

No One Takes My Life From Me

PART 18 - VERDICT

TEXT: JOHN 19:1-16 (ESV)

Sent to Herod

Today we continue our study of Jesus' trial before Pilate. But before we get to our text from John, we need to take a quick detour over to Luke 23 to see a part of this process only he discusses—Jesus' trial before Herod. Herod was the ruler of neighboring Galilee, and he held a higher rank than Pilate. When Jesus was first brought for trial, Pilate quickly found the charges against him were baseless. But it would help if he had the support of another Roman official if he hoped to simply release Jesus. So after turning up nothing worthy of death, Pilate sent Jesus to Herod for a second opinion. (Lk 23:6-11)



Rev. Russ Ramsey
March 1, 2009

Oak Hills
Presbyterian Church,
Overland Park,
Kansas

Jesus was from Herod's jurisdiction, Galilee. Herod had heard of Jesus and was glad to finally see Him. (Lk 23:8) He spent his time here with Jesus trying to goad him into performing a sign while chief priests and scribes "vehemently" rehearsed their charges again now with Herod. As Herod listened, he and his soldiers "treated Jesus with contempt and mocked Him," (Lk 23:11) dressing Jesus in royal robes. But in the end, Herod sent Jesus back to Pilate with the same conclusion: Jesus didn't deserve to die. It was after Jesus' return from Herod that John picks up the story.

John 19:1-16

¹Then Pilate took Jesus and flogged him. ²And the soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head and arrayed him in a purple robe. ³They came up to him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" and struck him with their hands. ⁴Pilate 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." ⁵So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, "Behold the man!" ⁶When 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." ⁷The Jews answered, "We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has made himself the Son of God."

⁸When Pilate heard this statement, he was even more afraid. ⁹He entered his headquarters again and said to Jesus, "Where are you from?" But Jesus gave him no answer. ¹⁰So 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?"

¹¹Jesus 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." ¹²From 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." ¹³So 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.

¹⁴Now it was the day of Preparation of the Passover. It was about the sixth hour. He said to the Jews, "Behold your King!" ¹⁵They 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." ¹⁶So he delivered him over to them to be crucified.

Why Pilate Tried to Free Jesus

VERSES 1-8, 12a: Pilate is complicated but predictable. As I have studied his place in this story, I have found myself thanking God for the text devoted to this man. I've said before, so we're clear, he is not a man to admire. We shouldn't sympathize with him. But his actions are consistent with his worldview, making him a great case study in the consequences of ideas. He is a man who thinks he is in control of his situation, but he is not. He is motivated by a desire for the outcomes of this unrest in Judea to play to his favor. This is even what lies behind his attempts to free Jesus. This raises some questions at the start.

How many of my actions which appear noble and for the good of others are really done for the sake of making my own life easier? What does that say about what drives me to act nobly? These are worthy questions to ask this Easter season. What about you? What in your own motivations testify to your need for someone to save you from duplicity and fear? What does Pilate's story tell us about how God has responded to that need?

In the end, Pilate succumbed to the will of the mob outside and rendered the verdict that Jesus be crucified. For most of us, we saw that coming. You might chalk this up to familiarity, like the way your mind can't help but think of a sinking ship when you think of the Titanic. But our text raises two important questions for us: 1) If Pilate wanted to release Jesus, why didn't he? And 2) Why **couldn't** Pilate release Jesus? The answer to the first question illuminates our common condition as broken people. The answer to the second addresses God's remedy for it.

Why Pilate Didn't Free Him

VERSES 12-16: In verses 12-16, Pilate is getting nowhere with the people. Remember, he has the political authority to release Jesus. He doesn't have to listen to anyone else's counsel. But everyone's weighing in. Even his wife has his ear, sending word to him during this trial, "Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered much because of him today in a dream." (Mt 27:19) So his wife is saying, "Leave him alone," and the Chief Priests are saying, "Crucify him." Normally a tie should go to the wife.

But the Chief Priests delivered a threat Pilate heard loud and clear: "If you don't put this man to death, you're no friend of Caesar. Everyone calling himself king opposes Caesar." This put Pilate in a corner. The Chief Priest's would go public with any appearance of disloyalty to Caesar. And it would be easy to do. After all, how could Pilate be loyal to his king while allowing another to claim kingship on his watch? And if Pilate was no friend of Caesar, what did that make him? An enemy. And Caesar was known for executing his own relatives at the slightest hint of disloyalty. So the mid-level management types, like Pilate, had to learn to balance their own ambitions for power with the need to remain unthreateningly benign in the eyes of King Caesar.

The added insult here was that the Chief Priests couldn't have cared less about loyalty to Caesar and everyone knew it. They were making a play. But it was an effective one. Pilate's decision was suddenly simple: would he defend this prisoner or would he just give the people what they wanted and be done with it? He had no investment in Jesus to warrant risking his own reputation. When he looked at it that way, the decision was easy. Though we can't be certain, I suspect this threat from the Chief Priests was when Pilate irreversibly made up his mind.

