

Text

After he had said this, he went back outside to the Jews and told them, "I find no guilt in him. ³⁹ But you have a custom that I should release one man for you at the Passover. So do you want me to release to you the King of the Jews?" ⁴⁰ They cried out again, "Not this man, but Barabbas!" Now Barabbas was a robber.

19 Then Pilate took Jesus and flogged him. ² And the soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head and arrayed him in a purple robe. ³ They came up to him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" and struck him with their hands. ⁴ Pilate went out again and said to them, "See, I am bringing him out to you that you may know that I find no guilt in him." ⁵ So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, "Behold the man!" ⁶ When the chief priests and the officers saw him, they cried out, "Crucify him, crucify him!" Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and crucify him, for I find no guilt in him." ⁷ The Jews answered him, "We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has made himself the Son of God." ⁸ When Pilate heard this statement, he was even more afraid. ⁹ He entered his headquarters again and said to Jesus, "Where are you from?" But Jesus gave him no answer. ¹⁰ So Pilate said to him, "You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?" ¹¹ Jesus answered him, "You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin."

¹² From then on Pilate sought to release him, but the Jews cried out, "If you release this man, you are not Caesar's friend. Everyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar." ¹³ So when Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judgment seat at a place called The Stone Pavement, and in Aramaic Gabbatha. ¹⁴ Now it was the day of Preparation of the Passover. It was about the sixth hour. He said to the Jews, "Behold your King!" ¹⁵ 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." ¹⁶ So he delivered him over to them to be crucified.

Introduction - suffering servant

We have a lot to cover today as we look at the final scenes of John's Gospel before Jesus is sent to be crucified.

Lord willing, we will talk about the crucifixion, death and burial of Jesus in our special service this Friday evening.

Setting

To remind you of the setting, Jesus is at the headquarters of Roman governor Pontius Pilate. He was brought there by the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin.

Because the Jews had strict cleansing laws and it was the time of year for Passover, the Jewish council would not go into the headquarters and thus risk becoming ceremonially unclean. So you have Jesus inside, the council and a gathered crowd are outside, and Pontius Pilate going back and forth between Jesus and the crowd.

Last week, we talked about the interrogation of Pilate towards Jesus where Pilate is questioning Jesus about kingship.

Pilate is the only earthly authority who can give the order for Jesus to be crucified. As I keep pointing out, the Jews lived under Roman law and Roman occupation and did not have the legal authority to exercise a capital punishment.

As Pilate has questioned Jesus about kingship, we - as Christians - know that Jesus is a king, but he is not an earthly king who is trying to overthrow Rome and he doesn't have ambitions of territorial conquest.

And at least in part, we see in the story that Pilate recognizes this.

Because if Pilate had thought that Jesus was an insurrectionist who was trying to overthrow Rome, then Pilate would have had no qualms about having had Jesus executed.

But in the discussion today between Pilate, Jesus, and the Jewish ruling council, we'll see Pilate left perplexed.

We also see the complexities of Pontius Pilate as he tries to figure out who Jesus is. He goes from mocking Jesus, to having Jesus whipped, to trying to pardon Jesus, to fearing Jesus, to trying to save Jesus, to giving the order to crucify Jesus.

Bridge

And so we're going to look at today's passage in five scenes.

I don't usually prefer to do five part sermons because I think it becomes a lot of parts, but this section is a story and the scene keeps changing based on the movement of Pontius Pilate between talking to Jesus and leaving Jesus to step outside his headquarters and talk to the Jewish council and the assembled crowd.

Now the only person in this story whose in all five scenes is actually Pontius Pilate and so we're going to go through this story and see Pilate's progression from trying to release Jesus to having Jesus crucified.

First scene - Pilate tries to pardon Jesus

So with that, we come to our first scene and see Pilate try to pardon Jesus.

Last week, we saw Pilate's interrogation of Jesus.

Our passage begins where that section ends.

After he had said this, he went back outside to the Jews and told them, "I find no guilt in him."

Pilate doesn't find any issues with Jesus, personally.

Verse 39:

³⁹ But you have a custom that I should release one man for you at the Passover. So do you want me to release to you the King of the Jews?"

We're reminded in the text that it's Passover.

As a reminder, Passover is an annual Jewish feast which commemorates God's release of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. And so since Passover is a day which is a celebration of freedom, it fits with the day that a prisoner be released.

