

John 18:38–19:16a

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[0 : 00] Again, the passage is John 18, 38 through John 19, 16a. Pilate said to him, What is truth? After he had said this, he went back outside to the Jews and told them, I find no guilt in him, but you have a custom that I should release one man for you at the Passover. So do you want me to release you to the king of the Jews?

They cried out again, Not this man, but Barabbas. Now Barabbas was a robber. Then Pilate took Jesus and flogged him. And the soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head and arrayed him in a purple robe.

They came up to him, saying, Hail, king of the Jews, and struck him with their hands. Pilate went out again and said to them, See, I am bringing him out to you that you may know that I find no guilt in him.

So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, Behold the man. When the chief priests and the officers saw him, they cried out, Crucify him, crucify him.

[1 : 00] Pilate said to them, Take yourselves and crucify him, for I find no guilt in him. The Jews answered him, We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has made himself the son of God.

When Pilate heard this statement, he was even more afraid. He entered his headquarters again and said to Jesus, What are you from? But Jesus gave no answer. So Pilate said to him, You will not speak to me.

Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you? Jesus answered him, You have no authority over me at all unless it had been given to you from above. Therefore, he who delivered me over you has the greater sin.

From then on, Pilate sought to release him, but the Jews cried out, If you release this man, you are not Caesar's friend. Everyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar. So when Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judgment seat at the palace called the Stone Pavement in Aramaic Gabbatha.

Now it was the day of preparation of the Passover. It was about the sixth hour. He said to the Jews, Behold your king. They cried out, Away with him, away with him, crucify him. Pilate said to them, Shall I crucify your king?

[2 : 11] The chief priests answered, We have no king but Caesar. So he delivered him over to them to be crucified. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Thank you, Caleb.

Great to hear the word of the Lord from our full congregation, isn't it? Well, last week we picked up Pilate's question, What is truth?

And in doing so, we introduced it by rehearsing a couple of things. One, how we have historically handled truth, followed by John's argument that would connect necessarily this man, Jesus, to our understanding of truth.

I introduced the message last week by indicating that there have been four kind of generalized movements on our handling of truth.

By saying, first of all, that there was an ancient world long before you and I arrived where external authorities dictated truth to us.

[3 : 32] That held for centuries. Until the time of the Reformation, when Luther dislodged that external authority that would dictate truth to us and replace it, in his mind, with the Bible and his conscience, which were really the ways that we would move forward with truth.

And that held until the Enlightenment, when human reason and scientific inquiry were the truth tools that we would use to guide us.

And that held until the present day when you and I all know it's our personal experience. It's our encounter with things in the world that actually now, more often than not, are the ultimate guide for us on what is truth.

We've moved from this is true to this is my truth. All of those things, though, gave way to John and his gospel, who is attempting to make a distinct argument that you must also deal with Jesus if you're going to deal with truth.

He did so in chapter 1. He's full of grace and truth. He did so in chapter 8, that if you hear his voice and listen to it, you have the truth and the truth will set you free.

[5 : 02] He does that 26 times in John by having Jesus say, truly, truly, I say unto you, so that you and I would know when I hear Jesus, I am understanding truth.

He did it in chapter 14 where he says, I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but through me.

And into all of that, Pilate walked, unaware of John's argument. And we began to see last week what Pilate's encounter with Jesus meant for him concerning Jesus and truth.

John captured it for us. Pilate tried to ignore truth. Pilate made a soft inquiry of Jesus concerning truth. Jesus told Pilate that he had intruded into this world to tell the truth.

And Pilate had determined him to be no threat to the world and declared him innocent. And so as our text opens on that hinge where we closed last week with the question, what is truth?

[6 : 15] And now we push on to the scene as it follows what is truth. It would appear that Pilate has successfully navigated an encounter with Jesus in ways that will enable him to get on with his life without Jesus.

And yet mercifully allow Jesus to get on with life. Only one thing stood in the way.

He knew the agitation of the people around him to be so severe that a simple declaration of innocence would not solve the day. So what does he do? 39 and 40.

