sending Jesus back to Pilate, Antipas was agreeing with Pilate's judgment, that Jesus was innocent. That's two Roman courts, two Roman rulers, both judging that Jesus was innocent. Luke 23:12 says, "Now Herod and Pilate became friends

with one another that very day; for before they had been enemies with each other." The reason they became friends was because Pilate held a higher office than Antipas, and apparently, this had caused the two to rub the wrong way in the past. For Pilate to send a case from his court to Antipas was a mark of reconciliation. Edersheim said, "It was a mark of reconciliation (or might be viewed as such) between himself and the Roman, and in a manner flattering to himself, since the first step had been taken by the Governor, and that, by an almost ostentatious acknowledgement of the rights of the Tetrarch, on which possibly their former feud may have turned. Besides, Herod had long wished to see Jesus, of Whom he had heard so many things." In other words, for Pilate to seek Antipas' judgment, was politically expedient for Pilate in that, on one hand, it made reconciliation with Antipas and on the other hand, it gave him further reason to deny the Jews crucifixion of Jesus, a thing that he did not want to do. Thus, on that day they became friends.

Returning to Matthew 27, verse 15, you see Pilate's next attempt to extricate himself from crucifying Jesus. But this section has too much. Let's stop here for tonight. Summarizing, in 27:2, the Sanhedrin sent Jesus to Pilate early in the morning in the Praetorium. They themselves would not enter because of defilement. Pilate took Jesus into the Praetorium and went outside to ask the Sanhedrin what charge they brought against Him. They answered that if he had not done something worthy of death they would not have brought Him. This was an attempt to intimidate Pilate into issuing the death penalty. However, Pilate would not be pushed around. He actually knew that they had turned him over because of envy and had done nothing deserving death. They then issued three accusations, all treasonous; leading a sedition plot among the nation Israel to revolt against Rome, forbidding the paying of taxes to Caesar, and rivaling Caesar by claiming to be a King. The third charge merited Pilate's investigation. However, upon investigation he discovered that Jesus was a King whose kingdom was not derived from this world and who testified of the truth. To Pilate this was religious truth, which may have been true for Jesus but not real substance. Caesar was real substance. Therefore, without wasting any more time he went out to the Sanhedrin and announced that Jesus was innocent. Then they began to hurl many accusations against Him, none of which were capital in nature. And to all of these accusations Jesus remained silent, to the amazement of Pilate. In the midst of the accusations he realized the Jews were determined and upon hearing that Jesus was from the Galilee, he tried to extricate himself from the situation once more, sending Him to Herod Antipas. This would accomplish two things; reconciliation with Antipas, by recognizing his right to rule, and more Roman support for Jesus' innocence. Antipas questioned Jesus at length but Jesus remained absolutely silent, fulfilling more prophecy. They mocked and accused Him, treated Him with contempt, dressed Him in a gorgeous kingly robe and sent Him back to Pilate, fulfilling more prophecy. This established friendship between Antipas and Pilate that day; whereas before they had been enemies.

What's the conclusion? First, Pilate and Antipas, two Roman rulers, declare the innocence of Jesus. Pilate himself did not want to sentence Him to death. He took steps to try to ensure that the Jews did not have reason to crucify Him. He thought for sure that they would stop short of this madness. But in the end, he did not realize how much they hated Him. He would not escape responsibility. He could have concluded the trial with a

pronouncement of righteous. But he failed and the Book of Acts blames Pilate by name. Antipas just wanted to see a magic trick. When he was denied that he mistreated Him. But he knew He was innocent and returned Him to Pilate. He could have done more. Second, the religious leadership are corrupt. These were supposed to be the most holy people in the land. They were to uphold righteousness and justice. Yet the entire episode is so damning. They were the epitome of injustice and unrighteousness. Third, the King is marvelous. He is cool, calm, collected and completing a mission to fulfill Messianic prophecy. Remarkably all of the players were fulfilling prophecy, and all of them without knowing it, except Jesus.

Finally, why did Matthew record this event? To show that Jesus was the Messiah King. This is a major theme of the Gospel of Matthew. Matthew wants to give believing Jews apologetic ammo to bolster their faith and to defend Jesus' kingship against unbelieving Jews. They argued that Jesus could not be King of the Jews because there was no kingdom. They were right that there was no kingdom. There is no kingdom now. But Matthew's counter to this discounting Jesus being King is that His kingdom is not here now because you rejected Him. And you will not see Him or His kingdom until you say, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord." Surely in the meantime, any individual Jew could investigate for Himself, see that the religious leadership were corrupt, that the Lord Jesus was innocent and undefiled, the Passover Lamb who indeed takes away the sin of the world, believe upon Him for salvation and be baptized to separate themselves from that generation that was going to judgment in AD70. But would they?

¹ Edersheim quoted by J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ*, 468.