

Identity & innocence

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- [0 : 0 0] As Benjamin said, turn in your Bibles with us this morning. We're reading from Luke's Gospel, chapter 22, verse 63. And we'll read through to chapter 23, verse 25.
- Let's read together God's Word. The men who were guarding Jesus began mocking and beating him.
- They blindfolded him and demanded, prophesy, who hit you? And they said many other insulting things to him.
- At daybreak, the council of the elders of the people, both the chief priests and the teachers of the law, met together. And Jesus was led before them.
- If you are the Messiah, they said, tell us. Jesus answered, if I tell you, you will not believe me.
- [1 : 0 6] And if I asked you, you would not answer. But from now on, the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the mighty God.
- They all asked, are you then the Son of God? He replied, you say that I am. Then they said, why do we need any more testimony?
- We have heard it from his own lips. Then the whole assembly rose and led him off to Pilate. And they began to accuse him, saying, we have found this man subverting our nation.
- He opposes the payment of taxes to Caesar and claims to be Messiah, a king. So Pilate asked Jesus, are you the king of the Jews?
- You have said so, Jesus replied. Then Pilate announced to the chief priests and the crowd, I find no basis for a charge against this man.
- [2 : 2 0] But they insisted. He stirs up people all over Judea by his teaching. He started in Galilee and has come all the way here.
- On hearing this, Pilate asked if the man was a Galilean. When he learned that Jesus was under Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him to Herod, who was also in Jerusalem at that time.
- When Herod saw Jesus, he was greatly pleased because for a long time he had been wanting to see him. From what he had heard about him, he hoped to see him perform a sign of some sort.
- He plied him with many questions. But Jesus gave him no answer. The chief priests and the teachers of the law were standing there, vehemently accusing him.
- Then Herod and his soldiers ridiculed and mocked him. Dressing him in an elegant robe, they sent him back to Pilate.
- [3 : 2 7] That day, Herod and Pilate became friends. Before this, they had been enemies. Pilate called together the chief priests, the rulers and the people and said to them, You brought me this man as one who was inciting the people to rebellion.
- I have examined him in your presence and have found no basis for your charges against him. Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us.

As you can see, he has done nothing to deserve death. Therefore, I will punish him and then release him.

But the whole crowd shouted, Away with this man! Release Barabbas to us! Barabbas had been thrown into prison for an insurrection in the city and for murder.

Wanting to release Jesus, Pilate appealed to them again. But they kept shouting, Crucify him! Crucify him! For the third time, he spoke to them, Why?

[4 : 42] What crime has this man committed? I have found in him no grounds for the death penalty. Therefore, I will have him punished and then release him.

But with loud shouts, they insistently demanded that he be crucified. And their shouts prevailed. So Pilate decided to grant their demand.

He released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder. The one they asked for. And surrendered Jesus to their will.

Amen. So if you've lost your place in your Bibles, do turn up again at Luke chapter 22.

We'll be working our way through what we read together this morning. There's a skill, isn't there, to writing a clear, concise position paper or a petition to achieve a desired goal.

[5 : 50] Sometimes that's something we do on the Prospectary Strategy Committee. We have to prepare a petition for the General Assembly. And there's a kind of flowery language that comes along with the fact that it's an institution that goes back hundreds of years and so on.

There's a whole bunch of whereas and so on. But the core of the petition is simple. You give a number of points of information, all of which serve the objective of driving those receiving the petition to come to the same conclusion.

The petition should be granted. This is what you should do. You don't include a whole bunch of unnecessary fluff. You don't put in the interesting asides that are going to be a distraction. You put in only the information that will produce the result that you intend.

Maybe some of you have had to produce similar things, whether written or verbal. Should this account be opened or not? We want the essential information. Is this program at work?

Is it producing the desired results? Yes or no? Is it useful? Some of us sadly will have received or been asked to produce reports and memos that do the reverse, that are clogged up with all sorts of irrelevant distractions, that actually are designed to obfuscate.

[7 : 05] You find yourself wondering, what are they trying to hide? What do they not want us to see? The terms and conditions that we sign up to when we download a new app or sign a new phone contract, they seem to be designed to confuse, to bamboozle, don't they?

What are they trying to hide? In what Luke's presenting here of Jesus on trial, in chapters 22 into 23, Luke here is clearly opting for the former approach.

