

John 18:18-40

Teaching Points

The trial of Jesus moves from the Jewish religious leaders to the Romans. Jesus is led from Caiaphas to Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea. From this trial we see the Jewish determination to kill Christ, Pilate's weak complicity in the act, and Jesus' singular courage and reaffirmation about Himself.

The Jewish Determination to Kill Christ

We need to understand the legal situation in which the Jews find themselves. According to Roman Law, only the Romans can perform capital punishment. The Jews were not allowed to do so (the case of Stephen's stoning was clearly mob action, not a legal execution). So, in the early morning hours, Jesus is sent by the High Priest, along with other Jewish authorities, to Pilate, the Roman authority.

John often stresses the Jewish leaders' desire to see Jesus dead (5:18; 7:19; 8:40, 59; 10:31; 11:50). It looks like they are about to get their wish. But on what grounds? Notice that when Pilate asks the most basic question at a trial, "**What accusation do you bring against this Man?**", they have no answer (vv.29-30).

Discussion Questions: What does their answer in verse 30 tell you about those bringing Jesus to Pilate? And before Pilate even hears the matter at hand, what do you they admit in verse 31? How does this make their concern sound about "defiling" themselves in verse 28?

***Thoughts:** They have no answer for Pilate. Their deflection speaks volumes. They admit up front that they want Him dead ("not lawful for us to put anyone to death"). Their concern about being defiled is so blatantly hypocritical because they are ready to put an innocent Man to death—the God-Man! Their hearts were rotten, but they were concerned about the ceremonial cleanliness.*

The Jews could have petitioned Pilate to let them handle it themselves, with his permission. That would've involved having Jesus stoned to death or strangled. However, they wanted a crucifixion, which only the Romans could perform by law. Why would they want that? It was the most brutal death, but mainly because it would signify Jesus was accursed by God according to the Law in Deuteronomy 21:23 (see also Galatians 3:13).

Pilate's Weak Complicity

Starting here, we also see Pilate's complicity. Pontius Pilate functioned as the fifth Roman governor of the province of Judea from A.D. 26 to 36. He was a brutal ruler whose atrocities against the Jews were legendary. As a member of Rome's lower nobility he was always aware of his vulnerabilities and so controlled Judea harshly, with an eye on the pleasure of his masters in Rome.

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He wasn't a stupid man. He could see what was going on. He knew Jesus had done nothing worthy of death. But as a political leader he decided to bend to satisfy the people under him. He wanted to make them happy and he feared what they might do if he didn't listen to them. All the time he attempted to maintain his innocence, yet he was guilty too because as a leader his responsibility was to do right. Pilate's words and actions echo a common concern of politicians who find themselves compromising for the supposed "greater good." Yet, he is complicit in the greatest crime ever committed in history.

Discussion Questions: Take some time to think about and answer the questions asked by Pilate in this section. These are, in fact, some great questions! Is Jesus the "King of the Jews" (v.33)? Is Jesus a "king" (v.37)? Considering all of Jesus life and ministry, how would you answer the question posed to Him in v.35: "What have you done?" And the classic question asked by Pilate in v.38: "What is truth?"

Jesus Reaffirms His Mission

Also, here we see Jesus reaffirming His mission while on trial. Pilate held the Jewish authorities in contempt. "What are they compared to the might of Rome?" Here stands Jesus, a rabbi leading a rag-tag bunch of Jewish "nobodies"—isn't this a waste of Pilate's time? He has no idea Who is standing in front of Him. Jesus is the King and His "**kingdom is not of this world.**" Pilate is questioning Jesus, yet Jesus questions Pilate (v.34) and chooses to reveal His identity as King of His kingdom. Although Pilate certainly can't comprehend it, Jesus is quite clear about His identity and His mission. He has come to "**bear witness to the truth.**"

As Pilate goes in and out of the Praetorium, his headquarters, Jesus remains in place. Picture the scene: the rabid opposition of the Jews gathered outside, Pilate nervously and frustratingly going in and out to them, while Jesus stands in splendid isolation. The Jewish mob of accusers are bent on murder, Pilate is weak and vacillating, while Jesus accepts His destiny as royal Messiah and Suffering Servant.

Don't lose sight of the fact that the Lord Jesus is in complete, sovereign control. It seems the Jewish religious leaders will get "their way" in having Jesus crucified because Pilate gave the nod. Yet in reality this death penalty would be in fulfillment of Jesus' own words. He spoke of His death in that He would be "lifted up from the earth" (12:32; see also 3:14; 8:28). God is in control even over the decisions by Jesus' enemies. Barabbas, an actual criminal awaiting death by crucifixion, will be released and Jesus will take his place. What a picture of the Gospel! Jesus took our place on the cross, bore the penalty we deserve, and paid completely the sins of His people.