All it takes for Pilate to move on in life in ways that would allow him to ignore Jesus is simply this. To make a trade for him.

That's the first hanger here today. He's going to make a trade for him. Look at 38, the way it ends. I find no guilt in him, but you have a custom that I should release one man for you at the Passover.

[7 : 17] So do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews? Now this is rooted in political pragmatism that understands while his sentencing of innocence goes forward, it will cause an agitated stir among the religious who disdain Jesus.

And so he raises a figure, Barabbas, who according to Luke 23, was in jail, in a Roman jail, because he was an insurrectionist and a murderer, here, including a robber.

And he is convinced in his own mind that this mob will be aware that to have Barabbas on the loose, to set him free, to commute his sentence, would be a far greater risk for their welfare in a Roman world than it would be to have this impotent Jesus who's more like a philosopher willing to talk to you about what is truth.

And he was wrong. Look at their response. Verse 40, Give me Barabbas.

He's a less threat to our ability to navigate ourselves well in the world in contrast to this Jesus, the Nazarene. We ought to stop right there for a moment.

[8 : 45] Pilate tried to trade Jesus, and it didn't work. Why? What went wrong?

Can you fully grasp what went wrong? It's interesting. There are many who feel today that if we can just tamp down the ardent religionists, we would make our way forward into a peaceful world.

I remember having some conversations on my back porch with a secular Jew, incredibly well-educated and conversant at the deepest of levels with all of the things in the Mideast.

And his understanding, his belief, truly was that there would be a political situation in which we would bring peace into the world as long as we're able to put down the religious constructs that keep raising all of the tensions.

And what I tried to explain to him then and what I would say to you now is for some reason that does not work. One has to acknowledge the spiritual qualities of truth that a variety of individuals hold.

[10 : 11] And so it's important for us to see that simply saying you can move forward without Jesus is a certain level of ignorance that your avoidance hasn't yet wrestled fully with.

It didn't work for Pilate. It won't work for you. Let me put it then this way. Why is that the case? Well, what's interesting is, and this is what we need to understand, just as Pilate tried to trade Jesus to

get on with life, John is making his case for Jesus in ways that would enable you to see the full extent of his belief.

The hint is right there in the text. Through a word, verse 39, the word Passover. Now, you're going to have to run with me for the next five minutes to understand John's argument on the significance of Jesus.

This word Passover is a very interesting connection. Did you notice as Caleb was reading the scriptures today that the only time the narrator, John inserts his voice into the telling of the story is at a moment where he also introduces this idea of Passover?

It's not only there in 39. Take a look. It's over there in verse 14 of chapter 19. John, after telling the story, decides that the reader needs to know, again, now it was the day of preparation of the Passover.

[11:51] The Passover. And then a temporal marker, even in regard to the time of that day. That's a fascinating thing. The storyteller is reiterating something about the significance of, you need to know, while all these events are going on, it was the day of preparation for the Passover.

In fact, take a look. That goes all the way back to last week in chapter 18, verse 28, where the Jews wouldn't go into the headquarters. They did not want to be defiled so that they could eat the Passover.

Let me put it to you this way. John has constructed the crucifixion of Jesus within the brackets of Passover. It goes even further.

You can see John's argument on the significance of understanding the importance of crucifixion and truth with the Passover just by turning back to John 13.1.

In John 13.1, where you had the whole feast of the Last Supper, he actually embeds all of the final passion of Christ within Passover.

[13:01] 13.1, now before the peace of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come. In fact, he will close down the crucifixion of Jesus in chapter 19, at the very close, verse 42, so because the Jewish day of preparation, since the tomb was close at hand, they laid Jesus there.

Our passage puts the crucifixion in Passover. And the author is wanting you to see that. The telling of the greater story of the passion he puts within the brackets of Passover.

That's half the book. What's really fascinating is that he embeds the early ministry of Jesus within Passover. Spin back in your text, chapter 2.

Do you remember when Jesus went into the temple? After that first manifestation of his glory at the wedding of Cana, the first thing that happens, 2.13, the Passover of the Jews was at hand, 2.23, now when he was at Jerusalem at the Passover feast, many believed, and in between those, he is clearing the temple.

