

The Civil Trials

(The Trials - Part 2)

#151 in Series: “The Life of Christ – in a Harmony of The Gospels”

(In order to have Jesus crucified, the Jewish leadership had to somehow get Rome to sanction their plans. The encounter Pontius Pilate has with Jesus, and the truth of Christ, is one all people must have with Christ as well.)

Matthew 27:1-14, Mark 15:1-5, Luke 23:1-5, John 18:28-38a

Last week we learned about the *religious trials* Jesus faced. Today we move into the *civil trials*... The religious leaders had already determined that Jesus should die – but they had no authority to carry out the execution they wanted! Rome has been in control of Israel for almost a century, and they have taken the authority away from Israel to determine capital punishment... They did this, not because they are opposed to capital punishment, but because ... they rule wherever they occupy! In fact, the Romans became the masters in the art of execution, which we will see in weeks to come...

The Religious leaders wanted Jesus dead, and the only way this would come about is for Rome to sanction their desire!

Again, all four gospel writers record some detail of the trials Jesus faced in the civil courts of Rome. In fact, there is so much detail, we will consider them in today’s message, and Lord willing, next week as well...

Let’s stay with John’s report for our main text today. We read that immediately upon the conclusion of the “religious trials” –

John 18:28-38

²⁸Then they led Jesus from Caiaphas into the Praetorium, and it was early; and they themselves did not enter into the Praetorium so that they would not be defiled, but might eat the Passover. ²⁹Therefore Pilate went out to them and said, “What accusation do you bring against this Man?” ³⁰They answered and said to him, “If this Man were not an evildoer, we would not have delivered Him to you.” ³¹So Pilate said to them, “Take Him yourselves, and judge Him according to your law.” The Jews said to him, “We are not permitted to put anyone to death,” ³²to fulfill the word of Jesus which He spoke, signifying by what kind of death He was about to die.

³³Therefore Pilate entered again into the Praetorium, and summoned Jesus and said to Him, “Are You the King of the Jews?” ³⁴Jesus answered, “Are you saying this on your own initiative, or did others tell you about Me?” ³⁵Pilate answered, “I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests delivered You to me; what have You done?” ³⁶Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm.” ³⁷Therefore Pilate said to Him, “So You are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say *correctly* that I am a king. For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice.” ³⁸Pilate 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 guilt in Him.

Let’s simply think through this passage as it is given to us... In the first part of verse :28 we see –

1. The Necessity of the Trial

There was the need for the Jews to get Jesus tried by Roman authorities, simply because the Jewish leadership had no authority to carry out what they were determined to do to Jesus! So –

John 18:28a

Then they led Jesus from Caiaphas into the Praetorium, and it was early;

It's early – we're not told exactly how early, but it's right after Jesus went before the sanhedrin, and they couldn't meet until the sun rose... These "trials" started early ... and they moved quickly.

Let's lean into something that we do not need to miss... It is –

2. The Hypocrisy before the Trial

John 18:28b

... and they themselves did not enter into the Praetorium so that they would not be defiled, but might eat the Passover.

Listen, hypocrisy is no minor point, so it is not one in this message...

These "religious", haters-of-Christ, are so blinded by their wilful rejection of the Messiah, that they fail to see the hypocrisy of their actions here...

They refuse to enter ... a Gentile's space this close to Passover! It would ceremonially "defile" them!... They are so concerned to not violate the religious expectations of their contemporary version of Judaism, that they fail to see the putrefying sin that is lodged in their hearts!

Their hatred for Christ has blackened their hearts worse than any so-called "defilement" they would have suffered for entering Gentile space!

C.H. Spurgeon – "The Jewish counsellors little knew that they were already far too defiled to have any real fellowship with God's passover, and were unconsciously slaughtering the true Lamb, whose flesh they were not privileged to eat."¹

Let's move on and consider –

3. The Reason for the Trial

John 18:29

Therefore Pilate went out to them and said, "What accusation do you bring against this Man?"

Pontius Pilate becomes the principal part of what is about to happen... Pilate has been the Roman governor of Judea for less than 10 years at this point, and the last thing he wants is anything that could threaten his standing in the eyes of the Emperor, Tiberius Julius Caesar Augustus...

