

“Who do you say Jesus is?”

March 10, 2024

Matthew 27:11-26

I. Introduction

After reporting Judas' suicide, Matthew returned to Jesus' trial—“Meanwhile Jesus stood before the governor.” Having failed to find a legitimate charge against Jesus, the Sanhedrin had falsely accused Him of blasphemy and being worthy of death when He truthfully acknowledged that He was “the Christ, the Son of God” (Matt. 26:63-68). But because they didn't have the authority to exact the death penalty themselves, the Jewish leaders were forced to ask permission of the Roman governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate.

Pilate, the 6th Roman governor of Judea, was not liked by the Jews because of the things he had done that deliberately violated their Law. From the beginning of his tenure, he had been in trouble. Although the Roman headquarters were in Caesarea, Pilate would visit other cities in Judea and the troops that would accompany him would carry their standards or emblems which were flags or pennants with the Roman eagle or the image of the reigning emperor on them. Because of the Jewish hatred of graven images, every previous governor had removed the images from the standards before he marched into Jerusalem on his state visits, but in the beginning, Pilate refused to do so. The result was such bitter opposition and stubbornness by the Jews that Pilate was forced to yield. Later, Pilate decided that Jerusalem needed a better water supply—a wise decision. So, he constructed a new aqueduct. The problem was that he took money from the Temple treasury to pay for it. Because of these as well as many other things, Pilate's position as governor was rather precarious. The Jewish leaders were about to take advantage of Pilate's fear of political trouble and force him to crucify Jesus.

Luke recorded other details of Jesus' Roman trials—turn to Luke 23:1-25. Just like the Jewish religious leaders, the Roman political leaders could not find any fault in Jesus either. Even with all their efforts, the courts of man failed to produce a justifiable charge against the perfect Son of God. In Matthew's record of Jesus' trial before Pilate, we are shown 4 different scenes that demonstrate or prove that Jesus

Christ was put to death for no crime or sin of His own but by the hatred of sinful men—“4 Proofs of Jesus’ Innocence and the Hatred against Him.” It began with the accusations of the Jewish leadership.

II. 4 Proofs of Jesus’ Innocence and the Hatred against Him

A. The 3 Accusations of the Jewish Leadership When the chief priest and elders first brought Jesus to Pilate, it was very early on Friday morning—perhaps as early as 5 am. John 18:28 says, “By now it was early morning, and to avoid ceremonial uncleanness the Jews did not enter the palace; they wanted to be able to eat the Passover.” It was here Matthew wrote that “he was accused by the chief priest and the elders.”

Since Jesus and His disciples had already eaten the Passover meal, we need to digress for a minute and explain something about the timing of Passover. The northern Jews, including those from Galilee such as Jesus and His disciples, considered a day to span the time from one sunrise to the next. For them, Passover would start at sunrise on Thursday and end at sunrise on Friday. The southern Jews, including the Jewish leaders, considered a day to span the time from one sunset to the next. For them, Passover day began at sunset on Thursday and ended at sunset on Friday. For this reason, Jesus and His disciples had already celebrated Passover—what we now call “the Lord’s Table”—but the members of the Sanhedrin had not offered their sacrifices or eaten the Passover meal yet and for that reason they wouldn’t enter a Gentile house or building.

Pilate may have been a little upset at being roused so early in the morning, but he was probably more concerned about making the Jewish leaders angry—especially in the midst of their great religious festival when Jerusalem was filled to overflowing with Jewish pilgrims. Since they wouldn’t come in to him, the governor had to go out to them where Jesus “was accused by the chief priests and the elders.” Turn to John’s record—turn to John 18:28-340. When Pilate asked, “What charges are you bringing against this man?”, this was the first and only legal act in all the trials of Jesus—asking for a formal accusation.