That isn't an Old Testament tradition but this practice had apparently developed in Jerusalem.

But Pilate presents this as an opportunity to release Jesus. It's possible - though not certain - that Pilate saw that as a win-win. He would allow the council, in his mind, to save face and he would pardon Jesus who he considered to be innocent.

But the problem with this is that Pilate underestimates the hatred that the council has for Jesus and their unwavering desire to see him killed.

Pilate had the authority to simply release Jesus but didn't.

When Pilate seeks out the release of Jesus, he calls him the **king of the Jews**.

That seems pretty clearly antagonistic towards the crowd¹.

Either way, we see in verse 40 that the crowd rejects this solution.

⁴⁰ They cried out again, "Not this man, but Barabbas!" Now Barabbas was a robber.

The crowd doesn't want Jesus released. They don't even dignify Jesus by saying his name. The crowd says **not this man**².

Instead they want to see the other man released, Barabbas.

This scene is recorded and Barabbas is mentioned in all four gospels. John describes Barabbas as a **robber**.

There can be a challenge sometimes to get the full picture in just one word.

Robber can mean a lot of things. Is he out stealing loaves of bread to feed his family? Is he a petty criminal? Is he committing grand theft?

¹ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 595.

² Edward W. Klink III, *John*, ed. Clinton E. Arnold, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 768.

The word can be taken to refer to someone who is taking plunder or a form of piracy. The Greek can have connotations of violence and lawlessness³. Given the ways in which the other gospel writers describe Barabbas, he's a pretty sinister figure.

Matthew 27:16 says that he had been a notorious prisoner. Mark 15:7 says he had been an insurrectionist who had committed murder.

In any event, it is Barabbas whom the crowd wants released.

Gospel

The point is that a guilty man is pardoned instead of the innocent Jesus. A man who is set to die is given life because Jesus takes his place.

That is the gospel.

We are all guilty of our sin. We are all guilty of our rebellion against God.

Again, sin is not just that we all mess up sometimes or that we're trying to figure it out. We have offended a righteous and holy God and we stand condemned.

But because Jesus went to the cross, he makes a pardon available to all of us. Because he died and rose, Jesus gives life.

And when we believe that, the Bible says that we are justified by faith, that we are forgiven because of what Christ has done for us.

Second scene - Pilate has Jesus flogged

We come to chapter 19 and to our second scene.

The crowd wanted to see Barabbas pardoned and so Pilate has Jesus flogged.

Then Pilate took Jesus and flogged him.

Roman flogging was a Roman form of torture where someone would be whipped. The whips could sometimes have pieces of rock or animal bone woven between the tassels.

³ Ibid.

Flogging could be done as a precursor to Roman crucifixion but people could also sometimes be flogged without further punishment.

Verse 2:

² And the soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head and arrayed him in a purple robe.

Roman guards take Jesus.

The crown of thorns, the purple robe. They're makeshift garments for a king. Matthew's gospel adds that they took a reed, a piece of long grass and gave that to Jesus as a pathetic, makeshift scepter (Matthew 27:29).

Verse 3:

³ They came up to him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" and struck him with their hands.

They're doing all of this to mock Jesus.

And they don't know it but it's supremely ironic that they're bowing down to Jesus and giving him this faux royal treatment.

When Jesus is the king!

But the people don't know it.

It's also a picture for us as Jesus as the king who suffers. Jesus is the almighty God of creation. The eternal Son of God. He is righteous and without sin but he would die the death of a common criminal.

Kingship

Over the last few weeks, we've talked a lot about Jesus as a king.

I touched on this a few weeks ago, but in the book of Isaiah, in the first half of the book, we see a lot of references and prophecies about a coming Davidic king. Those prophecies are fulfilled in Christ. But then in the second part of the Book of Isaiah, the

tone changes and Isaiah also talks about a figure who is a servant of the Lord who suffers.

There are four such servant songs which can be found within passages in Isaiah chapters 42, 49, 50 and the most famous of these is found in Isaiah 52:13-53:12.

Had you been a faithful Jew in the first century, you were aware of these passages but what you almost definitely would not have put together was the idea that the Davidic King and the suffering servant were the same figure.