But Pilate was angry. He'd been worked, and though he would hand Jesus over to death, it wouldn't be without a few choice insults first. He hoped parading Jesus in that purple robe and pressing that crown of thorns into his brow, saying, "*Behold the man.*" (Jn 19:4-5) would be enough. But when this wasn't and they demanded crucifixion, indignation rose within Pilate. Handing Jesus over, he was now no longer saying, "*Behold the man.*" He said, "*Behold your King.*" Now he was mocking Jesus' accusers.

I shudder to think of what manner of demonic darkness was here in this moment. Pilate said, "*Shall I crucify your king?*" and the Chief Priests gave a reply no one expected. They said, "*We have no king but Caesar.*" Dark words! From the lips of the priests who had grown up looking for their Messiah to come from the only kingly line they would honor—David's—they coolly offer this reply, as if to remind Pilate they mean to make good on their threat if he doesn't accommodate their desire.

But this was a grotesque lie. Their kingly line belonged to David. And even David's kingship was less than what God wanted for His people. They crowned their first king Saul because all the nations around them had one. They demanded their prophet Samuel give them one also, to which God said, "*Obey the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them.*" (1 Sam 8:7)

Israel was given her first King because, to them, God was not enough. They wanted to rule themselves. Now here all these generations later, before Pilate they mockingly disregard their entire history as a nation as if they were nothing more than subjects of Rome. And for what? To get what they wanted in the moment—the crucifixion of the Messiah God Himself, their only true Sovereign, had given for the forgiveness of their sins.

Let the word of God search your heart here! These religious leaders didn't just abandon their own convictions. They contradicted everything God had ever said about who they were and Whose they were. Do you profess faith in Christ? The Chief Priests show us here what it looks like to take the name of the Lord in vain, manipulating Pilate to crucify Christ by feigning allegiance to Caesar. If you take the name of the Lord, take it in earnest, with all you have and are. If you are His, you are forever His. There is no circumstance in life where it is ever right to put off that name in order to achieve a goal. Never.

Why Pilate Couldn't Free Him

VERSES 9-12: Politics and the fear of man are why Pilate didn't free Jesus. But why Pilate **couldn't** free Jesus is another matter. Many times in this story, people have urged Jesus to say something in order to make a tough situation better. During His Triumphal Entry, the Pharisees wanted Him to tell people to stop praising Him. (Lk 19:39) Here, Pilate wants Jesus to answer the charges against Him, saying, "*Don't you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?*" If Jesus would give Pilate something to work with, Pilate could find a way to release Him and they could get on with their lives. Didn't Jesus realize this?

But is Pilate the one seeing things for what they are, or is Jesus? Jesus answers Pilate, "*You'd have no power over me if it were not given to you from above.*" Strong! Let that wash over you for a minute. The Greek word here Jesus uses for power is a word which literally means "*legitimate authority.*" This is simply an incredible statement to make. Brought in as the prisoner, Jesus quickly assumes the posture of authority over this moment—telling Pilate things are not entirely as he sees them.

When Pilate claims to have the power to release or crucify Jesus, he has just made a weighty doctrinal assertion. Does he have the power to stop what is happening here? We're wading into deep theological waters, but Pilate raises a point we need to tangle with. Yes, it sure appears that if only Jesus gave Pilate the right testimony, Pilate could put an end to this kangaroo court. But there are no "*if-only's.*" There's just what is, and while Pilate can imagine a host of possibilities, there will only be one outcome. Will that outcome ultimately reside with Pilate's will? Is there any outcome that ultimately resides with your will?

An impatient Pilate is confounded beyond words as to why this man, who is inching closer to his own death every minute, won't take this chance to defend himself. But He won't defend Himself because He is utterly defensible. But it isn't for His own transgression that He means to die. Has Jesus broken any laws? No. But have you? Have I? Oh yes! We have all broken God's law. We have all sinned against Him, and the wages of sin is death. (Rom 6:23) Christ stands before Pilate because He means to die—not to satisfy the mob outside, but to take upon Himself the sins of the world. Jesus means to drink the cup of the full measure of God's wrath toward your sin. (Lk 22:42) This isn't Pilate's show, so Jesus remains silent for His own reasons.

For every secret sin, every personal failing, every broken heart, every desperate ambition to prove your worth, every confession of allegiance to another king—for all this He kept silent before His accusers. Pilate couldn't release Jesus because it wasn't Pilate's orders that would send Jesus to the cross. This was His Father's doing. Jesus' crucifixion wasn't to satisfy the wrath of the mob outside, but His Father's wrath toward your sin.

At the end of this text, a riot begins to form. Time for talking is over. Pilate must act. So to quell the uprising he's been working so hard to avoid, Pilate, from His judgment seat, washes his hands of guilt and delivers Jesus over to be crucified. (Mt 27:24) If only it worked that way. Pilate was far from clean. And apart from Christ, we are no different than Pilate in this. But we can be made clean. Jesus said, "*No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and to take it up again.*" (Jn 10:18) Jesus intentionally and authoritatively gave His life for you. "*These things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*" (Jn 20:31) Do you believe this?

Notes: