

“24 Hours That Changed the World”

Part 4 The Trial Before the Romans

Matthew 27:11-14,19,22-26

April 9, 2009

The Sanhedrin had gotten what they wanted, at least so far. They had been able to capture Jesus in the garden. They held what they claimed to be a trial where charges against Jesus were brought, a charge that he claimed to be the Messiah, and then he was quickly convicted. They had the alleged legal grounds to put him to death, but they did not have the legal authority. That meant that they had to go to the Roman authorities. They had to go to the governor, a man named Pilate.

Now Pilate did not want to be in Palestine. No self-respecting soldier wanted to be in Palestine. It was not a choice assignment. In fact, it was more of a punishment than a privilege. And when Pilate got to the area, he wasted little time in irritating the natives. The Romans had known for some time about the intensity of the Jewish religion, and the unbreakable character of Jewish belief. Rather than pick a fight with them, the Romans usually treated them with kid gloves.

Pilate had a different philosophy. He came into town and came down on the religious leaders like a ton of bricks. He would intentionally insult and anger them. And his actions were excessively cruel. As a matter of fact, Pilate was finally sent back to Rome because of his unnecessary savagery. But he quickly found out that the Jewish leaders were not just going to sit back take it. They would send word to the Roman Senate, or even to the Emperor himself. And no politician wants to hear of problems and dissension in the ranks. So after Pontius Pilate had his hands slapped a few times, after these Jewish leaders followed through on their threat to go to Rome, Pilate was much more inclined to tolerate their beliefs and their requests, but he still wasn't happy about it.

Then into his office came a prisoner named Jesus. He was being led by the leaders of the Temple. There was no love in that room. What charge could be brought by these Jews? Now they had found Jesus guilty of claiming to be the Christ, but that was a charge of blasphemy, which was a matter of faith. Pilate would have nothing to do with that, and they knew it. At that time Rome was a very pluralistic religious society. Whatever you believed was OK. There were no grounds for the Roman law to get involved with what people believe, about what is correct or incorrect. So they came up with something else. First they charged Jesus with being a revolutionary. “*We have found this man subverting our nation.*” (Luke 23:2a) The middle east has been filled with revolutionaries even to this day. In the days of Jesus, it was the zealots who would do most anything to bring pain to their Roman oppressors. They were a very violent group. They wanted a free Israel and the cost of getting a free Israel did not matter. These were extremists. And they were a real pain in the side of Rome because they would set traps and ambushes, they would attack and then disappear among the people. And Jesus was charged with being one of them. Pilate knew that was a lie. He didn't even follow up with that, even though “*they insisted, ‘He*

stirs up the people all over Judea by his teaching. He started in Galilee and has come all the way here.’” (Luke 23:5).

The second charge was financial. They said, *"He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar"* (Luke 23:2b) And they charged Jesus with inciting the people to not pay their taxes. No government likes that. One of the most notorious criminals of all time was Al Capone, who ran boot legging operations, prostitution, and gambling facilities. He bribed politicians and policemen, and was even involved in murders to protect his enterprise. All those things were pretty nasty, but they caught and convicted him because he did not pay his taxes. Governments want all our tax money and then some. Even today, whenever someone speaks of a tax cut, politicians line up to ask how the government can afford it. Never is it asked how the people will afford a tax increase, but always our governments lament the loss of tax funds. So this charge against Jesus was a serious one. But somehow the witnesses could not line up and agree with one another. And there was some record of Jesus paying taxes. Recorded in Matthew 17 is a story of a tax being due. Jesus argued that he should be exempt because of who he is, that is, the Son of God. But then he said, *"However, lest we cause them to sin, go and throw a hook into the Lake, and take the first fish that comes up. When you open its mouth, you will find a shekel in it: bring that coin and give it to them for yourself and me."* (Matthew 17:27) And even in the last week, when they tried to trap him by asking him directly if it was lawful to pay taxes, he wisely answered, *"Render unto to Caesar that which is Caesar's, and unto God that which is God's."* (Mark 12:17) This charge about taxes could not hold up, and Pilate knew it.

At this point Pilate must have turned to those Jewish leaders to ask why they were wasting his time with such trivia. They answered that he must be guilty because they had these accusations against him. And so they finally said *"[He] claims to be Christ, a king."* (Luke 23:2c) The third charge was treason, and that was very serious. *"Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?"* (Matthew 27:11) And Jesus asked Pilate if that was his own idea, or if he was just asking what others told him to ask? So Pilate got more specific. "Am I a Jew?" And Jesus said, "You probably cannot comprehend this, but my kingdom is not of this world." And Pilate did not know what to do. This man was not guilty of these crimes, and yet these troublesome religious leaders were so insistent. Then he learned that Jesus was from Nazareth, of Galilee. He could pass the buck to Herod. And that's what he did.