He is saying, take these sacrifices away as the gospel opens. And at the close, he is saying, as they are preparing for that, I am preparing to be the sacrifice for sin.

[14:22] Indeed, the whole gospel of John launches out with this announcement in chapter 1 from the lips of John the Baptist, behold, what? The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

I mean, this is John's argument. John is wanting you to see that Jesus is truth, and truth will set you free, and truth will bring you eternal life, and he weds the whole thing, all that history within that Old Testament record of Passover.

He's been doing this. Let me put it to you this way. History is built upon text. You know that. I know that. Our contemporary culture knows that. This is why we argue about the significance of Christopher Columbus today.

This is why we argue about what is or is not true about American history. This is why we argue about what's the true story, because we know that history is built on text. And John is building his Jesus as truth on what?

On all the Old Testament scriptures. He is building the interpretation of Jesus for you and me in its fulfillment of scriptures.

[15:36] The rejection of Jesus that led to his crucifixion is, according to John, the fulfillment of God's plan that got started back in Exodus 12 and 13 with the Passover meal.

I mean, it's stunning when you actually see what John is doing. He actually opened in Genesis 1, didn't he? In the beginning was the word.

And if you're not aware of the Passover then, then you don't know yet why we can't just get on in the world without Jesus, without an uprising taking place by those who hold him to be true.

See, the Passover was the way God made a people for himself. He rescued his own people out of Egypt, out of bondage, through the shedding of the blood of a Passover lamb, and thereby made them his people.

As by faith, they stood underneath that blood on the lintel. And what John is saying is that all of that was moving mysteriously in the plans of God to be fulfilled in this moment where Jesus himself voluntarily gives himself for the redemption of our sin.

[16:56] And he's been doing it in so many ways, hasn't he? Jesus was the vine, just as, harken back to Isianic texts on Israel being the vine. Jesus as the bread of life, just harkening back to my history as built on those texts.

Jesus as the light, all of these things, as the living waters. John's argument for you, you cannot trade him.

For something else that will be, in your mind, less vitriolic if people truly believe that he is God's truth invaded into this world to offer forgiveness for your sins, to bring you into relationship with God.

And the irony of all ironies, that as the religious leaders are trying to not defile themselves and to prepare to make themselves pure, Jesus is himself the sacrifice that will make any and all pure in his name.

I mean, this is stunning. And it's all here in this text. In fact, the whole gospel of John now is seen to be written within the bookends of an understanding of that Passover.

[18:16] The first clearing of the temple, get these kind of sacrifices out. The final moment now when it's crucifixion, put me in and all who have faith in my name will have life forevermore.

That is, was, will be the controversialist statement on the Christian faith. Hold his death to be the sole means, his blood, is that which enables God to pass over your sins.

Talk to someone else who feels, well, let's just put that aside. Just, just put that aside and we'll figure out how to get along. You cannot trade Jesus. John has made a compelling case for Jesus. Now, Pilate doesn't know any of this. I mean, this is the, this is the, the downside for Pilate. He's not aware of any of this stuff. He could have cared less about their law, their teachings, their stuff. And so, when he can't trade Jesus, what does he do? He tries to humiliate Jesus. That's where the text moves. Nineteen, one, really, through six.

[19:28] He flogs him. There's a thorn of crowns put on him. There's a mockery of display about him being king of the Jews thrown at him.

There are fists that land upon him. There's a, there's a dressing up. And then, he brings him out. If I can't trade him, maybe I can humiliate him. Now, why did Pilate think this would work? He's like, look, you want Barabbas? Fine. But let me show the full, full force of Roman law and you will know that this man has no ability to overthrow anything I do.

So he now parades him out, a mutilated man. As if to say, I have humiliated his cause. You have no concern for his rule.

And did that work? No, it didn't work. Look at verse six. The chief priest and officer saw him. They cried out, crucify him, crucify him. Pilate exasperated.

[20:33] Take him yourselves and crucify him. I still find no guilt in him. Verse seven is fascinating. They say, we have a law.

