

37. The Trials of Jesus

John 18:28-40

The Gospel According to John

Politics has been a part of the human experience since civilization has existed. The Wikipedia definition of politics is from the Greek word, *politikos*, which means of, for, or relating to citizens: “the practice and theory of influencing other people on a civic or individual level.”

The comedian, Robin Williams, had another definition of the word. He said the word politics is derived from the word "poly," meaning "many," and the word "ticks," meaning "blood-sucking parasites." There has been political satire for as long as political parties have existed. Often, politicians promise one thing and deliver another. One comedian has defined the word politician as “One who shakes your hand before elections and your confidence thereafter.” It is hard to marry politics and truth. In the quest for truth, politics will often usurp or ignore the truth in a bid to gain or maintain power. In thinking about the trials of Jesus, we need to understand that Jesus caused a political dilemma for the ruling leaders and Pontius Pilate, those presented with the decision as to his guilt or innocence.

The Trial of Jesus Before Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin

John doesn't tell us anything of Jesus' trial before Caiaphas, perhaps because he wrote his Gospel after Matthew, Mark, and Luke, so it is possible he didn't want to write the same things as the others. After the interview with the deposed high priest, Annas, and the three-time denial of Peter, Jesus was sent over the courtyard to the high priest Caiaphas for the trial before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling elders, which was an illegal trial in so many ways. For one thing, it was conducted during the night, and Jewish law forbade a trial at such a time. Also, Jesus had no defense attorney while the high priest was trying to intimidate him. The witnesses also could not agree with one another, so finally, the exasperated Caiaphas straight out commanded Christ to reply to the charges under oath, thus binding Christ under the witness of the Living God. Matthew records Caiaphas as commanding Jesus in these words: “**I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God**” (Matthew 26:63). Mark gives us Jesus' response:

⁶⁰Then the high priest stood up before them and asked Jesus, “Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?” ⁶¹But Jesus remained silent and gave no answer. Again the high priest asked him, “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?” ⁶²“**I am,**” said Jesus. “**And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.**” ⁶³The high priest tore his clothes. “Why do we need any more witnesses?” he asked. ⁶⁴“You have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?” They all condemned him as worthy of death. ⁶⁵Then some began to spit at him; they blindfolded him, struck him with their fists, and said, “Prophecy!” And the guards took him and beat him (Mark 14:60-65).

Notice Jesus' use of the divine name for God again, *I AM* (v. 62). This reply is what sealed Jesus' fate as it concerned the Jewish ruling elders. The trial was over at this point, “**Why do we need**

any more witnesses” (v. 63). Christ was convicted for telling the truth about Who He is. Jesus stood up to the High Priest and to his face claimed that He is the One written about by the prophet Daniel, i.e. the One called the Son of Man, the Messiah, Who will sit on the throne of David, and will be worshiped:

¹³In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. ¹⁴He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed (Daniel 7:13-14 Emphasis mine).

After Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin passed judgment on Christ, Mark wrote that they spat upon Jesus for speaking words that, to them, were words of blasphemy. Then, Christ was blindfolded so that He could not anticipate the punches of those in the Sanhedrin that morning (Mark 14:65). Luke also wrote that they struck Him with their fists and beat Him before leading Him to Pilate (Luke 22:63).

The Politics Influencing Pontius Pilate

It was politics again that influenced the difficult decision Pilate had to make when confronted with the truth Himself, the Lord Jesus. At first glance, it may seem that only Jesus was on trial, but looking closer, we can see that Pontius Pilate and the ruling elders were on trial for their souls. Let's look closer at the politics surrounding the Roman governor.

The Jewish civil and ceremonial law book called the *Talmud* records that, forty years before the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem, i.e., two years before the crucifixion of Christ, judgment in matters of life and death was taken away from Israel. Tiberius Caesar had decreed that only the governor or procurator had the authority to execute a man, but this was not always strictly followed, for a few months later, there was the stoning to death of Stephen, an illegal act (Acts 7), plus the leaders also tried to get the woman caught in the act of adultery stoned to death (John 8:5).