He's leaving out information about things that we know happened. There are things that are included in the other gospel accounts that Luke doesn't mention. And theologians are largely agreed it's not that Luke doesn't know more details about these trials.

He probably has Mark's account open in front of him as he's writing his own. But he only includes the details that are going to drive the conclusion that he intends to produce.

Any biographer always leaves out a high proportion of the information that they've gathered. They're not putting into the account everything that they know. They don't want to compromise their objectivity, but still they're selecting incidents that they think are going to convey to the reader the same impression of the person they're writing about as they themselves have formed.

- [8 : 28] Luke isn't just writing history. This isn't a verbatim account of this and then that and then this and then that. And this isn't even just biography.
- No, Luke has a clear agenda. He told us up front. Luke chapter 1, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.
- His purpose is for Theophilus and with him the rest of us to be confident in the things that we know, the things of God. So here, Luke's account of Jesus on trial, he's not trying to convey absolutely everything that he possibly knows.
- No, he wants to drive, I think, two primary points forwards, two things he wants to convey. First, he shows us Jesus' identity. And then he majors on Jesus' innocence.
- The question of identity he deals with a little more briefly. It comes through primarily in the trial before the Sanhedrin. This is the end of chapter 22. Maybe that's briefer because he spent more time on Jesus' identity in the preceding 21 chapters than he has on Jesus' innocence.
- [9 : 44] But Jesus' innocence is then hammered home repeatedly over and over in this kind of two-fold trial before Pilate and Herod. Folks, don't be confused by the slightly unhelpful section headings here in the NIV.
- The whole of 22.66 through 23.25, all of it is Jesus on trial, but it's only from the start of chapter 23 that he is before Pilate and Herod, as the heading puts it in the ESV.
- The last part of chapter 22 that could better be headed Jesus before the council, as it is in some other Bible translations. There are multiple distinct trials here.
- First, we have this interrogation before the council, a sort of pre-trial, because the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council, they don't have the authority to pronounce a death sentence.
- So this ought to be more of an information-gathering exercise before they then go to trial. But as we'll see, they're not really interested in gathering information.
- [10 : 47] They're just trying to bolster what they've already decided upon. They're trying to drag things in so that they can go and make the case that they intend. So, let's focus first there on this section at the end of chapter 22, the identity of Jesus.
- And before we quite get to the trial before the Sanhedrin, just pop up to those first couple of verses, from verse 63 onwards, interleaved between the account of Peter's denial and then this trial before the Sanhedrin.
- In 63 through 65, we have the beating and the mockery of the guards. And that sort of falls between the cracks. You know, you've got these two longer sections and it would be easy to just kind of blip over those verses.
- But I don't want to ignore them entirely because we see in these verses, we see the beginning of the suffering of Jesus. Or at least the beginning of the physical suffering. I suppose the spiritual, the emotional language, that has already begun.
- We saw that Jesus praying in the garden. He was already in anguish there. But as the soldiers blows rain down, remember at this point, he is a man convicted of no crime.
- [12 : 02] I mean, a bit of casual brutality towards the accused is not terribly surprising in that day and age. But still, this is undeserved. This is the beginning of his suffering.
- But more important than the suffering, perhaps, is that as they mock him, as they beat him, they give us the first plank of the identity of Jesus, even in these short verses.
- Prophecy, they demand. Now, as with other people later on through this account of the trials, it's clear that these guards, they don't really mean what they say.

They don't believe that he can prophesy. And yet they speak better than they know. Jesus really is the prophet beyond all others. Jesus could have answered their question.

He could have told them who struck him. He knows every single thing about these men. Think back. Think of Jesus with the woman at the well.

[12 : 59] The woman who went and said to her friends that Jesus told her everything she ever did. Jesus knows the details of that woman's life.

Jesus knows the details of these soldiers' lives. He knows not just who strikes him, but he knows which of them regularly beat their wives at home.

He knows which of these soldiers are the vicious sadists and which are going along with the mockery to avoid becoming the next target themselves. He knows every detail of their lives.

And yet Jesus goes to the cross for them. As they beat him, Jesus chooses to remain in their power.

He chooses to continue down this road. Luke has established more than enough over the preceding chapters for us to see that Jesus does not have to remain subject to their power.