And as Jesus is mocked and beaten by the Roman guards in these royal garments, we're pointed to the suffering servant who is also the saving king.

Gospel

Jesus is the king who took up his cross before he put on his crown. He is the worthy king who brings us into his kingdom because he's the king who lays down his life for his people.

Who is the king in your life?

Everyone is following something. Everyone is pursuing something. Everyone is serving something. Everyone values something about all else.

It might be your work, it might be your money, it might be your family. There might be something in your life that you're struggling with.

But we're all serving something.

Jesus comes into the world full of grace and truth. He has a ministry that is glorious. He reveals the love of God to the world. But then his supreme act of glory is his death for our sins and his resurrection.

We've talked about forgiveness.

A lot of us are happy to say that Jesus is our savior.

But is he your Lord? And is he your king?

Everyone is serving something. Jesus came into the world in glory and died in glory to show us that he is the only thing truly worthy of serving and placing above all else in life.

We come to a third scene.

Third scene - Pilate mocks Jesus

In this scene, Pilate both mocks Jesus but also tries a second time to pardon him.

Verse 4 begins the next scene. It's transitory as Pilate reiterates that he personally finds no guilt in Jesus. This verse is also moving Pilate from inside his headquarters to outside to address the Jewish leaders.

Verse 4:

⁴ Pilate went out again and said to them, "See, I am bringing him out to you that you may know that I find no guilt in him."

But it's not until verse 5 that the crowd sees Jesus after he has been beaten:

⁵ So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, "Behold the man!"

That's our savior.

He's been beaten to a pulp. Undoubtedly bleeding, swollen, and bruised. Floggings were so brutal that sometimes people wouldn't even survive to be crucified.

When Pilate says "**behold, the man!**"

Pilate is both mocking Jesus and the crowd.

He's speaking ironically⁴. That the Jewish leaders have been so set on seeing Jesus crucified. Pilate points to what he's been reduced to as he stands in his makeshift garments of majesty and is basically saying "Here is the man you're so afraid of!"

Meanwhile, the crowd has no less vitriol for Jesus.

⁴ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 598.

Verse 6:

⁶ When the chief priests and the officers saw him, they cried out, “Crucify him, crucify him!” Pilate said to them, “Take him yourselves and crucify him, for I find no guilt in him.”

The crowd - and just as a reminder - consists of more than just the Jewish ruling council is still set on seeing Jesus crucified.

Pilate says, **“Take him yourselves and crucify him, for I find no guilt in him.”**

This is further mockery of the crowd. In chapter 18, Pilate had also told the Jewish leaders to judge Jesus according to their own law (John 18:31). They can't. As we've discussed, it has to come from the Roman government.

But they do respond to Pilate by stressing what their law teaches.

⁷ The Jews answered him, “We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has made himself the Son of God.”

They're accusing Jesus of blasphemy.

Now in chapter 18, when Jesus had first been brought to Pilate, Pilate asked what accusation they brought against Jesus (John 18:29).

And instead of giving an actual charge, the council leaders responded in John 18:30 by saying:

“If this man were not doing evil, we would not have delivered him over to you.”

But here, they outline their charge against Jesus.

he has made himself the Son of God.”

In the eyes of the Jewish council, Jesus is guilty of the capital offense of blasphemy. And to be fair, had Jesus not actually been the Son of God, such a thing would be blasphemous.

Gospel

Blasphemy is the idea of profaning God or what is sacred by words or actions.

If you or I would have made the claims Jesus made about dying for sins, being the Son of God, being sent by God, being the way to God, that would obviously be blasphemy.

But what matters in Jesus' ministry is that everything he has said is true. He is the Son of God. He has been sent by God and he restores us to God and he demonstrates his truth through his life, ministry, and miraculous signs.

We've talked about Jesus as the one who takes our place and Jesus as the king.

Jesus didn't make himself the Son of God. He is the Son of God.

Again our world likes to take some teachings of Jesus and some vague spiritual ideas. But Jesus has come into the world as the eternal Son of God who is the only one who uniquely positioned to restore sinful humanity to God.

It's because he is the Son of God that he is a king and it is because he is the Son of God that he is able to give his life for ours. An ordinary person could not do that, but Jesus is the Son of God.

Fourth scene - Pilate's fear

We come to a fourth scene. Pilate is pretty cavalier in the last scene but at the accusation from the crowd about Jesus, his tone changes.