What Pilate doesn't realize is that ... this very trial will be what history will remember about him...

Since the Jews won't come into the Praetorium, Pilate goes out to them – and asks for the charges they are bringing against Jesus.

It is at this point Luke tells us that they said –

Luke 23:2

And they began to accuse Him, saying, "We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding to pay taxes to Caesar, and saying that He Himself is Christ, a King."

¹ Charles Spurgeon's "Morning & Evening", Devotional: October 12th

Notice... half of this is true, but the first half of this charge is false!...

John simply says –

John 18:30-31

³⁰ They answered and said to him, “If this Man were not an evildoer, we would not have delivered Him to you.” ³¹ So Pilate said to them, “Take Him yourselves, and judge Him according to your law.” The Jews said to him, “We are not permitted to put anyone to death,”

The argument the Jews are presenting is – *Trust us! We’ve examined him, and found him guilty and worthy of death! We’ve tried him, you only need to go ahead and ... condemn him!*

The Romans don’t do things the way the Jews did. They were not simply going to endorse the “lower court’s decision” without examination...

What this text shows is that the Jews would not be satisfied with anything short of Jesus’ death...

And John says that they requested this in order –

John 18:32

to fulfill the word of Jesus which He spoke, signifying by what kind of death He was about to die.

You could put parentheses around verse :32, because John is simply saying that Jesus had already prophesied how He was going to die, and this dialogue between the Jewish leaders and Pontius Pilate leads to the appeal to Rome to have Jesus crucified – which is the only way to fulfill Jesus’ own prophecy... When did Jesus prophesy that He would actually die upon a cross?

Now stay with me for this... Let’s go back, all the way back to the conversation Jesus had with Nicodemus one night... Jesus talked to this “Teacher of Israel” about salvation, and Jesus said –

John 3:14-15

¹⁴ As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; ¹⁵ so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.

How did Moses “lift up the bronze serpent”? We need to go back to the book of Numbers for this – and it’s worth your time –

Numbers 21:7-9

⁷ So the people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned, because we have spoken against the LORD and you; intercede with the LORD, that He may remove the serpents from us.” And Moses interceded for the people. ⁸ Then the LORD said to Moses, “Make a fiery *serpent*, and set it on a standard; and it shall come about, that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, he will live.” ⁹ And Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on the standard; and it came about, that if a serpent bit any man, when he looked to the bronze serpent, he lived.

Now Jesus said –

John 3:14-15

¹⁴ As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; ¹⁵ so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.

Jesus said He would be lifted up in a similar way. How was He to be lifted up – in “*praise*” like a lot of people claim when they cite this verse?... No! He would be lifted up ... on a stake – a piece of wood!

This was Jesus' prophesy of how ... and why He was going to die!... The only way, humanly speaking, to get this accomplished – was to get the Roman authorities to sentence Jesus to be crucified...

Later, on the Day of Pentecost, Peter would expound on this by saying –

Acts 2:23

this Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death.

We need to understand, that these men, both the Jews and the Romans, are responsible for the ... wickedness in this act of crucifying Jesus! The point here is, that God, “by His predetermined plan and foreknowledge” supersedes in this to accomplish His eternal plan!... They are responsible – God is still Sovereign!

Let's spend the rest of our time looking at –

4. The Crux of the Trial

As we get into this first, of three civil trials, we begin with –

- The interrogation

John 18:33-35

³³ Therefore Pilate entered again into the Praetorium, and summoned Jesus and said to Him, “Are You the King of the Jews?” ³⁴ Jesus answered, “Are you saying this on your own initiative, or did others tell you about Me?” ³⁵ Pilate answered, “I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests delivered You to me; what have You done?”

Pilate asks the question; “Are You the King of the Jews?” – which we need to understand in its context. Pilate is simply asking a *political* question.

Jesus, in His answer, is simply asking if Pilate has come to this question because of his own examination of the evidence?... Just how *personal* is Pilate's question?... That's the point here, has Pilate observed Jesus saying or doing anything that would be a ... threat to Roman rule?...

Pilate is going to be held responsible for the decision he makes here, so he needs to make it on the basis of his belief that Jesus is deserving of the crucifixion the Jews are seeking!