Now understand that Herod was a Jew by race, but certainly not by faith. He was the one who had John the Baptist arrested because John kept harassing him about cleaning up his lifestyle. You see, Herod was a dangerous and evil man. Yet Herod did not want to seriously hurt John because he feared the reaction from the people. But in the end, Herod had John beheaded, because he had been tricked and virtually seduced by his own stepdaughter, and rather than be embarrassed before his party guests, he killed a prophet. If that's what he did with John, what would he do with Jesus? Herod did want to meet Jesus because he had heard so much about him. But deep down, Herod simply wanted Jesus to perform for him. In the musical "Jesus Christ, Superstar," there is a very humorous depiction of the encounter between Jesus and Herod, and I believe that scene is

basically correct. Not the music and all that. But that he wanted to have Jesus entertain him with a few little miracles or healings. He didn't want to listen to anything Jesus had to say. He just wanted him on display. And if he did well, Herod would keep him around as a sort of court jester. But when this Jesus would not cooperate, Herod was ready to cut him loose. Jesus was sent back to Pilate.

Just when Pilate thought he could relax, when he thought that he had neatly sidestepped this political hot potato, a guard came to tell him that Jesus was back. Pilate didn't want to hear that. Especially not after his wife pulled him aside and told him to stay away from this Jesus character. She tried to warn him, saying, *"Don't have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him."* (Luke 27:19) She did not think that this whole incident would have a very good outcome. And Pilate wasn't surprised to hear that. In fact, it echoed his own thoughts. But the fact remained that dealing with Jesus was his responsibility and the Jewish leaders insisted that something drastic be done. What to do?

According to the scriptures, Pilate questioned Jesus one more time. But just like it had been with Herod, Jesus would not cooperate. In John 19 we read, *"Do you refuse to speak to me?" Pilate said. "Don't you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?"* (John 19:10) Certainly Jesus was thinking of the words of the prophet Isaiah, saying, *"He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth."* (Isaiah 53:7) So Jesus followed the plan of God that had been prophesied for centuries. And Pilate's frustration grew.

Pilate found that he couldn't just dismiss the case, and his attempt to pass the buck to Herod had failed, but maybe there was another way. He would put the issue before the people. After all, Pilate could use a little good press, and there was this old tradition of releasing a prisoner during the Passover feast. So he would let the people choose between this obviously innocent Jesus and the most vicious, angry, evil character in his prison. Such a man was Barabbus. He was a first century terrorist. Given the choice, certainly the people would do the right thing and Pilate would be off the hook.

Only the people did not do what was expected. He offered them Jesus, but they shouted for the release of Barabbus, the terrorist. Maybe Pilate underestimated the hatred of Rome. Maybe he underestimated the hatred that the Jewish leaders held for Jesus. Maybe there was even confusion in the crowd because they were given the choice between Jesus, the Christ, or Jesus Barabbus, which means Son of the Father. But for whatever reason, the people chose the Son of the Father, over the Son of God. And Pilate was left holding the bag one more time. He knew that this Jesus was not guilty of anything. And yet he could not release him because of the threat that these Jewish leaders would take their complaints to Rome, and Pilate would be dismissed from his position in a most painful and disappointing way.

Pilate even pleaded the case for Jesus, saying, *"What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called Christ?" Pilate asked. They all answered, "Crucify him!" "Why? What crime has he committed?" asked Pilate. But they shouted all the louder, "Crucify him!"* (Matthew 27:22-23) It was frustration on parade. *When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. "I am innocent of this man's blood," he said. "It is your responsibility!"* (Matthew 27:24) And Pilate gave in to the crowds. And though he washed his hands of this whole, sordid affair, the blood of Jesus remained on his hands, and on his heart, as the blood remains on our hands and our hearts.

In this season there are a lot of people who say all sorts of nasty things about Pontius Pilate. And much of that he deserves. Even though he knew what was the right thing to do, he did not act on that knowledge. He chose to protect himself rather than stand up and speak out for what was right. But before we get too upset with him, we need to pause for a minute and examine ourselves. Do we have the courage to say what we believe? When our society regularly displays that we can discriminate against no one but Christians; when we are told that we cannot display a Bible or a cross in public; when we are told through legal challenges that because we have freedom of religion and speech that we can't speak about our religion, about what we believe, how ready are we to stand up and speak out for the one who died that we might have life.

In Romans it is written, *"For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."* (Romans 8:38-39) Nothing separates us from the love of God unless it is self induced. We sometimes separate ourselves from Christ because our pride has been hurt, or because we are embarrassed to be called by his name. We separate ourselves from him so we can hit the bars or make a little more money. We separate ourselves from Christ because, like Pilate, we do not have the courage to stand up and speak out, to say what we believe, or speak about who we believe, that Jesus was and is the Son of God. That he was wounded for our transgressions. He was crucified for our sins. And it is in Jesus, in Jesus alone where we can find life and peace and joy.

Jesus had the courage to die for us when we were yet sinners. Today, will we have the courage to stand up and stand by Jesus of Nazareth? Pilate had his chance, but mostly he passed the buck, washed his hands, and tried to walk on by. But now the question comes to us. What will we say about Jesus of Nazareth? What will we do with Jesus of Nazareth? Shall we wash our hands and walk away? Or shall we be washed in his blood and walk by his side? May you answer with your heart. May you answer with your life, this day and always. Amen.