

Jesus on Trial before Pilate

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[0 : 00] With God's help tonight, I want us to consider this significant and in many ways unique moment when the divine judge himself finds himself under the judgment of a man, and in particular a man named Pilate.

And as we gather, if you like, into this courtroom of Pontius Pilate tonight, and as we see him examining Jesus, as we hear the cries and the voices from the crowd, and as we see the verdict that Pilate eventually comes to, so I want to bring Christ before you tonight.

And I want to ask you with all reverence to examine him. And I want to ask you with all reverence to come up with your verdict on this man, Jesus of Nazareth.

Now, Jesus actually goes through six different trials during these last few days of his life. Three of the trials are before religious leaders.

You've got people like the Sanhedrin, the high priests, and the chief priests were involved as well. So three of these trials are before, if you like, the religious leaders of the day.

[1 : 35] But then after these three trials, he's handed over to the civil courts, if you like. The civil courts of Pilate. And in this chapter here, in chapter 23, we read of those three civil trials that he went through.

So first of all, you have verse 1 to 5, Jesus before Pilate. That's the first time he comes before Pilate. And then Pilate sends him off to Herod, before Herod then sending him back again to Pilate, where he is, if you like, tried for a last time.

And this last trial, if you like, it's not so much a trial nearly at the hands of Pilate. It's a trial, as we'll see, at the hands of the crowd.

And I want to look with you tonight at that last phase, that sixth phase, if you like, of these trials in verses 13 to 25. So this is when Jesus comes a second time before Pontius Pilate.

He has come back from Herod, and he comes to Pilate. And this is the crucial trial where he ultimately is sentenced to death.

[2 : 56] This is the final trial where he is sentenced to crucifixion. But what I want to kind of draw attention to during this is, yes, Pilate, but more than that, I really want to look at the cries and the demands of this crowd, because this crowd is instrumental in what happens in this last trial.

And I guess if I was going to choose a particular text, which I would preach on, if you like, tonight, it would be verse 23. But they were urgent, demanding with loud cries that he should be crucified. And their voices prevailed. Especially those chilling words towards the end of that verse. And their voices prevailed.

So tonight, I want to ask you, will you listen to the silence of Jesus throughout this trial? Or will you hear the cries, the voices, the loud demands of this crowd?

And I've broken it into three things. You'll see it there on your sheets. The innocence of Jesus, the cries of the crowd, and the verdict of Pilate.

[4 : 13] So first of all, the innocence of Jesus. And this is something that comes through powerfully. Not just in this passage, but throughout the narrative of his last hours, if you like, on earth.

Verse 14, you brought me this man as one who was misleading the people. And after examining him before you, behold, I do not find this man guilty of any of your charges against him.

Not guilty of any of the charges that you have had against him. Now, Pilate was a Roman governor. He was the Roman governor of Judea, that particular region. And when the chief priests, when they come to Pilate with Jesus, they want one thing.

They want Jesus to be put to death. And that is their sole aim. That is their goal. They want Jesus put to death. This was in no way going to be a fair trial.

[5 : 17] They had made up their minds long before this that Jesus was guilty. These religious leaders, they'd taken Jesus through their own version of trials in a somewhat farcical way.

In order to confirm the judgment that they had already come to. This man deserves death. And we're going to make sure that this man is killed. We're going to make sure that this man is crucified. So when these Jewish leaders, when they take Jesus to Pilate, they come up with a list of accusations. And they're very clever accusations.

They're accusations that Pilate would take seriously. Not accusations about religious things. Accusations that enter into the civil world, if you like.

And we read of those accusations in verse 2 there, and 3 as well. Three accusations. Firstly, he is misleading our nation.

[6 : 18] Leading, later on it goes on to say, this is kind of leading to a kind of unrest in the nation. He's misleading the nation. And Pilate straight away, he's going to listen to this one.

Because, after all, his job is to make sure there is peace in the region. So if someone's coming, causing a bit of unrest, he's going to take note of this. But it's quite interesting that they come. And in many ways, it's quite ironic that they come with this accusation. Accusing him of causing unrest. Because by demanding that he be crucified, and by ultimately crucifying him on the cross, these very people, what they are doing, results not only in unrest in the surrounding region, but unrest in the whole world.

Because after Christ was crucified, we read, when the apostles went out, that the whole world was turned upside down. So there's a degree of irony there in their accusation of him causing unrest and misleading the nation.

That's the first, if you like, accusation. Secondly, he is charged with opposing payment of, effectively, taxes to Caesar. Again, Pilate is going to listen to this one.

[7 : 33] Because allegiance to Caesar was crucially important to Pilate and Pilate's job role. So he was going to take this seriously. But again, again, this is a false accusation.

Didn't Jesus teach the very opposite of that? He taught that it was right to pay taxes. Render to Caesar that which is Caesar's.

But these religious leaders, they don't care about if there's any truth in their accusations. They just want to make sure this man is put to death. So they come up with these false accusations.

So that's the second one. And the third accusation, and probably the most important, or at least the one that Pilate seems to take more seriously, is this accusation that he calls himself a king.

A king. And again, if Pilate has been loyal to Caesar, anybody that calls himself a king, that is a serious issue. So that's three accusations that Pilate will take very, very seriously.

