

Before the Judge

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[0 : 00] Well, good evening, friends. It's great to see you all. It's great to be here. I'm still reeling a bit from John O'Ree defining the definition of a young adult to exclude me.

I'm over 30. Where is he? He's hiding at the back. He'll be feeling what's called a GSA and I'll define that later in the sermon. Let's pray. Lord, our God, we pray that we would be open as we read this historical account of the trials of Jesus of Nazareth, that we'll be open to understand what happened and to understand the meaning of these events and their significance, their enormous significance for us today. In Jesus' name we ask. Amen. So of the great questions of history, the two greatest I think we need to wrestle with, and we constantly need to come back to these two great questions, who was Jesus of Nazareth and why did he die? Those two questions are so crucial, as you'll see tonight. The historical evidence that Jesus of Nazareth walked the earth and taught and died under Pilate, you know, we have independent verification of that from Roman records, which we'll share a bit of on Wednesday night, on the April Fool's night. So we know he lived, we know he died, but the question is, well, who was he and why did he die? What's the meaning behind this historical event? Everyone, I think, has to form an answer to those questions. They're just there and even if you decide, like, it doesn't matter or something, you're in effect concluding that Jesus is dead and therefore irrelevant. That's what you're saying when you're saying,

I'm not even going to think about those questions, but you're still making a kind of historical judgment in the end anyway. I think we would do well, the people who are here who are Christians, who call themselves followers of Jesus, when we talk to non-Christians, to ask them those two questions. I know we're a bit coy about being seen to be preachy, but it's not really preachy, I think, to ask someone what they think. So ask people, who do you think Jesus was and why do you think he died? Those would be good questions to be asking our friends and colleagues around Easter time especially. I know what answer you would get if you ask a Christian. A Christian would say, Jesus was the son of God and he died for the redemption of the world through his blood. That's the gospel of forgiveness. But I think we kind of need to come back to this question tonight at a more base level. We need to look at why did

Jesus die historically? Why did he die politically? Why did a Roman soldier hammer nails into his hand and nails into his feet? Why was a soldier ordered to do that in the first century in Jerusalem? There are answers to that question that are more than just theological. We need to actually work out historically what happened to him. The reason is, of course, because if it didn't actually happen, then our theology means nothing. You could say all your life that he died for your sins, but if there wasn't an actual trial that makes historical sense, then the whole thing is a sham really. So we need to look at this from the historical angle tonight. And as we go, we'll constantly come back to what it truly means theologically. So what's happening is Luke presents a trial of four episodic kind of scenes. And it continues directly from last week where we saw Peter's denial of Jesus. And Peter ran away from the house of probably Annas, who is sort of like the high priest or the oldest in the high priestly family. His son-in-law has formally taken on the title of high priest, but he's still kind of calling the shots. And we come the morning after Peter has denied Jesus. So when day came, the assembly of the elders of the people, both chief priests and scribes gathered together and they brought Jesus to their council. So probably what's happened all night is they've just been kind of beating up Jesus, interrogating him, pushing him around. He probably hasn't had any sleep. They're probably trying to get him into a shape where he will confess something because they're hurting him so much. And then they'll have something to hang him on or to send him to the cross. These leaders are so desperate to get rid of Jesus because the Sabbath is coming. And so they've got to, in effect, get him trialed and sentenced that morning so that he can sort of be ready to be

hung up on the cross. Otherwise, you wait a day on the Sabbath. People start leaving Jerusalem because of the

[5 : 22] Passover. Things might simmer down and they'll lose the sort of bloodthirsty momentum they've got against this teacher. And so they convene this council called the Sanhedrin and they go straight to the root of the matter, which is what I've already raised, who is Jesus? And so they ask him in verse 67, if you are the Messiah, tell us. Are you the Messiah? They don't want to muck around with lawyers and witnesses and due legal processes. They basically want Jesus to incriminate himself.

