



John 18:28-38

Matthew 27:2, 11-14; Mark 15:1-5; Luke 23:1-5

Jesus' Civil Trials before Pilate

In the early morning hours before dawn the Jewish Sanhedrin condemned Jesus Christ on a charge of blasphemy. The penalty under Jewish law was death. However, the high priest had no authority to execute a death sentence. These Jewish trials were held at night and were illegal because it was illegal to pronounce a death sentence at night. Moreover, the death sentence could not be pronounced on the same day of the trial. There had to be at least one day to intervene. Both of these provisions were violated.

Therefore, the Sanhedrin quickly turned Jesus over to the Roman governor Pontius Pilate to execute Him.

The crucifixion of Jesus had to take place and everything cleaned up before six p.m. at the beginning of the Passover celebration. No body could be left on the cross that afternoon.

Jesus' First Appearance before Pilate

Pontius Pilate was the Roman Procurator from 26 to 36 A.D. His residence was in Cesarea, but during the religious feasts of Israel he travelled to Jerusalem because there was always the fear of civil unrest during these highly patriotic events. He was actually born in Seville, Spain. He abandoned his first wife to marry Claudia, the daughter of Julia, the daughter of the Emperor Augustus. His contempt for the Jewish religion was detestable. George Adam Smith says, "He was a typical Roman, stern and practical, with all the Roman contempt for superstition, which at that period was synonymous with religion of every variety, and all the Roman hatred of the Jews He hated his subjects, but also feared them. He was at their mercy, and they knew it." Pilate won the favor of the Emperor as long as he could increase the tax revenue and maintain peace in the conquered land. However, he got in trouble with the Emperor with both accounts. The first time he entered Jerusalem he set up the Roman standards bearing the Emperor's image on the citadel completely disregarding the religious conviction of the Jews concerning the prohibition of all graven images. A year before Jesus' crucifixion Emperor Tiberius had rebuked Pilate concerning these shields he had set up in Herod's palace.

Capital Punishment

The civil trial of Jesus before the Roman governor Pilate could not take place before sunrise (6 a.m.). The Sanhedrin had conducted their trials in the early morning before the sunrise. Both of their trials were technically illegal. They did not have the authority or power to crucify Jesus. The sole purpose of the Sanhedrin was to get approval from the Roman government to execute Jesus. Only the Roman governor had absolute legal authority in matters involving capital punishment. That power lay in the hands of Pilate who alone could prescribe the death penalty. He also had the power to release Jesus, but he did not.

Each of the four Gospels tells us the Sanhedrin delivered up Jesus to Pilate. Probably the whole Sanhedrin was involved with the exception of Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea.

The Jewish religious leaders wanted a rapid decision from Pilate because they feared an uprising among the Jewish people (Matt. 26:5). Moreover, they wanted to keep themselves ritually clean, in order to be able to eat the Passover meal that night. They were so obsessed that they might become religiously defiled by entering the Roman governor's palace and be forbidden to partake of the Passover that night that they did not even consider that they were murdering an innocent man at the same time. To them ceremonial pollution was far more serious than murder. The Roman Praetorium was the governor's official residence with a large outside court where the Jewish crowd could assemble without fear of ceremonial impurity. Here the Roman governor heard and decided cases brought before him. It comprised all the buildings that included the governor's quarters. If the Jews entered the Roman Praetorium on the morning of the first day of the Passover celebration they would have been rendered impure and forbidden to offer the Pascal Lamb. "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" (John 18:28, NASB95). (All Scripture references are taken from *New American Standard Bible*, 1995 Update unless otherwise noted).

Jewish Leader's Manipulations

They brought Jesus before Pilate and began to accuse Him, "We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding to pay taxes to Caesar, and saying that He Himself is Christ, a King" (Luke 23:2). These religious leaders did not want an independent formal investigation into the facts regarding Jesus; they wanted the governor's outright approval of their death sentence. Legally we cannot kill Him; you do it for us.

Pilate went out to the Jewish leaders 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" (John 18:29-32).

Jesus had been repeatedly telling His followers how and where He would die. "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up" (John 3:14). "'And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself.' But He was saying this to indicate the kind of death by which He was to die" (John 12:32-33). "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem; and the Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn Him to death, and will hand Him over to the Gentiles to mock and scourge and crucify Him, and on the third day He will be raised up" (Matthew 20:18-19). The Jews could not execute Jesus, but the Scriptures had predicted His crucifixion. The Romans had to crucify Him.

The religious leaders were not being honest with Pilate. The Sanhedrin charged Jesus with blasphemy, but they knew if they told Pilate the truth about why they wanted Jesus executed he would have refused to fulfill their demands. Pilate as a Roman governor would have nothing to do with their religious superstitions. Jewish blasphemy was not sufficient grounds in the eyes of Roman law to crucify Jesus. Pilate simply told them you have your laws go out and do it yourself. Their response was but according to the Roman law we do not have the authority to execute anyone. "We are not permitted to put anyone to death." That is a Roman privilege.