Pilate feels that pressure, and pushes back, even with ... contempt in his voice; “I am not a Jew, am I?”... He has no such evidence that Jesus is guilty, that is why he pushes to get Jesus to provide evidence of any guilt worthy of capital punishment; “what have You done?”

Let's read –

- The defense

John 18:36

Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm.”

Professor Utley says –

Bob Utley – “It should be translated ‘If My kingdom were of this world, and it is not, then My servants would be fighting, which they are not.’”²

Jesus doesn’t elaborate here on the nature of His Kingdom, but He also does not deny the reality that He does in fact have a Kingdom!

It’s not in your notes, but let me share Tozer’s point on this text –

A.W. Tozer – “Jesus answered, My kingdom is not of this world. (John 18:36)

In the kingdom of God, the surest way to lose something is to try to protect it, and the best way to keep it is to let it go. This was the word of our Lord Jesus Christ: ‘If any man will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross!’

Christ turned from the fallen world of Adam and spoke about another world altogether, a world where Adam’s philosophy is invalid and his technique inoperative. He spoke of the kingdom of God whose laws are exactly opposite to those of the kingdom of men.

So, the true Christian is a child of two worlds. He lives among fallen men, but when he is regenerated, he is called to live according to the laws and principles that underlie the new kingdom. He may, then, find himself trying to live a heavenly life after an earthly pattern—and this is what Paul called ‘carnal’ living. That is why it is vitally important to move up into the life of the Spirit of God. Give up your earthly ‘treasures’ and the Lord will keep them for you unto life eternal!”³

Let’s continue –

John 18:37

Therefore Pilate said to Him, “So You are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say *correctly* that I am a king. For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice.”

Again, it is an interesting response that Jesus gives to the question. He doesn’t say; “Yes, I came to be King” – He says; “*I came to testify to the truth!*”... He came as a Witness – to provide evidence that He IS the King!

The deeper point is – Jesus has come to this world to fulfill His ... God-given purpose!

By the way – everyone has a ... God-given purpose for the lives we have been given!... and we will all be held accountable for that purpose!

The Apostle Paul would later write to the young pastor, Timothy and cite what happened here when Jesus appeared before Pilate... Paul began with an admonishment for Timothy –

1 Timothy 6:12-14

¹² Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called, and you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. ¹³ I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who testified the good confession before Pontius Pilate, ¹⁴ that you keep the commandment without stain or reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ,

What did Jesus testify to when He stood before Pilate? He testified to ... the truth!... Do you remember Pilate’s response?

John 18:38

Pilate said to Him, “What is truth?”

² <https://www.preceptaustin.org/john-18-commentary#18:36>

³ Child of Two Worlds (BORROW Mornings with Tozer page 324)

It is at this point that we can conclude that the ... trial has now been reversed... Jesus is not on trial before Pilate – Pilate is on trial before ... God!

Vance Havner – “I think Pilate must have shrugged his shoulders as he asked, ‘What is truth?’ But let us be patient with Pilate. He had listened to Greek philosophers and Roman lawyers and Oriental jugglers, all ranting about truth. Little did he dream that standing before him was One who not only knew the truth but was the Truth.⁴

You recall that in a different setting, with His disciples, where Jesus gave testimony to the ... exact nature of truth. He said to Thomas –

John 14:6

Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me.

We live in a day when people like to think that there is no such thing as truth... Our day is often referred to as “Post-Modern”... The so-called “modern age”, was when people claimed “their own truth”... The “post-modern” age, is a time when people deny that there is any truth...

This is simply another ploy of the deceiver, who is himself ... a liar – and more than a liar!... Do you recall what Jesus said to the scribes and Pharisees?

John 8:44

You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

Everyone needs to realize that there IS such a thing as truth – and there is such a thing as a lie. You need to know truth!...

Let’s press on and consider –

- **The verdict**

John 18:38b

And when he had said this, he went out again to the Jews and said to them, “I find no guilt in Him.

We might refer to this as the *first* verdict... In fact, this is the first of three “not guilty” verdicts rendered by Pilate... But, it won’t matter... There is a determination in the hearts of the unbelievers to have Jesus found guilty of a crime worthy of death!

It was after this initial verdict that Luke reports that the religious leaders –

Luke 23:5

But they kept on insisting, saying, “He stirs up the people, teaching all over Judea, starting from Galilee even as far as this place.”