Taking full advantage of their leverage against Pilate, the Jewish leaders responded with arrogance and sarcasm, “If he were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you.” They weren’t expecting Pilate to give Jesus a fair trial; they simply wanted him to approve and administer the death

sentence they had already decreed. But to avoid responsibility for Jesus' death and possible retribution from their own people, they wanted the Romans to execute Him. In order to satisfy Pilate's demand for a specific charge and to satisfy Roman law, the chief priests and other leaders had come up with three crimes. None of which had anything to do with blasphemy. "We have found this man subverting our nation. He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar and claims to be the Christ a king" (Luke 23:2).

Had these allegations been true, Pilate would have known about them before this and would have had Jesus arrested a long time ago. But, like everyone else, Pilate knew that Jesus was a man of peace and was in submission to Roman political authority. Jesus willingly paid taxes and taught His disciples to do the same (Matt. 17:24-27). In the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:41 Jesus had even taught that if a soldier commanded a person to carry his gear for a mile, that person should carry it two miles. Jesus didn't rebel against Caesar but taught to "render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's" (Matthew 22:21). And when his admirers had wanted to make Him king by force, He had disappeared from their midst (John 6:15). All the accusations brought by the Jewish leaders were lies and easy to disprove.

Pilate focused on the third charge—that Jesus claimed to be a king—because this was a definite threat against Rome. Pilate knew that the Jewish leaders themselves hated Rome with a passion. Had Jesus actually been an insurrectionist, they would have supported Him and sought to protect Him, they wouldn't have brought Him before a Roman court and demanded His execution. As Matthew wrote, Pilate knew that "it was for envy" of Jesus, not loyalty to Rome, that "they delivered Him up" (verse 18).

"Are you the king of the Jews?" Pilate asked. Jesus gave him a clear reply, "It is as you say." But then, as we read in John, Jesus asked Pilate a question about his question. Was Pilate thinking of "kingship" in the Roman sense? If so, then Jesus said that He wasn't that kind of king. He explained to Pilate that his "kingdom is not of this world," that He had no armies, that His followers would not fight. Jesus said, "But now my kingdom is from another place."

Since Jesus obviously wasn't a dangerous revolutionary, Pilate decreed, "I find no basis for a charge against him." But the council members would not be put off by Pilate's verdict. In anger they cried, "He

stirs up the people all over Judea by his teaching. He started in Galilee and has come all the way here.” The leaders were almost out of control as they vehemently demanded that Pilate condemn Jesus.

B. Jesus’ Response Jesus’ response to the accusations hurled at Him also demonstrated His innocence. Pilate knew the truth and the Jews were opposing the truth. Hoping that Jesus would come to His own defense and help expose the lies of the Jewish leaders, Pilate said to Him, “Don’t you hear the testimony they are bringing against you?” Pilate was amazed. He had judged hundreds of accused men and most of them loudly protested their innocence and were willing to say anything to save themselves—especially from death on a cross. A person who said nothing in his own defense was pretty much unheard of and astounding. But Jesus’ innocence was so obvious that it demanded no defense on His part. 1 Peter 2:23 says, “When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate, when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.”

Luke added that Pilate then sent Jesus to Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee who was in Jerusalem for the Passover. But Jesus was silent before King Herod. If Pilate had hoped to get rid of this problem, he would have been disappointed. Herod couldn’t find any charge against Jesus either. All the king could do was mock Jesus and send Him back to Pilate. Pilate wanted to solve this problem but not make any definite decision about Jesus. As a Roman governor, he was to uphold the law. But as a politician, he knew he had to get along with the people. Every decision Pilate made forced him to make another one. Pilate was digging himself a deeper and deeper hole. So, when Jesus came back from Herod, Pilate questioned Him some more, but Jesus made no reply—there was nothing to say, He was innocent.

C. The Hostility of the Crowd. Pilate had one more possibility: he would follow the tradition of releasing a prisoner at Passover. Instead of selecting an unknown prisoner, Pilate deliberately chose the most notorious prisoner he had, Barabbas. In the Gospels we are told that Barabbas was an insurrectionist, a murderer (Mark 15:7), and a robber (John 18:40). Pilate reasoned that the crowd would reject Barabbas and ask for Jesus who had healed the sick, raised the dead, and even fed many of them.