Tiberius Caesar had entrusted administration in Rome to his right-hand man, Lucius Sejanus. Because the land of Judea (Israel) was known to be a problematic land to rule, Sejanus had picked Pontius Pilate as the procurator of Judea because he was known to be one who would take no nonsense from the people under his rule. Upon Pilate's arrival, though, he began making mistakes. He marched his soldiers up from their seaside garrison resort of Caesarea up to Jerusalem, bearing Caesar's image on their standards. The Romans believed that Caesar was a god, which was, of course, objectionable to the Jewish people. Pilate was determined that the Roman province of Judea and Jerusalem should be treated as any other province of Rome. All kinds of religious protest broke out. Josephus, the historian, wrote that, when the Roman forces and Pilate returned to Caesarea, a host of Jews followed him imploring him to hear their case. Here's what Josephus wrote:

On the sixth day [of the protest] he ordered his soldiers to have their weapons [hidden],

while he came and sat upon his judgment seat, which seat was so prepared in the open place of the city, that it concealed the army that lay ready to oppress them: and when the Jews petitioned him again, he gave a signal to the soldiers to encompass them round, and threatened that their punishment be no less than immediate death, unless they would leave off disturbing him, and go their ways home. But they threw themselves upon the ground, and laid their necks bare, and said they would take their death willingly, rather than the wisdom of their laws should be transgressed; upon which Pilate was deeply affected by their firm resolution not to have their laws broken, and presently commanded the images to be carried back from Jerusalem to Caesarea.¹

Not long after this incident, another riot broke out and was suppressed with brute force by Pilate with many people killed, so within days, the Jewish leadership petitioned Tiberius Caesar for Pilate to be dismissed from his post. Pilate knew he had to be careful of Jewish sensitivities; otherwise, he would lose his job.

The Demand for Pilate to Execute Jesus (John 18:28-32)

This appearance of Jesus before Pilate was expected because the large detachment of soldiers that arrested Jesus during the night must have had Pilate's permission. It was now daylight and probably around 6 a.m. when the procession of elders, the Lord Jesus, and the high priest got to Pilate's headquarters in Jerusalem. The Jews would not enter the building due to a scribal law that the homes of Gentiles were not ceremonially clean for a Jew. Alfred Edersheim, in his book, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, brings out the fact that the Jews believed that the Gentiles aborted their babies and put the remains down the drains. Being in contact with a dead body required seven days of ritual cleansing.² Passover law also stipulated that, days before the Passover, the home had to be meticulously swept clean and all leaven (yeast) removed before the start of the seven days of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the first day of which was Passover (Exodus 12:15). After being in a Gentile residence, ritual cleansing would take anywhere between one day and seven days, depending on what was touched in the building.

²⁸Then the Jewish leaders took Jesus from Caiaphas to the palace of the Roman governor. By now it was early morning, and to avoid ceremonial uncleanness they did not enter the palace, because they wanted to be able to eat the Passover. ²⁹So Pilate came out to them and asked, "What charges are you bringing against this man?" ³⁰"If he were not a criminal," they replied, "we would not have handed him over to you." ³¹Pilate said, "Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law." "But we have no right to execute anyone," they objected. ³²This took place to fulfill what Jesus had said about the kind of death he was going to die (John 18:28-32).

At an earlier time, Jesus had accused the religious leaders and Pharisees of straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel (Matthew 23:24). What does that mean, and how does this passage relate to it?

¹ Flavius Josephus. *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*. Trans. William Whitson. Peabody, MA. Hendrickson, 1987, p. 392.

² Alfred Edersheim. *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*. Hendrickson Publishers, p. 865.

The religious leaders forgot justice and mercy, and had illegally hauled their Messiah into a criminal court, beating and bruising Jesus for telling them the truth about being the Messiah, yet here they were, worried about ritual uncleanness by entering the home of a Gentile! So often, church people make a big deal about small things while leaving out the more essential matters of the spiritual life.