The religious leaders actually reveal a part of their problem with Jesus... It was Jesus’ *popularity* that stirred them to such jealousy that they want Him dead...

There is another matter we need to consider... John doesn’t speak to it, but Matthew did... We’ll call it –

⁴ <https://www.preceptaustin.org/john-18-commentary#18:38>

- **The tragedy**

In the middle of this first trial before Pilate, Matthew tells us, almost parenthetically, about Judas... Let's look at that for a moment –

Matthew 27:3-4

³ Then when Judas, who had betrayed Him, saw that He had been condemned, he felt remorse and returned the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, ⁴ saying, “I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.” But they said, “What is that to us? See to *that* yourself!”

Isn't it interesting that they had no issue about giving this money for Jesus' betrayal – but they were ... uncomfortable taking it back!... That's an irony, only the Lord fully understands!

So, what does Judas do? –

Matthew 27:5-10

⁵ And he threw the pieces of silver into the temple sanctuary and departed; and he went away and hanged himself. ⁶ The chief priests took the pieces of silver and said, “It is not lawful to put them into the temple treasury, since it is the price of blood.” ⁷ And they conferred together and with the money bought the Potter's Field as a burial place for strangers. ⁸ For this reason that field has been called the Field of Blood to this day. ⁹ Then that which was spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled: “AND THEY TOOK THE THIRTY PIECES OF SILVER, THE PRICE OF THE ONE WHOSE PRICE HAD BEEN SET by the sons of Israel; ¹⁰ AND THEY GAVE THEM FOR THE POTTER'S FIELD, AS THE LORD DIRECTED ME.”

We learned about Judas' determination to betray Jesus in [Matthew 26:14-16](#), and how it was carried out in [Matthew 26:47-50](#)... We are now being told about the ... remorse that has grown in his heart.

It is at this point that we need to clarify a matter... There is a big difference between *remorse* and *repentance*...

Remorse comes with the realization that ... you've messed up!... It contains the emotion of *sorrow*, and can even be accompanied with a sense of ... *shame*... There is *guilt* and *regret* in *remorse*...

All of this sounds ... appropriate when one comes to realize their ... sin. But, remorse falls short. It is more of a “*sorry-for-getting-caught*” mentality, not a “*sorry-I-wish-I didn't-do-it*” mentality...

Later in Scripture, we find the Holy Spirit directing the Apostle Paul to elaborate on the difference –

2 Corinthians 7:10

For the sorrow that is according to the will of God produces a repentance without regret, leading to salvation, but the sorrow of the world produces death.

Study this passage in its context (2 Cor. 7:9-13), and you will get a better understanding of the difference...

The tragedy of Judas, is that he ... purposefully, and personally made the decision to turn his back on Jesus, and actually ... turn Him over to those who wanted to kill Him!... He is complicit to say the least in this *crime-of-all-crimes*!

He may have had a sense of remorse, but it was “the sorrow of the world” that “produces death” – even ... his own death!

In some ways, this is a ... sad story. But, take no pity on Judas! He chose his sin, with his eyes wide open!... If anything, we should understand ... the perfect innocence of Jesus!... There is nothing in Jesus ... deserving the treatment He is enduring!

I think Spurgeon made a great point here –

C.H. Spurgeon – “Judas had been with our Lord in public and in private; and if he could have found a flaw in Christ’s character, this would have been the time to mention it; but even the traitor, in his dying speech, declared that Jesus was ‘innocent.’”⁵

We can’t help wonder if Judas knew –

Deuteronomy 27:25

‘Cursed is he who accepts a bribe to strike down an innocent person.’ And all the people shall say, ‘Amen.’

Surely, he had ... *ringing in his ear* what Jesus said about the events leading up to this moment –

Mark 14:21

For the Son of Man is to go just as it is written of Him; but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been good for that man if he had not been born.”

Our text says that Judas ... hung himself... But listen to what Peter said in Acts 1, recorded by Luke –

Acts 1:16-18

¹⁶ “Brethren, the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit foretold by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus. ¹⁷ For he was counted among us and received his share in this ministry.” ¹⁸ (Now this man acquired a field with the price of his wickedness, and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his intestines gushed out.

We’ll stop there...