Now, as we look at Jesus' response here, I want you to see that Luke is trying to present two aspects of Jesus' character. Through the whole trial, there are two things going on. One is that we see Jesus as kind of the innocent, meek lamb. That's a very popular picture of Jesus at his trial, so I know you know that. But the other picture of Jesus that Luke presents more under the surface is Jesus is the world's true Lord and the world's true judge. And they're contrasting pictures, aren't they? That Jesus is like this innocent, meek lamb to the slaughter and yet Luke is showing us that he is the world's true Lord. He is the world's true judge. And so interestingly, in this first trial scene, Jesus responds by really taking on the accusers. So Jesus answers his judges by answering them back.

He says, well, if I tell you, you will not believe. That is, you know, Jesus is judging them because he's the world's true judge. If I tell you, you're not even going to believe anyway. And if I question you, he says, you will not answer. That is to say, they're not recognising who he is and yet he should be the one judging them. And then Jesus goes on even further in verse 69, which is probably the critical verse of all of tonight's readings, where Jesus answers the judges by telling them that he is the true judge of the world. But from now on, you will be, from now on, the son of man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God. Jesus is evoking a very profound and specific imagery that he himself had taught about in Luke chapter 21, not long ago. And John, I took us through that a few weeks ago, where Jesus had promised that after he had died and risen from the dead and ascended to the, he would go to the right hand of God. He would become the exalted judge who would destroy Jerusalem in AD 70. And following that, there'd be a promise that one day he would come back to judge all nations, all heaven and earth. And so just in this one little phrase, which the Sanhedrin, his listeners, it would be pushing their buttons. They know about Daniel 7. They know about the prophecy of the one who will go into the presence of God the Father and be given all dominion, all authority, all kingship and glory. That's who he's claiming to be. And also they'd know the imagery of Psalm 110, where King David looks forward to the true Messiah to come, where God will invite the Messiah to sit at his right hand and sort of judge the world. And again, Jesus is saying, alluding to that by talking about, you'll see me at the right hand of the power of God. So they're two pretty critical texts. I think we as Christians ought to be familiar with Daniel 7, Psalm 110. So Jesus is saying to the

Sanhedrin, you judge me, but from now on, I'm going to judge you. From the vantage point of the resurrection, from that point onwards, I will be a Messiah like you never believed, like you never would have expected. I am going to be the world's true Lord. I'm going to be the king and judge of all creation. And so Jesus, this is the starting point, I think, that Luke wants us to understand the trials of the Lord. He wants us to see that from the beginning, Jesus answers his judges by judging them and telling them that he is the world's true Lord and true judge. It's funny, isn't it? Because why else would he be a threat? He's meek and mild. Why else would they be so threatened by him? They have a sort of, to go back to that term, a GSA about Jesus. A GSA is a gnawing sense of anxiety. Have you ever had one of those? You may have one tonight. You may have a GSA about you've got some work due at uni this week or you may not have put the bin out or you've used up all your internet plan or something like that or your phone plan. You've got a GSA. Well, these Jewish leaders have a gnawing sense of anxiety about Jesus because he claims to be the world's true Lord.

[10 : 46] And I think actually everyone has such a sense of that anxiety. It's sort of in the air that we know that it's like there's a curtain over the world and behind that curtain sits the Lord Jesus Christ.

The world cannot see that he is their true Lord. But people kind of know he's there. The anxiety is not because it's unknown behind the curtain. The anxiety is that when the curtain's drawn, they actually know it was him all along. But they haven't lived with him as their Lord.

Part of the Christian life, I think, is that we live in advance while the curtain is drawn with Jesus as the world's true Lord. And so from that point on in the trial, 40 years later, Jesus will destroy the temple. That's what he will sovereignly oversee in Jerusalem. In 300 years, the Lord Jesus will sovereignly oversee the turning of the Roman Empire. 2,000 years later, from where we stand, the Lord Jesus has billions of followers. I'm very optimistic about the future of Christianity because I know that Jesus is the world's true Lord. So I'm very optimistic about Christianity all over the world, including in Australia, because he is the Son of Man who has gone to the right hand of the power of God. He is the world's true Lord. And one day that curtain will be open for all to see and their gnawing sense of anxiety that everyone feels will kind of be exposed on the day of judgment. So anyway, we'll go on with it. We just need to sort of see theologically what's happening at the very beginning of the trial. And of course, he's given them more ammunition to kill him than they ever needed in terms of blasphemy.