[14 : 01] If he chose to do so, Jesus could have been off and away. We hear about him slipping away through the crowds unobserved. He could have exerted his power.

He could have got away. But he chooses to go to the cross for them. He knows the details of the soldiers' lives, and that is the path he chooses.

And it is equally true that he knows the details of our lives. He knows the details of your life.

He knows your very best deeds, and he knows your very worst deeds. The things that no one else knows.

The things that you wouldn't want to be seen here again if people knew about it. Jesus knows. And he chooses.

[14 : 59] He chooses to surrender his life for the sake of yours. Friends, this is his love for you. Jesus, the prophet, who knows you perfectly, goes to the cross for you.

So passes the night in pain and anguish, brutal mockery, painful beating. In verse 66, at daybreak, he's dragged before the council of the elders, the Sanhedrin.

These kind of various Jewish authorities all gathered together, joined in judgment and condemnation. And as they try to gather their evidence against him, they ask, are you the Messiah?

Now that's a tricky question, because the answer is both yes and no. Yes, Jesus is the promised Messiah.

Jesus is the one to whom all the Old Testament prophets pointed. Jesus is the one that people have been waiting for. Jesus is the one that they were told was coming. But the problem is that he's not what they think they're waiting for.

[16 : 04] And hence Jesus' somewhat evasive-sounding answer. If I tell you, you will not believe me. And if I asked you, you would not answer. But from now on, the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the mighty God.

See, the Jewish leaders, the Jewish people en masse, they think they're waiting for a conquering hero. Notice when they present this messianic claim to Pilate in verse 2 of chapter 23, what do they say?

A Messiah, a king. That's what they think the Messiah is. And it is, and yet it's not. Not that kind of king.

They're looking for the conquering hero who's going to come and cast out the Roman oppressors, and Jesus is not that kind of Messiah. Instead, in his response to that question, he comes to the next part of his identity.

Verse 69, from now on, the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the mighty God. So Jesus refers to himself here as the Son of Man, which on one level is totally uncontroversial, because you can just use Son of Man as a slightly flowery way of referring to a human being.

[17:13] But Jesus very obviously means more than a human being here, doesn't he? Because most human beings don't get to sit at the right hand of God, do they? Given how Jesus uses the term here, it becomes very clear that he's alluding to a specific use of this title, Son of Man.

And that comes in the prophet Daniel, in chapter 7 of the book of Daniel, where Daniel has described God in his vision, described God who's referred to as the Ancient of Days, described him enthroned in glory and power and splendor, and Daniel then says, in my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven.

He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory, and sovereign power. All nations and peoples of every language worshipped him.

His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed. This is not just any old human being, is it?

This son of man is something else. The son of man who Jesus here claims to be is the one who has authority and power. The one whom the people rightly worship.

[18:32] And Jesus goes even further than talking about the son of man in the abstract because where the son of man of Daniel comes into the presence of the majestic ancient days, Jesus has this second dimension.

He will sit at the right hand of mighty God. The language of sitting at God's right hand is drawn from Psalm 110.

We looked at that in weeks not long ago thinking through the book of Hebrews, so we're not going to dig into that in great detail again here. Suffice it to say this is a claim to divine authority.

To sit at the right hand of God is to be on par with God, is to be on his level. He claims divinity for himself. He's making huge claims, isn't he?

The authorities are angry about a claim to be Messiah, even when they understand that in terms of political leadership. Well, if they're angry about that, how much greater is going to be their anger at a claim to be equal with God himself?

[19:34] It's very clear. That is how they see this. Verse 70, they all asked, are you then the son of God? You can hear the disbelief, the bafflement.

How could anyone even claim this? Jesus' reference to the son of man and to this place of God's right hand, this comes across to them as a claim to a higher place than what they'd previously understood the Messiah to occupy.

To claim to be Messiah, that might be a mistake. It's misguided, foolish even, potentially dangerous. But to claim to be Messiah is not blasphemy.

But this is something different. What Jesus says here links Jesus to deity. It is a claim to be God. So they ask, are you the son of God?

And how does Jesus respond? Again, it's not a straightforward answer, is it? You say that I am. Probably, probably this is best understood as an affirmation, as an agreement, but in a kind of ironic manner.