How do we reconcile what Matthew says, about Judas “*hanging himself*” – with what Peter says that he fell “*headlong*” and “*burst open ...*”?

Many scholars have concluded that Judas hanged himself over a cliff, and no one took him down... His body remained there for sometime ... rotting to the point that it later fell from the rope ... and then ... broke open.”⁶

That’s a detail that has challenged several when studying about Judas’ death – but, we don’t want to get lost in such details that we miss what we should be taking away from this narrative...

I think perhaps, J.C. Ryle has the final word here –

J.C. Ryle – “Sin is, in truth, the hardest of all masters. In its service there is plenty of [promise], but an utter dearth [in] performance. Its pleasures are but for a season. Its wages are sorrow, remorse, self-accusation, and too often death... Let us be sure that sooner or later, in this life or in the life to come, in this world or in the judgment-day, sin and the sinner will meet face to face, and have a bitter reckoning. Let us be sure that of all trades, sin is the most unprofitable. Judas, Achan, ... Ananias and Sapphira, all found it so to their cost. Well might Paul say, ‘What fruit had you in those things whereof you are now ashamed?’ (Rom. 6:21)”.⁷

⁵ <https://www.preceptaustin.org/matthew-27-commentary-spurgeon>

⁶ <https://www.preceptaustin.org/matthew-27-commentary#27:5>

⁷ <https://www.preceptaustin.org/matthew-27-commentary#27:5>

Questions to Consider in Community Group

- Why did the Jews bring Jesus to Pilate - why could they not have simply stoned Him to death, if they wanted Jesus dead?
- Why was it necessary for Jesus to die by means of crucifixion anyway?
- What is the evidence, in the text, that the Jews were being hypocritical? What is the danger of hypocrisy anyway?
- What can we say about the exchange between Pilate and Jesus - specifically, what is really the *crux* in the trial?
- What are your thoughts about any of the quotes shared?

C.H. Spurgeon – “The Jewish counsellors little knew that they were already far too defiled to have any real fellowship with God’s passover, and were unconsciously slaughtering the true Lamb, whose flesh they were not privileged to eat.”

Bob Utley – “It should be translated ‘If My kingdom were of this world, and it is not, then My servants would be fighting, which they are not.’”

A.W. Tozer – “Jesus answered, My kingdom is not of this world. (John 18:36)

In the kingdom of God, the surest way to lose something is to try to protect it, and the best way to keep it is to let it go. This was the word of our Lord Jesus Christ: ‘If any man will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross!’

Christ turned from the fallen world of Adam and spoke about another world altogether, a world where Adam’s philosophy is invalid and his technique inoperative. He spoke of the kingdom of God whose laws are exactly opposite to those of the kingdom of men.

So, the true Christian is a child of two worlds. He lives among fallen men, but when he is regenerated, he is called to live according to the laws and principles that underlie the new kingdom. He may, then, find himself trying to live a heavenly life after an earthly pattern—and this is what Paul called ‘carnal’ living. That is why it is vitally important to move up into the life of the Spirit of God. Give up your earthly ‘treasures’ and the Lord will keep them for you unto life eternal!” Vance Havner – “I think Pilate must have shrugged his shoulders as he asked, ‘What is truth?’ But let us be patient with Pilate. He had listened to Greek philosophers and Roman lawyers and Oriental jugglers, all ranting about truth. Little did he dream that standing before him was One who not only knew the truth but was the Truth.”

C.H. Spurgeon – “Judas had been with our Lord in public and in private; and if he could have found a flaw in Christ’s character, this would have been the time to mention it; but even the traitor, in his dying speech, declared that Jesus was ‘innocent.’”

J.C. Ryle – “Sin is, in truth, the hardest of all masters. In its service there is plenty of [promise], but an utter dearth [in] performance. Its pleasures are but for a season. Its wages are sorrow, remorse, self-accusation, and too often death... Let us be sure that sooner or later, in this life or in the life to come, in this world or in the judgment-day, sin and the sinner will meet face to face, and have a bitter reckoning. Let us be sure that of all trades, sin is the most unprofitable. Judas, Achan, ... Ananias and Sapphira, all found it so to their cost. Well might Paul say, ‘What fruit had you in those things whereof you are now ashamed?’ (Rom. 6:21)”