So they say, you know, they all ask together, are you the Son of God? Is that what you're saying? He says, you say that I am? Jesus can't really deny that. And so they've got him. He's blasphemed. So friends, just stop for a minute. Are you sure that you truly believe that Jesus is at the right hand of God, that he is the world's true Lord, that he is the Son of Man, that he is the judge of the world? Are you sure about that? Because friends, you need to be, because if you're not, or if you're not living as if he is, then you are in rebellion against the world's true Lord. And that's obviously a bad thing. You're committing treason. You're undermining what he's trying to do in the world.

[13:24] And so obviously bad things will await you unless you make peace with him. And tonight is a good place to do that and resolve that gnawing sense of anxiety. Now the Sanhedrin have got him, he's blasphemed, but they've got one problem. They don't have the power to kill because Rome doesn't give them that power. They're a kind of a conquered people. They need to go to Pilate to get permission to get him killed. And Pilate's the sort of procurator or governor over Jerusalem. He represents in Jerusalem the power of Caesar, the power of the emperor. And therefore he's got the power of capital punishment. And Pilate's sort of one job really for the course of his tenure was to keep Jews under control. And he hasn't done a great job of it actually. And his job is something somewhat on the line. And so they come to Pilate with three accusations. One of them's true. One of them's false. And one of them actually I haven't worked out. So you tell me what you think. So in chapter 23 verse 2, they brought Jesus and accused him saying, we found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king.

Now I don't think Jesus ever forbid paying taxes to Caesar. In fact, I think he explicitly told the opposite, didn't he? He said, render to Caesar, you know, whose picture's on this coin. So that's a lie.

He did claim to be the Messiah, a king. That is true. I don't know whether you think he was perverting our nation. That's a hard one, isn't it? It kind of depends how you look at it. So Pilate himself goes, all right, I better deal with this. It's my job to keep the peace. You brought this man. I'll interrogate him. Are you the king of the Jews? Jesus becomes more of the meek and mild lamb to the slaughter. He just sort of says, you say so. Doesn't deny it. But kind of says, you know, it's your words, but I'll give assent to them. But you know, that's not really enough for Pilate.

He needs a bit more positive evidence against Jesus. So he says, I don't find any basis for accusation against this man. And the people, of course, are insistent and they say, but he stirs up the people, reminding Pilate that his job is to stop insurrection. He stirs up the people throughout all Judea, from Galilee, where he began, even to this place. Luke is showing us very clearly, I think, that the innocence of Christ, the innocence of Jesus, that it was very hard for them to pin anything on him. It's very hard for them, you know, almost any of us, that you could dig up some dirt on almost any normal person, but there was nothing to be dug up on Jesus, except for maybe the claim to be a king. But Pilate doesn't really know what to do, but he's a politician. And he thinks of a loophole, a great kind of bureaucratic loophole. When they mention that he started in Galilee, he thinks, well, that's actually not my territory. That's not my jurisdiction. I can handle that to Herod. And Herod is in town because of the Passover. And so basically, he can send him over to Herod's palace and let it be Herod's problem. And I think it would have also been a kind of a compliment from Pilate to Herod to sort of say, this was hard for me to deal with. Can you help me, please? Or I don't have the authority that you have, or the wisdom or something. I don't know. So he goes to Herod's. And that takes us to the third episode of the trials. And it's a quick one, really. Nothing

really happens there, except that Herod treats Jesus like a circus animal. It's kind of like a party trick. Herod is glad to receive Jesus because he'd heard about him, wants to see some kind of miracle. Jesus is silent through the whole trial or accusation before Herod. The chief priests hang it on him, but he won't defend himself. Even Herod with his soldiers, in verse 11, treated him with contempt and mocked him. Then he put an elegant robe on him and sent him back to Pilate. So Jesus didn't prove to be kind of of any interest to Herod. And Herod really didn't want to help solve the problem.

So he just sends him back to Pilate. The interesting thing that Luke says is in verse 12, that same day Herod and Pilate became friends with each other before this day had been enemies.

