

Unclean Hearts

After the illegal and rigged religious trial during the night, Jesus faced a civil trial early in the morning. The Jews did not have the legal right under Roman rule to execute anyone, so the religious leaders had to bring Jesus before Pilate.¹ John 18:28-38² says:

Then 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. Therefore Pilate went out to them 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.' So Pilate said to them, 'Take Him yourselves, and judge Him according to your law.' The Jews said to him, 'We are not permitted to put anyone to death,' to fulfill the word of Jesus which He spoke, signifying by what kind of death He was about to die. Therefore Pilate entered again into the Praetorium, and summoned Jesus and said to Him, 'Are You the King of the Jews?' Jesus answered, 'Are you saying this on your own initiative, or did others tell you about Me?' 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 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.' Therefore Pilate said to Him, 'So You are a king?' 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?' And when he had said this, he went out again to the Jews and said to them, 'I find no guilt in Him.'

What decay in their hearts and deception of mind did the religious leaders reveal in their concern about ceremonial uncleanness! They could not enter a Gentile house and remain ceremonially clean, just the courtyard.³ But how ironic it was for them to be concerned about cleanness when they were in the middle of executing a conspiracy to murder someone!⁴ And the irony extended to the identity of their victim, for they wanted to remain ceremonially clean to eat the Passover dinner, yet were conspiring to murder the one who was the true Passover lamb!⁵

That this trial would be as much of an injustice as the one in the night was obvious in that the religious leaders had no real charge to make. Their first attempt to bully Pilate into cooperation was with fallacious logic that revealed their underhanded ways and the injustice of their

¹ J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Words & Works of Jesus Christ* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981], 466, 471. See also Edwin A. Blum, "John," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck [Colorado Springs, CO: Victor, 2004], 336-337; and D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary [Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991], 591.

² All scripture taken from the New American Standard Bible, © 1995 The Lockman Foundation.

³ Blum, 337; Carson, 588.

⁴ Blum, 337.

⁵ Carson, 589.

accusations. They were trying to railroad Jesus through the political system, essentially asking Pilate to sentence Jesus to death without investigating the charges.⁶ They knew they could not come to court with a charge of blasphemy, because it alone would not be sufficient grounds for execution under Roman law.⁷ But only execution would satisfy their corrupt desires, and so they were not content to falsely convict Jesus themselves, they needed to manipulate the political-justice system as well, to bring Jesus to death.

Unworthy Leaders

Luke 23:5-16 says:

But they kept on insisting, saying, ‘He stirs up the people, teaching all over Judea, starting from Galilee even as far as this place.’ 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 also was in Jerusalem at that time. 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. And he questioned Him at some length; but He answered him nothing. 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. Now Herod and Pilate became friends with one another that very day; for before they had been enemies with each other. Pilate summoned the chief priests and the rulers and the people, and said to them, ‘You brought this man to me as one who incites the people to rebellion, and behold, having examined Him before you, I have found no guilt in this man regarding the charges which you make against Him. No, nor has Herod, for he sent Him back to us; and behold, nothing deserving death has been done by Him. Therefore I will punish Him and release Him.’

Forced by Pilate to lodge a reasonable accusation, those charged by God to represent his truth and lead the nation spiritually lied. Instead of laying bare their true reason for contempt of Jesus, the religious leaders of the country offered up a false charge of sedition. Such was their worthiness of leadership!

Pilate knew of the victim’s innocence but tried to evade his responsibility by sending the case to Herod. Herod had no interest in justice! To him, Jesus was a plaything, and when he could not work Jesus like a marionette, he satisfied himself by ridiculing and mocking Jesus with the help of his soldiers. Such was the quality of Roman political leadership. Both Pilate and Herod found no reason to convict Jesus, yet their solution was to subject him to contempt, mockery, and physically abusive punishment.

⁶ Pentecost, 470.

⁷ Pentecost, 470; Blum, 337.

