

41. The Trial before Pilate

We have seen the trial of Jesus before the Jews. Now let us look at his trial before the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. We begin this lesson in John 18:29:

“Then they led Jesus from Caiaphas to the Praetorium... Pilate then went out to them and said, ‘What accusation do you bring against this Man?’ They answered and said to him, ‘If He were not an evildoer, we would not have delivered Him up to you.’ Then Pilate said to them, ‘You take Him and judge Him according to your law.’ Therefore the Jews said to him, ‘It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death,’ that the saying of Jesus might be fulfilled which He spoke, signifying by what death He would die. [And they began to accuse Him, saying, ‘We found this fellow perverting the nation, and forbidding to pay taxes to Caesar, saying that He Himself is Christ, a King’ (Luke 23:2).] Then Pilate entered the Praetorium again, called Jesus, and said to Him, ‘Are You the King of the Jews?’ Jesus answered him, ‘Are you speaking for yourself about this, or did others tell you this concerning Me?’ Pilate answered, ‘Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered You to me. What have You done?’ Jesus answered, ‘My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here.’ Pilate therefore said to Him, ‘Are You a king then?’ Jesus answered, ‘You say rightly that I am a king. For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness 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 fault in Him at all.’

“[But they were the more fierce, saying, ‘He stirs up the people, teaching throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee to this place.’ When Pilate heard of Galilee, he asked if the Man were a Galilean. And as soon as he knew that He belonged to Herod’s jurisdiction, he sent Him to Herod, who was also in Jerusalem at that time. Then Herod, with his men of war, treated Him with contempt and mocked Him, arrayed

Him in a gorgeous robe, and sent Him back to Pilate. That very day Pilate and Herod became friends with each other, for previously they had been at enmity with each other. (Luke 23:5-7,11,12)]

“[Now at the feast the governor was accustomed to releasing to the multitude one prisoner whom they wished. And at that time they had a notorious prisoner called Barabbas. Therefore, when they had gathered together, Pilate said to them, ‘Whom do you want me to release to you? Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?’ For he knew that they had handed Him over because of envy. While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent to him, saying, ‘Have nothing to do with that just Man, for I have suffered many things today in a dream because of Him.’ But the chief priests and elders persuaded the multitudes that they should ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus. (Matthew 27:15-20)]

“...Then they all cried again, saying, ‘Not this Man, but Barabbas!’ Now Barabbas was a robber.

“So then Pilate took Jesus and scourged Him. And the soldiers twisted a crown of thorns and put it on His head, and they put on Him a purple robe. Then they said, ‘Hail, King of the Jews!’ And they struck Him with their hands. Pilate then went out again, and said to them, ‘Behold, I am bringing Him out to you, that you may know that I find no fault in Him.’ Then Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. And Pilate said to them, ‘Behold the Man!’ Therefore, when the chief priests and officers saw Him, they cried out, saying, ‘Crucify Him, crucify Him!’ Pilate said to them, ‘You take Him and crucify for I find no fault in Him.’ The Jews answered him, ‘We have a law, and according to our law He ought to die, because He made Himself the Son of God.’ Therefore, when Pilate heard that saying, he was the more afraid, and went again into the Praetorium, and said to Jesus, ‘Where are You from?’ But Jesus gave him no answer. Then Pilate said to Him, ‘Are You not speaking to me? Do You not know that I have power to crucify You, and power to release You?’ Jesus answered, ‘You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you

from above. Therefore the one who delivered Me to you has the greater sin.'

"From then on Pilate sought to release Him, but the Jews cried out, saying, 'If you let this Man go, you are not Caesar's friend. Whoever makes himself a king speaks against Caesar.' When Pilate therefore heard that saying, he brought Jesus out and sat down in the judgment seat in a place that is called The Pavement, but in Hebrew, Gabbatha. Now it was the Preparation Day of the Passover, and about the sixth hour. And he said to the Jews, 'Behold your King!' But 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!' [When Pilate saw that he could not prevail at all, but rather that a tumult was rising, he took water and washed his hands before the multitude, saying, 'I am innocent of the blood of this just Person. You see to it.' And all the people answered and said, 'His blood be on us and on our children.' (Matthew 27:24,25)] [So Pilate gave sentence that it should be as they requested. And he released to them the one they requested, who for rebellion and murder had been thrown into prison; but he delivered Jesus to their will. (Luke 23:24,25)] Then he delivered Him to them to be crucified. So they took Jesus and led Him away." (John 18:29–19:16)