Pilate came out to the elders and the crowd in the courtyard. He asked them, “**What charges are you bringing against this man?**” (John 18:29). The chief priests and Pharisees did not like being asked this question because they had no charge against Christ for a Roman court. Their indictment was a religious one, i.e., the charge of blasphemy against God. They knew that charge would not hold up before Pilate. Instead of an accusation, they thought they already had an agreement with Pilate. “**If he were not a criminal,**” they replied, “**we would not have handed him over to you**” (v. 30). Pilate already knew of the jealousy and hatred for Jesus and distrusted them, so his reply to them was, “**You take Him and judge Him by your own law,**” Pilate told them (v. 31). Pilate was not expecting the high priest and elders to be after the death penalty for Jesus, so he told them to take care of the situation with Christ on their own, outside of his court. Perhaps, it was at this point that Pilate’s wife came out to him with a strong warning message that came in the form of a dream. God will often use a thought, a dream, a message in church, or even a friend’s words to restrain us before we sin if we have the heart to listen and receive it.

Matthew wrote about the words of Pilate’s wife:

While Pilate was sitting on the judge's seat, his wife sent him this message: Don't have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him (Matthew 27:19).

Pilate permitted them to judge Christ themselves. Why didn't they take Pilate at his word and execute Him immediately? (John 18:31).

It is possible that the high priest and elders planned to blame Christ’s death upon the Romans, that way they could declare themselves free of blame. In reply to Pilate’s judgment, they said, “**But we have no right to execute anyone,**” they objected. This reply was spoken to fulfill what Jesus had said about the kind of death he was going to die (John 18:32). Jesus had prophesied some time earlier that He would be crucified: “**The Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death¹⁹and will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified**” (Matthew 20:18-19), and John records Jesus as saying that He would die by being lifted up: “**But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself**” (John 12:32). The Jewish leadership also wanted to disprove His claim to be Messiah (Christ) by putting a curse upon Him. They wanted Christ to die by crucifixion rather than the Jewish method of execution, which was to be stoned to death. To be hanged on a piece of wood (a tree) was to be cursed of God:

²²If someone guilty of a capital offense is put to death and their body is exposed on a pole,
²³you must not leave the body hanging on the pole overnight. Be sure to bury it that same day, because anyone who is hung on a pole is under God’s curse. You must not

desecrate the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance (Deuteronomy 21:22-23).

Behind it all, God was at work to substitute His Son for us. Jesus would take the curse that hung over us. Paul, the Apostle, wrote to the Galatian church that there was a reason that God allowed His Son to be hung on a tree and bear a curse upon Him:

¹⁰For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse, as it is written: “**Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.**”

¹¹Clearly no one who relies on the law is justified before God, because “the righteous will live by faith.” ¹²The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, it says, “The person who

does these things will live by them.” ¹³**Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us,** for it is written: “**Cursed is everyone who is hung on a pole.**”

¹⁴He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit (Galatians 3:10-14).

Commentator William Barclay tells us that crucifixion "originated in Persia; and its origin came from the fact that the earth was considered to be sacred to Ormuzd, the god, and the criminal was lifted up from it that he might not defile the earth, which was the god's property. From Persia, crucifixion passed to Carthage in North Africa; and it was from Carthage that Rome learned it."³ The Romans crucified at least 30,000 Jews during the Roman occupation of Israel to warn people that this is what happens to people who go against Rome. The Jewish leadership wanted the worst possible death for Jesus and, at the same time, to shock the ordinary people by putting a curse on the One whom the people thought was the Messiah. God was showing us that Jesus bore the thorns of the curse upon His head. In the Garden of Eden, when Adam chose to obey the serpent's voice instead of God's, the Lord said: “**Cursed is the ground because of you...both thorns and thistles it will yield you**” (Genesis 3:17-18). In fulfillment of the curse brought to the cross, they “**twisted together a crown of thorns** and set it on his head” (Matthew 27:29 Emphasis mine)

Pilate Questions Jesus about His Kingship (John 18:33-38a)