[20 : 49] You are the ones who say that I am. As if to say, you've confessed it even though you don't believe it. Just as those guards who demand that he prophesy.

And so Jesus, in saying this, accepts this designation of son of God. And that's the sort of divine sonship that's expressed in Psalm 2.

Psalm 2, where God scoffs at the nations and proclaims, I have installed my king on Zion, my holy mountain. I will proclaim the Lord's decree. He said to me, you are my son.

Today I have become your father. Ask me and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession. You will break them with a rod of iron. You will dash them to pieces like pottery.

Therefore, you kings, be wise. Be warned, you rulers of the earth. Serve the Lord with fear and celebrate his rule with trembling. Kiss his son or he will be angry and your way will lead to your destruction for his wrath can flare up in a moment.

[21 : 55] Blessed are all who take refuge in him. The right response, as Psalm 2 makes abundantly clear, the right response faced with the Messiah, with the Son of Man seated at the right hand of mighty God, faced with the Son of God himself.

The right response is to bow in humble homage, to admit his superior power and his greater authority. You may be the kings of the nations, you may be members of the Jewish ruling council, but the right response is to bow down.

The right response to his justified anger is to throw yourself on his mercy. But that's not what the Jewish leaders do, is it?

Verse 71, they count himself condemned and haul him off to Pilate. Why do they take him to Pilate? Well, because they want him dead. Not just thrown in prison, not just silenced, they want him dead and they don't have the authority to sentence him to death themselves.

It's not that they're unwilling to pronounce that sentence, it's not that they feel like they need a second opinion. Now as a conquered people, they're subject to the authority of the Roman Empire and so to the representative thereof, they must go.

[23 : 14] Jesus' identity that has been established at some length through Luke's gospel has been clarified here and reiterated. Why does Luke do this here?

Because at this crucial moment, as Jesus heads to the cross, Luke wants us to ask once again, who do you say that I am? Who is this Jesus?

It's a question that Luke wants everyone reading his account to ask themselves. Is it true that he is the Messiah, the prophet above all others, the son of man seated at the right hand of mighty God, the son of God himself?

Is this who he is? Is he a rabble-rousing threat to the authority of the Jewish leaders? Or more? Is he something else?

There aren't many questions more important in this world than this one. Who is Jesus? And that brings us on to this second trial.

[24 : 21] Second trial now before the civil authorities. With Pilate and with Herod, Luke's choosing to emphasize Jesus' innocence. He starts that emphasis in verse 2 with the nature of the accusations that are brought.

We found this man subverting our nation. He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar and claims to be Messiah, a king. Subverting the nation, they say.

Well, I suppose maybe by their definition, because they think the authority is rightly theirs and that Jesus is a challenge to it. But it's not really subverting the nation by any normal person's definition, and it's certainly not subverting the nation by the definition Pilate's going to assume they mean.

Jesus isn't advocating rebellion. He's not saying let's rise up and overthrow the Romans. And that different expectation comes through in the examples that they use.

They say he opposes payment of taxes to Caesar. Well, no. He said the exact opposite. That one's just a flat lie. He claims to be Messiah, a king.

[25 : 29] Again, you can see how they're choosing inflammatory language. They're trying to produce the result that they want. Yes, it's true he claims to be Messiah.

It's true he claims royal authority. But he also said my kingdom is not of this world. They want Pilate to think that he's initiating a rebellion, but it just isn't true.

Pilate, to give him his credit, begins his investigations. He asked Jesus, are you the king of the Jews? You have said so, Jesus replied. Again, it's a sort of roundabout yes, isn't it?

And Luke's abbreviating the account of the trial. He's already made Jesus' innocence perfectly clear, and so he skips ahead to Pilate affirming that, declaring it in verse 4.

He announced to the chief priest in the crowd, I find no basis for a charge against this man. It's clear. There is no grounds. There is no basis for any charge against him.

[26 : 33] When he's pressed, Pilate's willing to go and get a second opinion. So he sends Jesus off to Herod. Herod's only interested in getting Jesus to do magic tricks. And when Jesus won't play along, Herod just mocks him and sends him back again and again.

Pilate affirms Jesus' innocence. He called together the chief priests, the rulers, and the people, and said to them, you brought me this man as one who was inciting the people to rebellion.