Verse 8:

⁸When Pilate heard this statement, he was even more afraid.

This is quite the elusive verse.

We can't know exactly the mind of Pilate but we learn that he was afraid when the Jewish leaders gave this charge against Jesus.

Now I've mentioned before that Pilate would not have cared about Jewish blasphemy. He wasn't Jewish.

But consider this about Roman religion at the time.

Most in Rome were polytheistic, meaning that they believed in many gods. Roman leaders could also be highly superstitious⁵.

The Romans had stories of deities coming into the world in human form. The Jews tell Pilate that Jesus says he's the Son of God.

And Pilate just had him flogged! So when the council gives their charge against Jesus, it gives Pilate pause⁶.

It's also another example of irony that the Jewish leaders have the Son of God with them and they're ready to crucify him.

Pilate is a pagan Roman and he's actually closer to believing in Jesus than the Jews⁷!

Never assume that a person can't believe in Jesus or who Jesus is. Never judge a person by their background or what you know about them and assume they're too far gone or too far away.

Verse 9. Pilate is now interested in getting to the bottom of this and trying to find out who Jesus is:

⁹ He entered his headquarters again and said to Jesus, "Where are you from?" But Jesus gave him no answer.

When Pilate asks Jesus where he's from, it's a question of origin.

It seems like Pilate is trying to get a sense of if Jesus is a god or if he's just a man⁸.

Now from our reading of John, we've learned that Jesus is from above and that he's from the father (cf. John 1:14, 3:31).

But the text tells us that Jesus doesn't give an answer.

Why?

⁵ Id., 600.

⁶ Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary & 2*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 1125.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Edward W. Klink III, *John*, ed. Clinton E. Arnold, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 780.

If you or I were in a life and death situation, we'd be talking! We'd be trying to explain things, we'd be pleading, we'd answer whatever questions came to us.

But Jesus doesn't.

Edward Klink argues that Jesus stays silent as a rebuke against Pilate⁹.

One. Jesus doesn't answer to Pilate. Two, Pilate is not worthy to judge the truth of who Jesus is¹⁰.

Three, Jesus has already answered this question!

In John 18 when Jesus is first being questioned by Pilate, Jesus describes where he's from and what he's doing.

John 18:36:

“My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world.”

Then again in verse 37, Jesus says:

“You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.”

But Pilate doesn't understand any of this and so Jesus remains silent¹¹.

This angers Pilate.

Verse 10:

¹⁰ So Pilate said to him, “You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?”

It was probably unbelievable to Pilate that Jesus would stay silent when Pilate feels like he's the one who has the power here.

⁹ Id., 781-81.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

And that does bring a response from Jesus in verse 11, and Jesus will point out that the power imbalance is not where Pilate thinks it is.

¹¹ Jesus answered him, “You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin.”

There is total boldness in addressing Pilate.

This is an idea that we see elsewhere in the New Testament about government authority.

Nations have authority ultimately because it is given to them by God. That's not to say that every nation or government is godly but that the governance of a society is a divinely ordained institution. Jesus came to earth and serves the will of God and it is God who is the authority. It's not Pilate, it's not even the emperor of Rome. It's God.

And Pilate has no power over Jesus except that which the Lord has given to him. And Jesus knows that it is the divine will that he lay down his life for his followers.

Gospel

The whole world is in a position where we have to make sense of Jesus and understand him. Understand who he is, what he does, why he matters.

Pilate certainly had a unique opportunity in that he actually spoke with Jesus.

We don't have that but we do have the scriptures which point to Jesus. We have the gospels which record the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus. The teachings of the apostles who saw the risen Lord.

We should question who Jesus is.

But when we do, we see that Jesus is a savior who stands up to the scrutiny. He is the Son of God who dies for our sins.

How will Pilate respond to Jesus?

Will he be angry? Will he be offended?

Fifth scene - Pilate sends Jesus to be crucified

In this fifth scene, Pilate will end by sending Jesus to be crucified. But before that, Pilate tries a third time to find a way to release Jesus. But he'll face pressure, and in the end, bend to the whims of the crowd.

First part Verse 12:

¹² From then on Pilate sought to release him, but the Jews cried out,

Pilate wants to release Jesus.

