

Christ Before Pilate

John 18:38-40

Part 3

We are in the middle of an election year. And the various candidates for president will be making all kinds of promises. But to be honest with you, I have very little confidence that any of these promises will come to fruition. Not necessarily because these candidates are dishonest, insincere or disingenuous, but rather simply because they, within themselves, are so very limited.

They may view themselves as strong. But the truth is that they are weak, just as we are also weak. So how weak are we? Let me read for you **Psalms 103:14**. “**For He [The lord] Himself knows our frame; He is mindful that we are but dust.**” So how weak are we? We are as weak as dust.

But this is not true of the Lord, is it? Though we are weak, He is mighty. This is why the Lord in **Isaiah 14:24** could say, “**Surely, just as I have intended so it has happened, and just as I have planned so it will stand.**”

This point, I believe, will come alive for us in our ongoing study of the Gospel of John as we see Christ, according to His Father’s eternal redemptive plan, resolutely and methodically moving toward His death. But He is not moving resolutely and methodically toward just any kind of death, but rather Christ is resolutely and methodically, according to His Father’s eternal redemptive plan, moving toward His death by crucifixion. And why was it so important for Christ to die by crucifixion? It was important for Him to die in this particular way because God had promised in His word, through king David as well as through Christ Himself, that He would in fact die in this way. Christ’s death by crucifixion was not optional; it was mandatory.

Christ could not die by a heart attack. Christ could not die by cancer. Christ could not die by stoning. Christ, according to the Word of God and according to what God had promised in His Word, had to die by crucifixion. If there is any doubt about this, read **Psalms 22:6-18** as well as **John 3:14; 8:28; 12:32-33**.

But how could Christ accomplish this? How could Christ get this done? For Christ to be crucified, Rome would have to put Him to death. But Christ was

not a criminal, nor was He a threat to Rome. But this did not change the fact that He had to be put to death by Rome since they alone practiced crucifixion as a form of execution.

And this brings us back to John's account of Christ before Pontius Pilate. Though Christ was the sinless Lamb of God without spot or wrinkle, the Jewish leadership, failing on various occasions to bring about Christ's death through stoning, had now after a sham religious trial brought Christ before Pilate so that Pilate might initiate a civil trial.

So, what was the first part of this trial that we have examined? The first part of this trial that we examined was this: Pilate meets with Christ's accusers (John 18:28-32). This meeting was in a sense a preliminary hearing. And it certainly was not easy. It was, in fact, difficult and tense, but it ultimately resulted in official charges being brought before Pilate against Christ by the Jewish leadership.

So, what was the second part of this trial that we have examined? It was this: Pilate's initial examination of Christ (John 18:33-38). And what did we discover about this initial examination? We discovered that Christ, seizing on Pilate's personal incredulity or disbelief that He, in light of His very unimpressive appearance, could in any way be a threat to Rome, got Pilate to completely debunk the Jewish charges against Him thus providing Him an opportunity to explain the true nature of the kingdom.

However, though he rejected Christ's words about His kingship and the nature of the kingdom over which He ruled, Pilate continued to be fully convinced that Christ was not in any way a threat to Rome and therefore found all the charges that the Jews had made against Christ to be without any basis and from that moment in time sought protect Christ from crucifixion.

What a joke. Here at this point in time in Christ's trial we have Pilate, the military governor of Palestine, attempting to protect Christ from crucifixion. On the surface you would think that he would be able to do this. But he is way over his head. For in seeking to protect Christ from crucifixion he is in essence opposing the eternal redemptive plan of God.

We are now ready to move on in our present examination of Christ's trial before Pilate. So what is the third part of Christ's trial before Pilate?

Pilate, being convinced of Christ's innocence, sought to deliver Christ from crucifixion (John 18:38-40).

It is my hope and prayer for this message that God would use it to help us to see how truly puny all mankind is when it comes to resisting the eternal redemptive plan of God. And how important is this for us to know? Extremely important! For it assures every true disciple of Christ that they, in fact, will one day be received glory. How exactly assured can they be of this? They can be just as assured of this as Christ was assured of the fact that He, according to the eternal redemptive plan of God, would be crucified.

So now let us now consider Pilate's first attempt to deliver Christ from crucifixion as recorded for us by the Apostle John in **John 18:38-40**. So let me read these verses for you. **“And when he had said this, he went out again to the Jews and said to them, ‘I find no guilt in Him. (39) But you have a custom that I release someone for you at the Passover; do you wish then that I release for you the King of the Jews?’ (40) So they cried out again, saying ‘Not this man, but Barabbas.’ Now Barabbas was a robber.”** These verses are very familiar to us. And what do they record? They record for us Pilate's first attempt, at least from John's account, to deliver Christ from crucifixion. So let us now go through these verses more carefully and develop this story more completely.