Guilt Beyond The Conspirators

Matthew 27:15-26 says,

Now at the feast the governor was accustomed to release for the people any one prisoner whom they wanted. At that time they were holding a notorious prisoner, called Barabbas. So when the people gathered together, Pilate said to them, 'Whom do you want me to release for you? Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?' For he knew that because of envy they had handed Him over. While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent him a message, saying, 'Have nothing to do with that righteous Man; for last night I suffered greatly in a dream because of Him.' But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to put Jesus to death. But the governor said to them, 'Which of the two do you want me to release for you?' And they said, 'Barabbas.' Pilate said to them, 'Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?' They all said, 'Crucify Him!' And he said, 'Why, what evil has He done?' But they kept shouting all the more, saying, 'Crucify Him!' When Pilate saw that he was accomplishing nothing, but rather that a riot was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd, saying, 'I am innocent of this Man's blood; see to that yourselves.' And all the people said, 'His blood shall be on us and on our children!' Then he released Barabbas for them; but after having Jesus scourged, he handed Him over to be crucified.

Pilate apparently counted on the popularity of Jesus among the common people to be such that they would choose Jesus over a known murderer.⁸ But the religious leaders were persuasive! They would rather release a known murderer than Jesus! They incited the crowd to chant "Crucify! Crucify!" like a chant at a football game.⁹ Rather than doing his duty to justice, Pilate tried to absolve himself of responsibility because he was too cowardly to face down a riotous crowd.

Are we in need of evidence of the depravity of the human race? Here is a crowd of people who were chanting for the death of the one hailed as a triumphant king just a few days earlier. Here was a crowd of people experiencing extreme bloodlust. By this time, we are not observing a few seeded supporters of the religious leaders, but a crowd large enough to threaten a riot. And this large crowd of people, who had been familiar with Jesus' miraculous works and godly teaching for years, were now unified in their condemnation of Jesus, which would be their self-condemnation.¹⁰ They were willing to accept the guilt of this crucifixion, on themselves and their children. There can be no greater witness to our need for a savior.

And what of Pilate, should we consider him an innocent victim in all this, a man who tried his best for Jesus but had to face political reality? Would such a man not have been content with

⁸ Louis A. Barbieri, Jr. "Matthew," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck [Colorado Springs, CO: Victor, 2004], 87. See Mark 15:7.

⁹ Barbieri, 87.

¹⁰ Stanley D. Toussaint, *Behold the King: A Study of Matthew* [Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1980], 310.

executing Jesus to satisfy the mob and his adversaries? But not Pilate, no, he went all the way, not only sending Jesus for crucifixion when he knew Jesus was innocent, but having Jesus flogged first! Scourged! with a leather whip with metal tips!¹¹ And badly enough that Jesus could not carry his own cross afterward.¹²

Rejection of the King

John 19:1-16 says:

Pilate then took Jesus and scourged Him. And the soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on His head, and put a purple robe on Him; and they began to come up to Him and say, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' and to give Him slaps in the face. Pilate came out again and said to them, 'Behold, I am bringing Him out to you so that you may know that I find no guilt in Him.' Jesus then came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, 'Behold, the Man!' So when the chief priests and the officers saw Him, they cried out saying, 'Crucify, crucify!' Pilate said to them, 'Take Him yourselves and crucify Him, for I find no guilt in Him.' The Jews answered him, 'We have a law, and by that law He ought to die because He made Himself out to be the Son of God.' Therefore when Pilate heard this statement, he was even more afraid; and he entered into the Praetorium again and said to Jesus, 'Where are You from?' But Jesus gave him no answer. So Pilate said to Him, 'You do not speak to me? Do You not know that I have authority to release You, and I have authority to crucify You?' Jesus answered, 'You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given you from above; for this reason he who delivered Me to you has the greater sin.' As a result of this Pilate made efforts to release Him, but the Jews cried out saying, 'If you release this Man, you are no friend of Caesar; everyone who makes himself out to be a king opposes Caesar.' Therefore when Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus out, and sat down on the judgment seat at a place called The Pavement, but in Hebrew, Gabbatha. Now it was the day of preparation for the Passover; it was about the sixth hour. And he said to the Jews, 'Behold, your King!' So 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.' So he then handed Him over to them to be crucified.