But Pilate had figured wrong. The people rejected Jesus and chose a murderer to be released. Pilate recognized that a riot was in the making, and he could not afford to let this happen. It would be bad for his career. The very thing the leaders of Israel had wanted to prevent—a riot at Passover—they were now engineering themselves in order to force Pilate to act. Pilate was trapped, he had underestimated the craftiness of the Jewish leaders and the hostility of the fickle crowd that now hated Jesus.

While Pilate was pondering his next move, he received a message from his wife. Only Matthew recorded the incident of Pilate's wife attempting to warn her husband because of her dream. This dream may have been supernatural, or it may just have been a natural dream, we aren't told which. In either case, her plea was, **"Don't have anything to do with that innocent man."** But Pilate, like many men, didn't listen to his wife's warning.

Unaware of what the leaders had managed to accomplish among the crowd while his attention was on his wife's warning, Pilate again asked, **"Which of the two do you want me to release to you?"** Without hesitation and with one voice they said, **"Barabbas."** Since Jesus had been declared not guilty under Roman law, Pilate should have released Him as well as Barabbas, but he was trapped. He knew that the only reason for the crowd to ask for Barabbas' release was to force him to condemn Jesus. Trying one more time, he said, **"What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called Christ?"** Immediately, **"they all answered, 'Crucify him!'"** The mob wanted Jesus' blood, not justice. Proclaiming Jesus' innocence, Pilate asked, **"Why? What crime has he committed?"** As he should have known, that question inflamed the mob even more and **"they kept shouting all the louder, 'Crucify Him!'"** In their hatred, the hostile crowd demanded nothing less than Jesus' death.

D. The Surrender of Pilate Matthew wrote that **"when Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. 'I am innocent of this man's blood. It is your responsibility.'"** No amount of reasoning or evidence would prevail with the obsessed mob, so Pilate took 3 steps in surrender. First, he washed his hands and declared that he was innocent of any guilt. Second, Luke and John write that Pilate said, **"I find no basis for a charge against**

him.” Jesus was a just man who was not worthy of death. Third, he offered to punish Jesus and then release Him, but the rulers would accept no compromise (Luke 23:16). Following Pilate’s surrender, the religious leaders used their last weapon as they said, “If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar” (John 19:12). At this, Pilate “had Jesus flogged, and handed Him to be crucified.”

III. Conclusion

In the hours following Jesus’ arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus was not the one on trial—it was the rest of the world. The Jewish leaders condemned themselves as they viciously demanded His crucifixion. The fickle crowds condemned themselves as they went along with their leaders and allowed themselves to be used. Herod condemned himself as he mocked the King of kings. Pilate condemned himself as he willingly allowed an innocent man to be put to death, choosing the world above the Son of God. It’s easy for us to say that if we were there in Jerusalem on that morning, we would have acted differently. But I’m afraid that’s probably not true. These people were just like you and me. As John 3:19 says, “This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.”

We spend the four Sundays before Christmas remembering and celebrating the Advent of our Lord and Savior. We sing songs like “Love came down at Christmas” and “Joy to the World.” We set up crèche scenes and here at TBC we celebrate the birth of our Savior in our annual Christmas program. In the midst of all the Christmas celebrations it is easy to forget what God’s love cost the sinless Son of Man.

There are people today who claim that Jesus was a good Man who happened to cross too many people and was killed before His time. But they are wrong. There are hundreds of prophecies about the Son of God in the Old Testament—where and when He would be born, even how He would die, e.g., turn to Isaiah 53:1-12. In Matt. 20:19 Jesus prophesied that He would die on a cross. This Lenten season, I would challenge you to take time and consider what God’s love cost Jesus Christ. And then consider what your response should be. As Jesus asked the disciples in Matt. 16:15, “Who do you say Jesus is?”