So what were the very first words out of Pilate's mouth to the Jewish leaders after his initial examination of Christ according to the Apostle John? The very first words out of Pilate's mouth to the Jewish leaders after his initial examination of Christ, according to the Apostle John, were these: **“I find no guilt in Him.”** So let me ask you this question. How do you think these words would have gone over with the Jewish leadership? Would they have gone over well or not so well? And you should already know the answer to this question. These words would not have gone over well at all! This is not clear here in **John 18**. But this is very clear in **Luke 23**.

When Pilate told the Jews that he had found no guilt in Christ, the Jews began to immediately and strongly protest according to Luke 23:4-5. And would this protest have had an impact on Pilate? Absolutely! In fact, this

protest by the Jews recorded for us in **Luke 23:4** was the reason, I believe, Pilate did not immediately release Christ after he had declared His innocence in **John 18:38**.

The Roman Empire at the time of Pilate was enjoying a relative period of calm known as the “Pax Romana,” or in other words the “Roman peace.” This period of calm was largely produced by a set of laws called the “jus gentium.” These laws not only granted a certain degree of self-government but also a certain degree of religious freedom. And it was the responsibility of the Roman military governors, such as Pontius Pilate, to apply these laws in such a way that peace might be able to be maintained throughout the Roman Empire.

Unfortunately for Pontius Pilate, he had already, from the standpoint of Rome, failed to capture the spirit of these laws in his dealings with the Jewish people on at least two occasions, according to the Jewish historian Josephus.

The first incident occurred early in his administration when he refused to remove the image of Caesar from their Roman standards when His troops marched into Jerusalem. This action on the part of Pilate, which totally disregarded the Jews sensitivity to the practice of idolatry, resulted in a huge riot. So how would Rome, in light of “jus gentium” or the “law of nations,” have viewed this particular action of Pilate especially in light of the huge riot that had resulted from his action? They would have viewed his action as ill advised at best and as opposed to their laws at worst. This obviously did not help Pilate in respect to any political ambitions he may have had.

But this was not the only incident Pilate mishandled in terms of “jus gentium,” or in other words the “law of nations.” There was a second incident that was as equally disturbing to the Jews when Pilate forcibly raided the temple treasury in order to secure funds for the building of an aqueduct. This also resulted in a riot.

These missteps on the part of Pilate were significant. During this period of “Pax Romana” Rome above all else was pursuing a path of peace in respect to all their conquered territories, and Pilate seemed to be having a very difficult time in accomplishing that end as the military governor over Palestine because of his own personal insensibilities. And this inability on

his part to understand the Jews and to apply the laws of Rome accordingly had put him in a very precarious position.

You have heard the expression, three strikes and you are out. This expression could very well be applied to Pilate. Rome had established laws, the “jus gentium,” in order to produce peace and Pontius Pilate had not done that, at least up to this point in time. And because of this, Pilate was very fearful of what might happen to his own political career if this present protest, created by his judgment that Jesus was, in fact, innocent, should somehow get out of hand.

Therefore, this strong and immediate protest by the Jewish leadership kept Pilate from releasing Jesus, because he was fearful that his own political career would be ruined if another riot broke out.

So what happened next? What happened next is, once again, not clear in **John 18** but it is clear in **Luke 23:6-7**.

Pilate, while listening to the immediate and strong protest from the Jewish leaders in **Luke 23:4-5**, heard the word “Galilee,” and this word “Galilee” led Pilate to ask the Jewish leaders a question.

Let me now read these verses for you **Luke 23:6-7**. **“When Pilate heard it [that His teaching had started in Galilee], he asked whether the man [Jesus] was a Galilean. (7) 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.”**

Though Pilate was unwilling, for political expediency, to immediately release Jesus, he was willing to turn Jesus over to Herod when he saw the opportunity to do so (Luke 23:6-7). This action on the part of Pilate is not recorded in **John 18**, but it is recorded for us in **Luke 23:6-7**.

Will Rogers once said, “There have been two great eras in American history, the passing of the buffalo and the passing of the buck.” And this is what we see here, Pilate passed the buck to Herod. He wanted to save Jesus, but if he could just have this whole thing go away this would have been fine with him.

So who was Herod? Herod Antipas was the man, who along with his wife, Herodias, had been confronted by John the Baptist for violating the laws of God (Mark 6:17-18). And what was the result of that confrontation?

The result of John the Baptist's confrontation of Herod and his wife was that John the Baptist was imprisoned and later reluctantly executed by Herod after he had been manipulated by his wife Herodias (Mark 6:17-29).

Herod's execution of John the Baptist was not without a price. Herod believed John the Baptist was a holy man, and therefore when Christ had begun to perform miracles, he initially believed that John the Baptist had risen from the dead (Matthew 14:1-2). This obviously was a fearful time for Herod. And the Bible tells us that after this time he continually wanted to meet Christ. Hoping perhaps to be somehow comforted by the fact that Jesus was not indeed a resurrected John the Baptist.

Unfortunately over time, though Herod's interest in meeting Christ continued, his conscience had become hardened, which became apparent after Pilate sent Jesus to him (Luke 23:8-9). This unfortunate hardening of Herod's conscience is recorded for us in **Luke 23:8-9**. Let me now read these verses for you.