MY KINGDOM IS NOT OF THIS WORLD

The Jewish leaders had apparently hoped that the Roman governor would agree to validate their decision against Jesus without any effort to find out the details. They said to him, "If He were not an evildoer, we would not have delivered Him up to you." But since Pilate was not satisfied with their verdict, they felt obliged to make up an accusation that would lead the governor to condemn him. Blasphemy against the God of the Jews was not a crime according to Roman law. So the Sanhedrin claimed that Jesus was guilty of rebellion against Rome. They said that Jesus called himself a king. Now the emperor did not tolerate the slightest suggestion of an uprising against his power.

Jesus did not deny his kingship before Pilate. He said, "You say rightly that I am a king." But he also said: "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My

kingdom is not from here... For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice." His kingdom is not of the same nature as earthly kingdoms, which defend themselves with physical weapons, raising armies and make war. If his kingdom had been like those of the world, he would have incited multitudes to follow him to war. But he did not act this way. The force that Jesus uses is not that of the sword, the gun, or a terrorist bomb, but the power of the truth to which he came to bear witness. It is by truth that he wins the hearts of men. One who is forced to become a Christian is not really a Christian.

Some teach that Jesus will return at the end of time to reign on the earth and that the capital of his government will be the city of Jerusalem. Many biblical passages show that this idea is false, including the passage where Jesus clearly says that his kingdom is not of this world. Others have spoken of holy war or led crusades to spread their religions or to defend the interests of those religions. Others use economic pressures to win converts. However sincere they may be, those who act in these ways do not understand that the kingdom of God is not of this world and its cause is not served by worldly methods.

Even Pilate understood what Jesus meant. He saw that Jesus was not looking to incite a revolt against Caesar, the Roman emperor. He went out and said to the Jews, "I find no fault in him." Then the Jews stated the true accusation against Jesus, "According to our law He ought to die, because He made Himself the Son of God."

THE CONDUCT OF PILATE

Perhaps you have noticed that Pilate never wanted to make a decision about Jesus. First he said to the Jews, "You take him and judge him according to your law." But the Jews reminded him that they did not have the right to carry out the death penalty. That required his approval. After examining him, Pilate was convinced of Jesus' innocence. The trial should have been terminated at that point, but Pilate lacked the courage. He sent Jesus to Herod, but Herod did not want to make the decision in his place.

Pilate tried to free Jesus according to the custom of the feast, without having to pronounce a verdict. But the priests manipulated the crowd so that it demanded Barnabas, a thief and murderer, rather than Jesus. Pilate next tried compromise with the

Jews by having him beaten rather than crucified. The half-measure did no good. Finally Pilate washed his hands in front of everyone to proclaim his innocence in this whole affaire, but, like it or not, he had the last word, and he handed Jesus over to be crucified.

Why didn't Pilate, with all the power of the Roman Empire behind him, have the courage to say "no" to the Jews? Since becoming governor, Pilate had aroused the anger of the Jews unnecessarily. The last time the emperor himself had decided in favor of the Jews and reversed Pilate's decision. When the Jews said, "If you let this Man go, you are not Caesar's friend," it was a threat. In effect, they were saying, "Your slate is not clean. We have already had to make a bad report on you. If you don't do what we ask, we'll make another report to the emperor and you will be dismissed from your post."

Jesus had said to Pilate, "The one who delivered Me to you has the greater sin." And this is true—he was not the guiltiest person in this story. He wanted to do what was right. But he lacked the courage to stand firm against the wickedness of the Jews. He crucified Jesus to protect his job.

CONCLUSION

There are men who, like the chief priests of the Jews, are hostile toward Jesus. Either they consider him to be a liar, a false prophet, or a threat to their interests... their lifestyles... their pride. Other people are more like Pilate. They see no crime in Jesus nor any reason to fight against the cause of Christianity. But they don't want to be forced to make a decision about him. However, we must take a position—no one can decide in our place. Like Pilate, some people look for a compromise when it comes to Jesus. But this is impossible—we are either with him or we are against him.

In the words of an old song: "Jesus is standing on trial still. You can be false to him if you will. You can be faithful through good or ill. What will you do with Jesus? Neutral you cannot be. Someday your heart will be asking, 'What will he do with me?'"