³³Pilate then went back inside the palace, summoned Jesus and asked him, “Are you the king of the Jews?” ³⁴“Is that your own idea,” Jesus asked, “or did others talk to you about me?” ³⁵“Am I a Jew?” Pilate replied. “Your own people and chief priests handed you over to me. What is it you have done?” ³⁶Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place.” ³⁷“You are a king, then!” said Pilate. Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.” ³⁸“What is truth?” retorted Pilate. With this he went out again to the Jews gathered there and said, “I find no basis for a charge against him. ³⁹But it is your custom for me to release to you one prisoner at the time of the Passover. Do you want me to release ‘the king of the Jews?’” ⁴⁰They

³ William Barclay. *The Gospel of Matthew*, Vol. 2. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975, p. 365.

shouted back, “No, not him! Give us Barabbas!” Now Barabbas had taken part in an uprising (John 18:33-40).

Pilate already did not like the way this was going. He brought Jesus aside from the religious elite and spoke to Christ privately from inside his quarters. He flat out asked Christ, “**Are you the king of the Jews?**” He said this because that was the accusation the Jewish leaders were making to Pilate to get him to convict. Rome could only have one king and to them that was Caesar. Inside his heart, though, Pilate felt that Jesus was innocent, but if he was to give in to the Jewish elders, he needed some indictment.

What do you think caused Pilate to begin to bend under the pressure of the ruling elders? What causes a man to compromise his values?

Pilate felt the pressure from these rulers of the Jews because he already knew that they would take the matter further and complain to Caesar, thus making him look incompetent to handle this situation. The fear of losing face or his position is a strong motivator to compromise his inner values. He said to Jesus, “**Are you the king of the Jews?**” (John 18:33). In Christ’s reply, the Lord wanted to know the context for the question. If Pilate is asking the question from a political or worldly standpoint, then no, in that respect, Jesus was not a king. Christ’s kingdom is not one of this world system of force and intimidation, but if Pilate is asking the question from a scriptural point of view—then yes, He is the King of the Jews, and He has come to bear witness to the truth of God, to conquer, and bring to nothing Satan’s rule over the earth.

Christ’s rule is of a completely different order. His response gave no evidence for Pilate to convict Him of being one who would take up arms against Rome. Jesus said, “**The reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me**” (v. 37). The Lord was allowing Pilate to respond to the truth he heard, just as He seeks to do with all of us, i.e., to opt-out of a sin that we know will be damning to the soul if we continue to march forward into it. If a man has an honest heart and is searching for the truth, then the truth will have a certain ring to it. The truths of God are like a sword that provokes us to choose a side. When the truth is presented to us, there is a dividing line that comes, i.e., a choice: either we will respond with a hunger for more, or we will close our mind and heart to it and reject the truth of God.

Do you remember a time when you first heard the truth of the Gospel? Were there painful circumstances that caused you to search for the truth?

Jesus was saying that all who love the truth listen to Him. When we hear the truth about Jesus, we each fall on one side or the other. There is no middle ground, i.e., no fence on which to sit, and we either reject the Word of God or hunger for more. Jesus said, “**Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters**” (Matthew 12:30). Truth is a remarkable thing. If a man is on the side of truth, he will listen and draw near to the person of Christ, the living embodiment of truth: “**I am the Way, the Truth and the Life**” (John 14:6).

Pilate was blind to the truth and answered with an abrupt and sharp, “What is truth?” He thinks Truth is what the victors of any war make it. Ungodly men will often shape history for their own

agenda's sake, blinding people to the truth. Unfortunately, Pilate did not inquire further to seek the truth from Jesus' lips.

Pilate Finds Jesus Not Guilty

Pilate realized that there was no evidence to convict Jesus to death. He went outside again and spoke to the crowd now gathered and gave his verdict: not guilty (v. 38). The crowd, though, did not take this answer, and Luke wrote that at this point some in the crowd shouted out that Jesus had stirred up problems in Galilee and everywhere He went (Luke 23:5-6). When Pilate realized that Jesus was from Galilee, he thought he could pass the judgment to Herod Antipas, the ruler over the Galilee region, who just happened to be visiting Jerusalem at the time.