The Roman law demanded public proceedings and explicit accusations. Pilate wanted to know the formal charge against Jesus. However, the Jewish leaders wanted to be the judges, and leave Pilate to do the execution. Pilate insisted on trying the case himself especially when he heard them say Jesus was an "evildoer" (*kakos*). This man is a bad, worthless fellow. They chose a loaded term emphasizing habitual evil worker. They imply that He was actively engaged in doing evil. They leave the inference up to Pilate who would hear the word "evildoer" and draw the conclusion that Jesus had committed some crime against the Roman law.

However, Pilate did not buy into their manipulation. Pilate said to them, "Take Him yourselves, and judge Him according to your law" (John 18:31). He refuses to associate "evildoer" with an offense against the Roman law. So he challenges the Sanhedrin, and insists on a specific charge against Jesus.

King of the Jews

The Jewish leaders proceeded to accuse Jesus of treason. They said He was plotting sedition by "misleading our nation and forbidding to pay taxes to Caesar" (Luke 23:2). How many of them had paid their taxes? It was an outright lie when they said He forbade paying tribute to the Emperor. Jesus in fact said, "Render to Caesar the things which are Caesar's." In desperation they said Jesus claimed to be the Messiah, a King. Again, Jesus had steadfastly refused to accept the acclamation to become a political messiah. At the same time these religious leaders deeply desire a political messiah who would overthrow the Roman dictatorship.

In response to their accusation of sedition against Rome Pilate goes back into his palace where Jesus is waiting (John 18:33). When Pilate examined Jesus he felt free to speak the truth with Pilate. Probably with a scornful sneer Pilate asked, "Are you the King of the Jews?" (Mark 15:2; Matt. 27:11; Luke 23:3) In each of the four Gospels this is Pilate's first question to Jesus and the pronoun "You" is emphatic. In Pilate's view this was a ridiculous charge. Each of the synoptic Gospels tells us Jesus replied, "It is as you say." We could paraphrase it, "You said it!" or "Yes, indeed." "Yes, I am a king." John 18:34 tells us, "Jesus answered, 'Are you saying this on your own initiative, or did others tell you about Me?'" (John 18:34)

Pilate took offense to Jesus' answer. With Roman scorn 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'" (John 18:35-38).

A. T. Robertson reminds us Jesus' kingdom is a spiritual kingdom. It is not of this world. Jesus did claim to be a spiritual king of Israel as Nathanael said (John 1:49) and as the ecstatic crowd hailed him on the Triumphal Entry (John 12:13). However, the Sanhedrin wish Pilate to understand this in a political sense as a rival of Caesar. Remember, some of the Jews had wanted Jesus to be a political messiah (John 6:15). If His kingdom were of this world He would have recruited a worldly army. He is not a political messiah. His Kingdom is based on spiritual truth. He reigns in the heart of the individual. Jesus said, "The kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:21). Where the King is, there is the Kingdom. His rule is acknowledged in the heart. It is the sovereignty of God through the Spirit of God in our lives. William Hendriksen said, "Jesus is the real King of the real Jews."

Newman and Nida in *A Translator's Handbook* write: "Jesus is not denying that His kingdom exercises authority in this world; rather, He is affirming that the origin and nature of His kingly authority are not the same as those of the kings of this world." The Son of God came out of heaven, and His kingship is of an entirely different kind.

Silent as a Lamb at slaughter

The religious leaders "accused Him of many things" (Mark. 15:3). "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" (Matthew 27:12-14). It was a dignified silence that fulfilled prophecy.

Pilate could have released Jesus at that point in the trial, but he didn't. Pilate did not see Jesus and His Kingdom as a threat to Rome, so he dismissed any charge of treason.

The religious leaders continued to press their issue against Jesus. "But they kept on insisting, saying, 'He stirs up the people, teaching all over Judea, starting from Galilee even as far as this place'" (Luke 23:5).

Normally Pilate was in Caesarea and Herod Antipas would be in Galilee. They were now in Jerusalem for the Passover. When Pilate heard the word "Galilee" he thought he could turn Jesus over to Herod and make peace with him. Since Jesus was from Galilee he would be under the jurisdiction of Herod. He had beheaded John the Baptist in order to please Herodias. How would he treat Jesus?

Jesus before Herod Antipas (Luke 23:6-12)

It is still early Friday morning around 6 a.m. in Jerusalem (John 19:14).

"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" (Luke 23:6-12).

Herod had often heard about the miracles of Jesus and was hoping to see some "sign" or demonstration of the divine power of Jesus. The apostle John uses "sign" (*semeion*) to point to the supernatural power of God behind the miracle, and thus always gave evidence to Jesus as the Son of God. However, many people failed to see the "sign" when they saw the miracles.