[18:09] And I think, again, that's just a reminder of, it's the most important question. Who is Jesus Christ? And it's a divisive question. And people are divided whether you're going to become a subject and a worshipper of Jesus or whether you're going to be part of the group rejecting Jesus. And people are united in their rejection of Jesus in his trial. And I think we ought not to be surprised if in Australia, strange bedfellows join up to hang it on Christians.

For example, a secular government and Muslim leaders join together to sort of make it illegal for Christians to do their thing, which has sort of almost happened in our vilification laws. They do that because they're united, even though they're opposites, Muslims and the secular government, they're united against Christianity, against the world's true Lord.

So it leads us, finally, it goes back to Pilate to the fourth and final scene. We've been to the Sanhedrin, we've been to Pilate before, we've been to Herod, now we're back to Pilate. And Pilate really just doesn't want to kill this guy. He says in verse 14, You brought me this man as one who was perverting the people. Here I have examined him in your presence and have not found this man guilty of any of your charges against him, neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us. Indeed, he has done nothing to deserve death. I will therefore have him flogged, sort of a token punishment, maybe to appease the Sanhedrin.

And then release him. Luke again is emphasising the innocence of Jesus Christ. There was really nothing that would stick to him. He was an unblemished lamb, as it were, to use that imagery. And so Pilate throws his hands in the air and says to the Jewish leaders, Well, you've got nothing on this guy. I can't do it. And then they start to put personal pressure on Pilate. And they know his weak point. They know his political weaknesses. And they really apply pressure at that point. So in verse 18, they shouted together, Away with this fellow. Release Barabbas for us. Barabbas was a murderer and a rioter. Pilate, wanting to release Jesus, addressed them again. But they kept shouting, Crucify! Crucify him!

[20:43] A third time he said to them, Why? What evil has he done? I have found in him no ground for the sentence of death. I will therefore have him flogged and then released. But they kept urgently demanding with loud shouts that he should be crucified.

And their voices prevailed. So basically, the crowd is, the Jewish leaders are inciting a riot, almost sort of threatening that there's going to be a massive insurrection if Pilate does not kill Jesus. And Pilate can't let that happen. If that happens, Pilate will lose his job and probably his head. And so ultimately, Pilate has to choose between himself or Jesus. And gutlessly, rather than do what is right, he just does what is self-serving. So don't see Pilate as kind of an innocent third party. He is very gutless in this and very cowardly in his allowing of Jesus to be killed. And in the end, he is the one who commands the soldiers to kill Jesus. So Pilate gave his verdict that their demand should be granted. And they released the man they'd asked for, who'd been put in prison for insurrection and murder, and they handed over Jesus as they wished. And so really, this is an image, I think, of earthly justice, that a murderer walks free and the innocent Son of God is condemned to death.

Now, they're the four episodes. Historically, we need to think, well, who killed Jesus? You can answer it on so many levels. I mean, it's hard to think who didn't kill Jesus.

[22:19] Soldiers killed Jesus. Roman soldiers who were sent by Pilate. So Pilate kills Jesus. But Pilate just represents Rome. So this is in which Rome killed Jesus. But we also know from the story that they didn't really start it. Judas was the betrayer. So Judas, in one sense, killed Jesus.

But he did that by betraying him over to the Sanhedrin and the high priest family. So they killed Jesus. But it's also the mob. There's a lot of unity here in Luke's imagery. Like they act as, they arose as one body in bringing Jesus to Pilate. And they cried out, crucify him, almost as one voice. It's like the mob or even united humanity kills their maker, kills the Son of God.

There's a lot of levels, isn't there, about who actually killed Jesus. And we want to be able to say, humanity killed Jesus. There's a sense in which we are counted in that, aren't we?

We, as in a race of God's created image bearers, we are the ones who killed Jesus. On top of even that, Jesus himself allowed it to happen and sought it out. It was his mission.

It's actually what he intended to do. It was God, God himself, the Father, planned the death of Jesus. So the Father killed Jesus in that sense as well.

[23 : 46] All those answers are true and we actually need them all because without them you just have a historical event that's irrelevant, that's not the plan of God. But you can't just have the plan of God without it actually happening.

And for it to happen, it needs to historically happen. So all those answers are true. And I love in one sentence in the day of Pentecost, Peter summarises all those levels with one sentence.