“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 question Him to see if perhaps He was, in fact, John the Baptist risen from the dead. No! This is not what it says. Rather it says...] and was hoping to see some sign performed by Him.” Whatever struggle he had with his conscience in the past had waned. He was now only interested in a sideshow.

So did Herod get what he wanted? No! All Herod got was silence. Let me read for you **Luke 23:9. And he questioned Him at some length; but He [Christ] answered him nothing.”**

There was a time when the Lord had been speaking to Herod through the voice of John the Baptist, but Herod neglected to heed that voice; and now Christ had chosen not to speak to him any further. Herod, rather than seeing miracles, simply experienced deafening silence.

If you are not a believer, if you presently like to listen to God's Word, if you have a reverence and fear of God, do not be content to simply go on hearing the words – do what His words call you to do! If you go on hearing the gospel but neglect it, you invite a fog over your eyes that will in time shut out all light. Respond now while the gospel still impresses you, for a day may come when it no longer does.

The silence of Jesus is an extreme and dramatic warning not to trifle with holy things, not to suppress the private appeals and suggestions of the Holy Spirit as Herod had done. What does **Psalm 95:7-8** tell us? **“Today, if you would hear His voice, do not harden your hearts.”**

So what happened next? After Jesus chose to remain silent, Herod and his soldiers mocked Jesus and then sent Him back to Pilate according to Luke 23:10-11. So now let me read for you **Luke 23:10-11.** **“And the chief priests and the scribes were standing there, accusing Him vehemently. (11) 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.”**

So now we are back once more to **John 18** and John's account of Pilate's first attempt to deliver Christ recorded for us in **John 18:38-40.** And what do we see Pilate now doing in response to all that has transpired just prior to this before Herod? We see him once again speaking to the Jews. But this time he actually has a plan. And what was this plan? Let me now read for you **John 18:39.**

“But you have a custom that I release someone for you at the Passover.” Evidently there was a custom that Pilate had with the people whereby he would release, each year, a Jewish prisoner. And this is the plan that we see Pilate actually putting forward in **John 18:39.** And why did Pilate put forward this particular plan?

Pilate, in John 18:39, after Jesus had returned from Herod, was hoping that he could use the Roman custom of releasing a Jewish prisoner during the Passover to free Jesus.

So how did he specifically go about doing this? Once again we will have to go to the other Gospels to fill in all the other details.

Pilate, according to Matthew 27:17, offered to the Jews two different Jewish prisoners for possible release.

Let me read this verse for you. **“So when the people gathered together [after Jesus had been returned back to Pilate by Herod], Pilate said to them, ‘Whom do you want me to release for you? Barabbas, or Jesus, who is called Christ?’”**

So who was Barabbas? Barabbas, according to Mark 15:7, had committed murder during a Jewish insurrection, but he was not nearly as noble as other Jewish insurrectionists. He also, according to John 18:40, was a robber. This was the choice that Pilate offered to the Jewish people. And a very stark choice indeed it was. On the hand there was Jesus, who in the eyes of both Jesus and Herod was innocent, and on the hand was Barabbas, a man that everyone knew to be guilty of the crimes he had been charged and who rightfully deserved to die. In Pilate’s mind he had set up this choice in such a way that the choice would be obvious. He had set it up in such a way that he really did feel that they would certainly choose Jesus to be released.

So, what was Pilate’s hope built on? Pilate believed that many Jews, based on His triumphal entry into Jerusalem just a few days before, actually believed that Jesus was their king. But Pilate had very much underestimated the fickleness of people in general and the hatred of the Jewish leaders in particular. We are back to **John 18:39**. And what does **John 18:39** tell us?

John 18:39 tells us that after Pilate gave the Jewish people a choice in Matthew 27:17, he went on to ask them if they wanted “the king of the Jews” to be released to them.

This was an incredible blunder on his part. Pilate once again showed a total lack of understanding of the personal dynamics that were in play before him. He actually thought in some way that referring to Jesus as their king would resonate with the Jewish multitude while at the same time give him opportunity to once again take a dig at the Jewish leadership, but he wrong. He was completely and totally wrong.

How did they respond? The whole of the Jewish multitude, both the leaders and the people, cried out, according to **John 18:40**, **“Not this Man, but Barabbas.”** Pilate I am sure was stunned.

Pilate was seeking to deliver Christ from crucifixion. In other words, he was attempting to stand in the way of God's unfolding redemptive plan.

How powerful was Pilate to resist God's eternal redemptive plan that would eventually in a few short hours place Christ on the cross of Calvary? He had no power at all to resist God's eternal redemptive plan. He was no more powerful than dust.

But this is not true of Christ. If we truly place our faith and trust in Christ alone for our salvation, trusting Him to deliver us from our sin and all of its consequences, His promise to us, in contrast to the promises of others, is sure. He will deliver us and will one day present us to Himself without any spot or wrinkle or any such thing.

May God give us the grace to know that, as true disciples of Christ, our future presence in heaven is as certain as it was that Christ would be crucified.