Herod kept on questioning Jesus at length with many words. "Herod was staging a show," but Jesus revealed absolutely nothing to him. The implication is Jesus did not answer with a single word. Lenski says, "This silence was a rebuke to Herod." Herod refused jurisdiction over Jesus, and after interrogating him, he sent Jesus back to Pilate. It is interesting that Pilate used Herod's refusal to try Jesus as his argument to release Jesus.

"And the chief priests and the scribes were standing there, accusing Him vehemently" (Luke 23:10). The chief priests and scribes pressed their accusations "vehemently" (*eutonos*), i.e. powerfully, vigorously, vehemently, even violently. Robertson says, "They stood by while Herod quizzed Jesus and when He refused to answer, they broke loose with the accusations."

Herod along with his small detachment of soldiers "after treating Him with contempt and mocking Him, dressed Him in a gorgeous robe and sent Him back to Pilate" (Luke 23:11). They made fun of Jesus mocking Him, treating Him with ridicule as the King of the Jews. They scoffed at Him and treated Him as nothing. They put a magnificent, elegant, bright shining garment of a king on Jesus. They mocked Him as a king. Ray Summers suggests Herod and his soldiers were "playing a joke on the Roman governor. . . . One can almost hear a mocking, 'Here is your king; go on a try him.'"

Jesus' Second Appearance before Pilate

"Pilate slowly and reluctantly and in fear surrendered to the demand of the Sanhedrin for the crucifixion of Christ," observes A. T. Robertson.

It is near sunrise and the Jewish leaders are anxious to get their death-warrant for the crucifixion of Jesus. Pilate returns to the *Bema* in front of the Jewish leaders. His judgment seat was a golden throne placed on an elevated pavement of marble.

What will be the decision of the judge?

"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'" (Luke 23:13-16).

Pilate saw the disapproval of the crowd and quickly decided to chastise Jesus and release Him. This of course did not satisfy those who thirst for the blood of Jesus.

Barabbas or Jesus?

Each of the four gospels gives us the desperate decision of Pilate to give the people a choice according to the time honored tradition of the Roman governor to pardon one prisoner at the Passover each year. Surely these god-fearing people would choose Jesus over a murderous insurrectionist! (Mark 15:6-8)

"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'" (Matthew 27:17-21).

All four gospels tells us the crowd that had gathered outside the palace cried out together demanding that Barabbas be released and Jesus crucified (Mark 15:9-11; Matt. 27:17-21; Luke 23:18-19; John 18:40).

Pilate's wife was a nervous wreck and had a bad dream. She sent word to Pilate while he was sitting on the bema saying, "Have nothing to do with that righteous Man; for last night I suffered greatly in a dream because of Him" (Matt. 27:19).

Scourging of Jesus

Again with desperation Pilate thought that a good Roman scourging of Jesus would soften the cruel hearts of the religious leaders. John says Pilate took Jesus and scourged Him (John 19:1). It was nothing more than beating the prisoner to death. It was an extremely cruel form of punishment. The Romans knew no limit to the number of strokes against the naked prisoner. The instrument of torture was a cat-o'-nine-tails with iron, glass, bone, hooks attached to the ends of the thongs of leather. It was not infrequent that the victim died from such a beating.

John Shepherd describes this beating. "The scourge was a whip with several thongs, each loaded with acorn-shaped balls of lead, or sharp pieces of bone or spikes. Stripped of His clothes, His hands tied to a column or stake with His back bent, the victim was lashed with the flagels by six lictors, who plied these instruments of torture with severity almost to the point

of the death of the prisoner. Each stroke cut into the quivering flesh, until the veins and sometimes the entrails were laid bare. Often the scourge struck the face and knocked out the eyes and teeth. Scourging almost always ended in fainting and sometimes even in death" (*The Christ of the Gospels*, p. 589).

John tells us the soldiers plaited a crown of thorns and put it on Jesus' head, and placed a purple robe on His bleeding lacerated body. They placed a reed scepter in His hands and then they came up to Jesus saying with mockery, "Hail, King of the Jews." They slapped Him with their hands. They repeatedly spat in His face.

Pilate went outside again and declared to the Jews, "I find no crime in Him." He presented Jesus to them wearing a crown of thorns and the purple robe. Arrogantly he declared, "Behold, the man!" "What then shall I do to Him whom you call the King of the Jews?" (Mark. 15:12; Matt. 27:22; Luke 23:20; John 19:5).

The bloodthirsty mob grew stronger in their demands and cried out again. "Crucify Him! Crucify Him!"

Pilate replied, "Why, what evil has He done? I have found no cause of death in Him. I will therefore chastise Him and release Him" (Luke 23:20-22).