It's a long one. But he says to the Jewish people at Pentecost, he says, This man Jesus handed over to you, that is Judas killed him, according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, that is God did it, you crucified and killed, that is to the Jews.

And he says, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law, which refers obviously to Rome. And so in one sentence he actually says all those people killed Jesus.

But the key thing is it was the plan and purpose of God, therefore there is a salvation purpose in it. There is a meaning to the trial and death of Jesus, which is for the good of the world, which is for your good and for my good.

[24 : 57] In the mercy and wisdom of God, the world's true Lord went through the most dodgy trial in order to save the world.

The world's true judge allowed himself to be under the most capricious and corrupt judges so that he could save the world.

One day Jesus is going to judge Pilate and those roles will be reversed, won't they? And on that day Jesus will judge Pilate with more justice and righteousness than Pilate gave him, won't he?

One day the high priests and the elders of Israel who were there, they will be judged by Jesus with more fairness and more righteousness than they gave him.

On that day, according to Jesus' own word, some of those people will be judged on the day of judgment and they'll be sent to hell forever for their betrayal of the world's true Lord.

[26 : 04] But others in that group, that very group of the Sanhedrin, they will come before Jesus on the day of judgment and he will say to them, well done, good and faithful servant.

Now, how can that happen? It can happen because when Jesus had risen from the dead, he sent his apostles straight back to the people who killed him with the message of his resurrection lordship and with the offer of forgiveness.

And many, many, many of them took it. And so actually, it's the grace of Jesus Christ that he allowed himself to go through that judgment and then after he was risen as the world's true Lord, he went straight back to them and offered mercy.

And in due time, the gospel went to Gentiles and many, many Romans, many, many Roman soldiers and people of all levels of the Roman hierarchy became Christians.

This is the mercy of God. This is the greatness of our God that he would offer such good news to those who had betrayed him. And I think it's really, that itself, that's the evidence that God can forgive you.

[27 : 21] You are a betrayer of Jesus. You are a rebel against the world's true Lord. That if he went to the very people who killed him, then of course that is an offer to us even today.

So friends, ultimately, you need to keep wrestling with this issue. And even if you're a Christian, you need to keep it front and centre. Who is Jesus and why did he die? And you need to live as if he is the world's true Lord.

So you ultimately become the kind of a decision about who will be the boss. You can't, many Christians, I think, would like Jesus to be in the car, but not driving the car of their life, if you know what I mean.

But actually, if he's the world's true Lord, he ought to be, have his hands on the steering wheel, so to speak. You cannot just sort of have Jesus in a compartment of your life. And for others here, you're not a sort of a committed Christian.

You haven't crossed the line. And you sort of have to decide like Pilate did, it's either him or me. And I beg you to choose him because that's ultimately what will save your life on the last day.

[28 : 30] There's a day coming when the curtain will be drawn back. And the glory of the Son of Man on the clouds at the right hand of the power of God will be shown to all the world.

On this day, your faith in the Lord Jesus will be vindicated. And everything you have done to suffer for his name while the curtain was drawn will be made worthwhile, won't it?

Because you'll think that was worth it. Here he is. And the world will see your good deeds as well and give praise to God, I hope. Friends, let me encourage you, just maybe close your eyes and think now of the Lord Jesus present with us by his Spirit.

Lord over us at God's right hand. He is truly God. He knows your thoughts.

He knows your heart. Let us pray to him now and I'll give you a time of quiet to pray in your own heart to the Lord Jesus to seek his forgiveness and to reaffirm your trust in him.

[30 : 03] Our Lord Jesus, we acknowledge your presence and Lordship over us.

We thank you for the wonderful humility you showed in going to the cross as judge of the world, enduring such corrupt trials for our sake.

Thank you, Lord Jesus, that you are a Lord who has walked our walk and that you're a Lord who has died for us. We couldn't ask for a more wonderful king and judge of the world.

So, Lord Jesus, we renew our trust in you now and I pray for those here who are not confident of that, that you would assure them and assure them by the Spirit and by the evidence of your word that that is true and that you would call people tonight to bend the knee to your Lordship and to become subjects and followers of you.

Amen.