I've examined him in your presence and have found no basis for your charges against him. Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us, as you can see. He's done nothing to deserve death.

Therefore I'll punish him and release him. And now we meet a new character. Now we meet Barabbas. Barabbas who's been thrown into prison for an insurrection in the city and for murder.

Barabbas actually is the sort of popular revolutionary that the Sanhedrin are trying to claim that Jesus is. Barabbas has done what Jesus is falsely accused of and whatever else, he's a murderer.

[27 : 46] Now folks, it doesn't take a genius to work out what justice demands here, does it? It isn't hard to see what ought to happen. But here in these verses, Luke now illustrates the great exchange that Jesus' death offers to us all.

Because at the urging of the crowd, despite his protestations of Jesus' innocence, at the urging of the crowd, Pilate capitulates. They shout, crucify him, crucify him.

And Pilate ultimately grants their demand. The guilty one, Barabbas, goes free. The innocent one, Jesus is punished.

Barabbas deserves death and receives life. Jesus deserves life and receives death. Again and again and again, we hear there are no grounds for the death penalty for Jesus.

There is no justification for this. And yet, that is what he receives. In Jesus' death, Barabbas receives life.

[28 : 58] death. And Luke pictures, illustrates for us what we all of us need. Back in the upper room with his disciples, Jesus spoke of his blood shed for the forgiveness of sins.

Paul and the apostles are going to make this abundantly clear in their later writings. Here, here in the account of the trial, Luke chooses not quite so much to explain as to illustrate.

He shows us this exchange in action. The ransom price is being paid. If the wages of sin is death, then death has to come. And here it is.

Because of the death of the innocent one, the guilty may go free. And maybe, maybe we're inclined to balk, to rebel at the idea of Barabbas being set free.

Because it's unjust. And we don't like it very much because it means Jesus dies. So we resent Barabbas being part of the means by which our hero is condemned, right? But I don't think that's what Luke wants us to think here.

[30 : 13] No, I think instead, we're meant to see ourselves in Barabbas, in his rebellion. We're meant to look at this and recognize that we're all of us guilty of rebellion, of insurrection.

Rebellion not against Imperial Rome or the modern day authorities, no, rebellion against a far greater, indeed against a perfect authority, rebellion against God himself, the creator of all things, the creator of you, the creator of me, the one who rules by right, the one who has legitimate authority as the creator in his perfect goodness.

God has the right to reign and we don't live his way. Since the days of Adam, each of us has followed in Adam's rebellious footsteps.

steps, I have, and so have you. We've rejected God's authority in ways big and small.

We're rebels deserving death, life. And yet in the death of Jesus, we may receive life. Jesus' perfect innocence, total purity, nothing deserving of death.

[31 : 46] Jesus' perfect innocence can be ours. We can be set free in his place. And folks, I think many of us would do well to recognize afresh, to reiterate to ourselves our great need of this redeeming life.

Many of us, having once acknowledged our sinful rebellion, have perhaps drifted away from our recognition of our need of a savior. And started to act as though we were fine on our own.

Or maybe some of you listening to me, maybe some of you have never admitted to yourself, never admitted before God, your sin, your rebellion, your rejection of his authority.

That's what it boils down to. Who's in charge? You or God? If that's you, if you've never admitted that, well, I urge you, I say to you, throw yourself on God's mercy today.

Now, acknowledge your wrongdoing, recognize your sin, admit your rebellion, and turn, turn to the savior who offers redemption.

[33 : 05] Turn to the savior who makes a way where there was none. Come to the one who offers life, fullness of life here today, eternal joy in the presence of God.

That's the exchange that's on offer here. that's what he holds out before you, the innocent man who died that you might live.

Let's pray. Lord Jesus, we thank you. We thank you once again for your willingness to suffer in our place.

We see again who you are, what you were rightly entitled to. We see your perfect innocence laid out before us, expressed and reaffirmed.

And we see our sinfulness, our rebellion, our rejection of you. And we recognize therefore our dependence upon that great exchange.

[34 : 19] Lord, be gracious to us, we ask. Embed this in our hearts that we might not drift away from that dependence on you.

That whether we recognize it for the first time this morning or for the hundredth time, the thousandth time, yet our need is the same. Our dependence on you is just as real.

So be gracious to us, we pray. Amen. Amen.