According to the law, he ought to die because he's made himself out to be the son of God. Couldn't trade him, but John made a case for him.

Couldn't humiliate him, but now John will make a case that he isn't only the Passover lamb, he is, that Passover lamb is no one other than the son of God.

And so, all of the verses then, between verses eight through eleven, you see Jesus now before Pilate in a fearful state because Pilate would have been someone who believed in many gods.

And now for the first time he's wondering, do I have before me a visitation of one of our gods that if I mistreat the pantheon will mistreat me over time?

[21:38] For the first moment he's wondering, is he a son of God? And Jesus, interestingly, indicates to him mercifully, verse eleven, you have no authority over me.

Therefore the one who delivered me over to you has the greater sin. I think he's speaking there of the chief priest. He's basically saying, the people that gave me to you know their own text.

And yet I'm here anyway. You who know nothing of the fulfillment of those promises, well you are not as bad a shape as they are. Can't trade them.

John says, I got a Passover case to make for him. Can't humiliate him. John says, I've got a son of God conviction to strengthen him.

And in that very moment then, what happens? What occurs is really absolutely fascinating.

[22 : 40] I mean, what do you do when you can't trade Jesus? What do you do when it won't work to humiliate Jesus? What do you do today if you are now learning, perhaps through this message and last week's for the first time, that you are going to have to face down your own fears on John's claim of Jesus?

Jesus? The only one who can make you right before God is God himself who came to make you right. You got two choices.

Well, you see what Pilate did. Pilate brought him out on the stone pavement. Then verse 14, we get that little inclusio comment from the narrator.

Pilate says, shall I crucify your king? We have no king but Caesar. So he delivered him to them to be crucified. You have two paths.

The path of Pilate is to crucify him. The object of John is that you would believe in him. It's that simple. You will come to a point in life where you will either have to kill off Jesus from your mind to get on with your life or you'll have to take Jesus who was killed by faith as your life.

[24 : 05] Which is it going to be for you? I'm thinking that the choice is yours.

I want to close. I'll shut it down early today. I have a favorite novel by Flannery O'Connor that starkly understands human nature.

And Greenleaf, she posits a woman who had a morning like Pilate had here. She had been disturbed early in the morning and confronted with something that she tried to ignore but couldn't. Tried to trade but was unable. Eventually has to rid herself of it. What had happened was a bull, a bull had made its way into her flower bed just outside her bedroom window and was eating all of her plants.

she tried to get rid of that bull every old way possible and couldn't until she realized the only thing I got to do now is kill it. Because the only way I can get this thing out of my life so I can get on with my life is to get rid of it from my life.

[25 : 29] And this is what O'Connor writes. After having hit the bull with the shotgun, she looked back and saw the bull, his head lowered, racing toward her.

She killed it. I mean, she hit it, but it was still coming. She remained perfectly still, not in fright, but in a freezing unbelief. She stared at the violent black streak bounding toward her as if she had no sense of distance, as if she could not decide at once what his intention was, and the bull had buried his head in her lap like a wild, tormented lover before her expression changed.

One of his horns sank until it pierced her heart and the other curved around her side and held her in an unbreakable grip. She continued to stare straight ahead, but the entire scene in front of her changed.

The tree line was a dark wound in a world that was nothing but sky, and she had the look of a person whose sight had suddenly been restored, but who finds the light unbearable.

End quote. If the Gospel of John is telling you the truth, then you have a big decision to make about Jesus. Jesus, we will either allow him into our lives, knowing that he is going to eat up every shrub outside our kitchen window until our lawn resembles the life he would like, or we will try to rid him from our presence only to find on that great day that he has the victory still.

[27 : 12] God, the choice is yours. What is truth?

Our Heavenly Father, as we wrestle with John's beautiful argument that would provide for us then an interpretation for all of the events in the Old Testament, commitment, we pray that we would not miss the forcefulness of those ideas.

Help each listener to my voice today to carry on their conversation with truth through an exploration of Jesus in ways that they would embrace him by faith to give gratitude to you for the forgiveness of sins and life unto us forevermore.

Amen.