Blasphemy

Desperately the Jews finally reveal their true heart. "We have a law, and by that law He ought to die because He made Himself out to be the Son of God" (John 19:7). When Pilate heard that he was even more afraid.

Pilate took Jesus back into the palace. "Who are You?" (John 19:9) "Jesus gave him no answer" John informs us. 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" (John 19:10-11).

Pilate sought even more desperately to release Jesus (v. 12).

You are not Caesar's friend!

The antagonism between Pilate and the Jewish religious leaders grew more intense. They threatened Pilate, "If you release this man, you are not Caesar's friend!" (John 18:12). That was their greatest intimidation. He was well aware that the evil Sanhedrin would send a report to the Emperor resulting in his removal of office and banishment from the Empire.

The Roman Emperor Tiberius was on the island of Capri gravely ill with a loathsome disease. He was paranoid with suspicion and full of revenge for anyone who would cross him.

Frederic Farrar wrote: "Panic-stricken, the unjust judge, in obedience to his own terrors, consciously betrayed the innocent victim to the anguish of death. He who had so often prostituted justice was now unable to achieve the one act of justice which he desired. . . . He who had so often abused authority, was now rendered impotent to exercise it, for once, on the side of right. . . . his pleasant vices had been converted into the instrument of his punishment" (*Life of Christ*, p. 303).

Behold your King!

Pilate makes one last desperate attempt at justice. His desire is to release Jesus. He took his place upon the *bema*, and brought Jesus out before the people.

Pilate turns to the Jews and declares, "Behold your King!" (John 18:14).

The Jewish leaders stirred up the crowd with loud frenzy calling for Jesus' crucifixion (Luke 23:23). 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" (John 19:15).

With these words they sealed the doom of the nation. The mob cried louder and louder demanding the crucifixion of Jesus.

"I am innocent of the blood of this righteous man."

Pilate feared the mob and gave up. "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!'" (Matthew 27:24-25).

Five times Christ is declared innocent of the charges brought against Him by the Jews. He was innocent. (1) Luke 23:4; John 18:38; (2) Luke 23:14; (3) Luke 23:15; (4) John 19:4-6; Mark 15:14; Matt. 27:23; Luke 23:22 (5) Matt. 27:24

Pilate may have washed his hands thinking he was innocent of the blood of a righteous man, but in reality "Pilate could not escape the sense of his responsibility. There was a custom among the Greeks, Jews, and Romans of that time that when a man shed blood, he would wash his hands, thus symbolically cleansing away their stain. Pilate felt that he was a murderer. The tragic reply came back like an echo of a groan from future generations: 'His blood be on us and on our children.' Thirty years later, on this very spot, judgment was

pronounced against some of the best citizens of Jerusalem. Of the 3,600 victims of the governor's fury, not a few were scourged and crucified! Judas died in a loathsome suicide, the house of Annas was destroyed some years later, Caiaphas was deposed a year after the crucifixion, and Pilate was soon after banished to Gaul and there died in suicide. When Jerusalem fell, her wretched citizens were crucified around her walls until, in the historian's grim language, 'space was wanting for the crosses, and crosses for the bodies.' The horrors of the siege of Jerusalem are unparalleled in history" (John W. Shepherd, *Christ of the Gospels*, p. 592).

A. T. Robertson notes, "The guilt of the Sanhedrin (both Pharisees and Sadducees unite in the demand for the blood of Jesus) is beyond dispute. . . The Pharisees began the attacks against Jesus on theological and ecclesiastical grounds. The Sadducees later joined the conspiracy against Christ. Judas was a mere tool of the Sanhedrin, who had his resentments and grievances to avenge. There is guilt enough for all the plotters in the greatest wrong of the ages" (*Harmony of the Gospels*, p. 225 footnote).

Release Barabbas – Crucify Jesus

From the judgment seat Pilate submitted to their intimidations and gave the sentence they demanded. He released Barabbas, the insurrectionist and murder, but delivered Jesus up to their will to be scourged and crucified (Mark 15:15; Matt. 27:26; Luke 23:24-26; John 19:16).

What would we have done if we had been there that day? What would have been our response to the appeal of the Jewish religious leaders? Would we have shouted, "Crucify Him! Crucify Him!" What if we had been Pilate? How would we have responded to the evidence?

We were not there, but we are still confronted with the same evidence and the same decision. What will you do with Jesus Christ? The truth is He died in your place on the cross. "The soul that sins will surely die." "The wages of sin is death." Jesus died as our substitute, in our place, on the cross. And because of that substitutionary penal death the LORD God offers us eternal life. Jesus said, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16). The apostle Paul wrote: "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 6:23). Eternal life or salvation is a free gift because Jesus paid for it in full when He died for you on the cross. "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household" (Acts 16:31).

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