He doesn't think that Jesus is guilty of what he's been charged with.

But the crowd starts pressuring him.

Second part of verse 12:

"If you release this man, you are not Caesar's friend. Everyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar."

So they question Pilate's loyalty. It's an attempt to pressure him to come to their side. Roman emperors would have officials executed for disloyalty or insubordination.

Once again, it's very ironic.

The Jews aren't loyal! They hate Rome!

But for political expediency, they try to make themselves out to be loyal to Caesar while questioning Pilate's loyalty.

Pilate is torn.

In verses 13-14, we see his verdict:

¹³ So when Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judgment seat at a place called The Stone Pavement, and in Aramaic Gabbatha. ¹⁴ Now it was the day of Preparation of the Passover. It was about the sixth hour. He said to the Jews, "Behold your King!"

So you have Pilate outside his headquarters to address the crowd. He brings Jesus out to render his verdict.

When Pilate calls Jesus the king of the Jews, it's unclear if he's speaking sincerely.

He's gone through a whole range of emotions and attitudes about Jesus from perplexity to frustration to fear to empathy.

Is he saying this sincerely? Does he believe that Jesus is the king of the Jews and Pilate doesn't want to execute him but he's more fearful for himself and so goes forward with the crucifixion against what he would prefer?

Or is it a final dig at the Jewish council They've gotten their way but he's going to rub their noses in it and taunt them by calling Jesus their king?

It could be either. It could even be a little bit of both.

Verses 15-16:

¹⁵ 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." ¹⁶ So he delivered him over to them to be crucified.

You see the hatred from the crowd against the Lord who came to save the world.

Pilate again refers to Jesus as a king.

Full circle as we began today and as we've talked the last few weeks about kingship.

We again see the striking contrast between Jesus as the king who goes to the cross. And when the crowd says **"We have no king but Caesar,"**

A common theme in movies and songs is the power of love.

But hatred can also be a powerful emotion. For the crowd, they hated Jesus so much that they were willing to show fealty to the oppressive Romans.

They would rather celebrate the emperor who had oppressed them than the Lord who came to free them. They're declaring their loyalty to an earthly king over their heavenly king.

And Pilate hands Jesus over to be crucified.

But what he is also doing is handing Jesus over to his ultimate act of glory in going to the cross to save all who believe in Jesus.

Meditation

Consider this series of events.

Pilate believes that Jesus is innocent. Pilate had tried to release Jesus - three times. Pilate had publicly said that he found no guilt in Jesus (John 18:38).

Yet he ends up crucifying this innocent man.

He's been intrigued by Jesus. He's been curious about Jesus. He's been fearful when confronted with claims of Jesus.

But just as quickly, the crowd sways him in the other direction with the suggestion that he would be disloyal to Caesar. To be fair, that's no small threat as such a suggestion could potentially put Pilate's own life at risk.

But in the end, we see where his loyalty ultimately lies.

It's with Rome. It's with the world. It's not with Jesus.

I realize that Pilate's situation was pretty unique. But what's not unique is being in a situation where we have the opportunity to go with Jesus and the world gives us various pressures not to.

The king and the cross. The lamb led to slaughter. The Lord of glory who dies for our sins.

Conclusion

As we wind down, I ask this question.

Who had Jesus crucified?

Was it the crowd and their pressure? Was it the high priest and his political influence? Was it Pilate and his authority? Was it you and me and our sin?

It was God and his sovereignty.

Jesus told Pilate:

“You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above.

That isn't to absolve the crowd, or the high priest, or Pilate. All of them are guilty of sin.

But as Isaiah 53:10 says: **it was the will of the Lord to crush him.**

Reflecting back on the crucifixion in light of the divine plan, the Apostle Peter would later say in Acts 4:27-28:

in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, ²⁸ to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.

God sent Jesus to the cross.

From humanity's fall into sin in Genesis 3, God has been working restoration. It was God's plan and God's way of salvation and it was achieved by his Son, Jesus Christ who went to the cross.

Next Sunday, we celebrate Easter. It's the day in which Jesus rose from the dead.

It's not simply a nice story but it's the hope of a fallen humanity that we can have life because Christ the Lord lives.

Pilate examined Jesus and ultimately crucified him.

May we be people who look to Jesus and who worship him as Lord and king.