John mentions nothing in his Gospel about this appearance before Herod Antipas, but Luke wrote that this, too, was fruitless for Pilate (Luke 23:6-12). After Jesus said nothing and did no miracle to appease Herod's curiosity, He was mocked and humiliated and sent back to Pilate for him to judge. Inside his heart, Pilate knew that there was something different about the Lord Jesus, and he was in an inner battle wanting to release Him, especially after thinking of his wife's dream. When the Lord came back from Herod, the crowd in the courtyard was getting bigger and even more unruly. Religious fervor was a scary thing for Pilate as well as it would be for any of us. Pilate had to do something.

The Passover Substitute Option

Suddenly, an escape clause came to him; he remembered that, due to Passover starting in a few hours, there was a tradition of releasing one prisoner as an act of grace and mercy. With the crowd before him, Pilate raised his voice and suggested this act of kindness to them. He gave them a choice, feeling sure that they would choose Christ. After all, only a few days previously, the ordinary people had been laying down palm branches before Christ as He came into Jerusalem riding on a donkey. They were crying out then, "Hosanna to the Son of David" (Matthew 21:9). Surely, they would pick the Son of David over the criminal and insurrectionist, Barabbas, the one who wanted to upset the order of things. Pilate felt sure that the ruling elite would not want a revolutionary, such as Barabbas, but he underestimated the hatred and jealousy of the religious elite in power.

Let's now imagine what it was like for Barabbas in the dungeon underneath the courtyard. He couldn't hear individual conversations, but he could listen to the crowd shouting. When Pilate gave a choice to the crowd of people, Jesus or Barabbas, they yelled at the top of their lungs for Barabbas, the corrupt elders went through the crowd whispering for the crowd to shout for Barabbas. Imagine what that would have been like for Mary, the mother of Jesus and the apostle John, for the elders to manipulate the crowd against Jesus. Down in the dungeon, perhaps Barabbas heard his name shouted followed by the words "Crucify Him."

²⁰But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus executed. ²¹Which of the two do you want me to release to you? asked the governor. **Barabbas**, they answered. ²²What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called Christ? Pilate asked. They all answered, "**Crucify him!**" ²³"Why? What crime has he committed?"

asked Pilate. But they shouted all the louder, “Crucify him!” (Matthew 27:20-23).

Surely his heart skipped a beat at the thought of his impending crucifixion beside two others. Up in the courtyard, Pilate then went back to the crowd. Imagine what it would have been like moments later for Barabbas to hear a Roman soldier coming down the hallway with the sound of keys in his hand. Barabbas must have thought to himself that his time was up. Imagine his shock to be told of his release and that someone else had taken his place. He was free to leave and go wherever he wanted. All charges against him were dropped! I like to think that, later, as he got out of the city of Jerusalem, he saw Jesus crucified in his place as his substitute.

Can you relate to Barabbas? Can you think of things that you may have in common with him?

Like Barabbas, we, too, have deserved a just death penalty for our sin. Like him, we also are offered a free pardon for our actions in this world. Jesus took our place and offered Himself as the substitute for all sin. This substitutionary death is charged to our spiritual account when we place our faith and trust in His finished work on the cross. Imagine if Barabbas chose to stay inside his small cell and not walk outside into the light. Wouldn't that seem crazy to you? If such a thing were to happen, the grace offered to Barabbas would have done him no good at all. Like Barabbas, we have at one time or another been in a prison of our own making. Thank God, Jesus sets us free. Who are you most like today: Pilate or Barabbas? When the truth is presented, will you compromise, as Pilate did, or walk out of your cell like Barabbas and thank God for sending a Substitute?

Prayer: Thank You, Father, for sending Your Son into the world to forgive me of the debt of my sin. Today, I ask Christ to come into my life and forgive me for all sin. I want to be clean and free from my prison of slavery to sin. Amen!

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