Pilate's own depravity continued to reveal itself following the scourging of Jesus, as he had Jesus humiliated in public, exhibiting him as harmless and ridiculous.¹³ Again we see that Pilate knew of the injustice of the accusations against Jesus, but here he caved to political pressure, the threat of accusation of treason for supporting someone who sought to overthrow Roman control.¹⁴ His foolish mistakes had left him with a record with Caesar which was not good, and so he could not

¹¹ Blum, 338.

¹² Pentecost, 474, quoting James M. Stalker, *The Trial and Death of Jesus Christ*, reprint ed. [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1961], 59.

¹³ Carson, 598.

¹⁴ Pentecost, 475.

risk such an accusation.¹⁵ Tiberius was a sick, suspicious, and violent tyrant,¹⁶ and the Jews had successfully complained of Pilate before.¹⁷

The depravity of the Jewish people also remained on display. Not content to bring upon themselves destruction by supporting the crucifixion of an innocent man, here they declared that they had but one king, Caesar! As they condemned an innocent man of blasphemy, they uttered blasphemy themselves! The religious leadership had abdicated its responsibility to God, not only rejecting the Messiah but leading the people astray also. They triumphed over Pilate by threats, accusing Jesus of seeking to overthrow Roman rule. The irony was that Jesus did not pursue such a course as his accusers would have wished from a Messiah.¹⁸ Thus, the Jews rejected their king and forced judgment on God's judge.¹⁹

Hope Rather Than Despair

What a bleak prospect this scene presents for us! Yet rather than acquiesce in the apparent despair of the moment, our hope reins supreme. In John 18:36-37, we are reminded that Jesus is King, that it was for this purpose that he came! He has been anointed the rightful King by God the Father, and – though he has not come back yet to reign – he remains our omnipotent King seated at the right hand of the Father. Theologian D.A. Carson noted, “Disclosing the truth of God, of salvation and of judgment, was the principal way of making subjects, of exercising his saving kingship.”²⁰ Thus, we have not only the hope of Jesus' future reign, but the hope he came to offer through his atoning sacrifice on the cross: salvation from sin! reconciliation with God! eternal life in paradise!

In John 18:38, we are reminded that we of faith do hear his voice. We are the redeemed, the faithful, the brothers and sisters of Christ, who serve our king now in this life and will serve him evermore when this life is complete. We have the assurance of our names in the book of life! the assurance of the presence of the Holy Spirit within us! the assurance that Christ has not abandoned us even in his death!

In John 19:11, we are reminded of the assurance that God is in control. The details of Jesus' trial and death were planned by God, as shown in the many Old Testament prophecies that were fulfilled in the process. While Jesus was a victim of injustice, as the Christ he was claiming ultimate victory in his apparent defeat. God's plan for redemption of the world was in the process of being carried out by the loyal Son of God, who had revealed that plan ahead of time to ensure his followers knew of his omniscience and control. In this last discussion with Pilate,

¹⁵ Barbieri, 87.

¹⁶ Blum, 339.

¹⁷ Carson, 602.

¹⁸ Pentecost, 471, quoting J. W. Shepard, *The Christ of the Gospels* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1946], 584. See also Blum, 339.

¹⁹ Carson, 603.

²⁰ Carson, 595.

Jesus revealed that it was God the Father who granted Pilate's authority and allowed the events to proceed. God is sovereign, and he was working through his sovereignty in this situation.

Throughout this civil trial, Jesus remained calm and in control, as he approached the last walk to his atoning sacrifice. In this we are reminded of his identity, his character, and his work for us on the cross, and thus infused with hope rather than despair.