[8 : 39] But in verse 14, he turns to this crowd and he says, Look, I have examined him against all of those charges, and I cannot find any fault in him.

There is nothing in this man that is deserving of death. And this actually makes up one of three separate occasions where Pilate effectively declares Jesus innocent.

Three times. The sinless Lamb of God is approaching the end of his earthly mission, if you like.

He's approaching the cross. And time and time again, we read here, This man is innocent.

No sin is found in him, even by the governor of Judea. He thrives, but he cannot find fault in this man. And throughout the narrative of these last hours of Jesus' life, we are reminded of that fact, that this man is innocent.

Pilate finds him innocent. He got sent to Herod. Herod finds him innocent. Herod can't find anything to accuse him with. And then interestingly, in Matthew's account, remember Pilate's wife?

[10 : 00] Remember she had a funny dream. And she comes to Pilate and she says, Have nothing to do with this man. Have nothing to do with this righteous man.

So even Pilate's wife is saying, Look, this man is innocent. This man is righteous. And even more than that, and perhaps this is someone who you wouldn't expect to declare him innocent, the thief on the cross does so as well.

You see that in this very chapter. We didn't read it, but see in verse 39 there, one of the criminals who were hanged railed at him saying, Are you not the Christ?

Save yourself and us. But the other rebuked him saying, Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we, indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds.

But this man has done nothing wrong. Even the thief declares him innocent. Time and time again, he is declared innocent throughout this narrative.

[11:07] It's as though God is writing in big, bold letters throughout these last hours of Jesus' life. This man is innocent.

And that is perhaps the remarkable thing about these trials. Trial after trial after trial seems to prove, if you like, the innocence of Jesus.

Yet remarkably, the forces of darkness are at work, and they are at work powerfully here. So powerfully, that a guilty verdict is given, even though the whole way along, all the evidence has been innocent.

Innocent. Innocent. It is the ultimate injustice. The ultimate injustice. It's an injustice in more ways than one.

And we'll maybe touch on that a bit later. But Pilate, he sees what's going on, and he tells the crowd, look, this man has done nothing wrong.

[12:16] Look, I've examined him. He has done nothing wrong. He has done nothing deserving of death. At that point, Pilate should have just let him go. He shouldn't even have addressed the crowd. It doesn't matter what the crowd thinks.

Pilate should have just let him go. But he sees the crowd, and he sees a bit of tension here. He sees a bit of hatred being stirred up, if you like, in this crowd. And he's not happy about this. So he tries to appease them a wee bit. And he comes up with this idea, I will punish him, and then I'll release him. How does that sound to you? I will punish him, and then I'll release him. Well, that takes us on to that second point, which is the cries of the crowd. Because that marks the beginning of a dialogue between Pilate and this crowd that has gathered.

And in many ways, like I said, this is not a trial merely at the hands of Pilate. It's a trial really at the hands of this mob, at the hands of this crowd.

[13:20] Because, you know, when you read these things, they are controlling things, aren't they? They are dictating things. They are the ones with all the control here. Pilate is slowly losing control of the situation.

He's losing control of what's going on. The voices of the crowd, they're orchestrated, they're collective, they're unwavering in their request, in their demand, that this man be put to death. That this man, the Lord Jesus, Jesus of Nazareth, that he be crucified. How easy it is to listen to the crowd, isn't it?

It's very easy to listen to the crowd. And as we consider the responses of this crowd, and as we see them with their shouts and their chants, we remember that this crowd still shouts today.

These cries still come out today. We are surrounded by their voices. Voices that desire, and even more than that, they demand the destruction of Jesus Christ and his cause.

[14:36] They cry out for Jesus almost to be crucified again. These voices, these crowds, the voice of the world.

And it's not easy to stand up to that kind of opposition. Some of you may have experienced it. It's amazing when crowds gather against you as a Christian. There's a degree of evil present there when they come and they attack on anyone who bears the name of Jesus Christ.

And Pilate, he crumbled. He gave in. He gave in to these shouts of the crowd. He threw in, if you like, his lot with the demands of the crowd.

And three times in the passage, we read here, three times the crowd speaks. And the first is in verse 18. And it's in response to that proposal by Pilate.

That proposal to have Jesus punished and then released. This was quite a clever move by Pilate. It was quite a politically savvy move by Pilate.

[15:45] You see, he sees that Jesus is innocent and he wants to let him go. But at the same time, he sees the hatred of the crowd that seems to be festering.

So he comes up with this idea to kind of compromise, to appease both. And this was to do with a yearly custom around this time.

Around that time of year, it was a custom to release a guilty prisoner. So, if Pilate released Jesus under this custom, he would be treating Jesus as guilty, but at the same time, allowing Jesus to walk free.

He thought, oh, this is a great plan. I will satisfy both. I will satisfy myself in my desire to release him and I will satisfy the crowd because I'm treating this man as guilty, but at the same time, I'm letting

him go.

But they cry out, away with this man and release to us Barabbas. Now that would have come as quite a shock to Pilate.

[16:52] He's seriously misjudged just how much hatred there is for this man. He's misjudged the sheer evil feeling there is towards this man, Jesus.

They would rather release Barabbas, the murderer, the man who was put in prison for insurrection. They would rather release him.

Friends, this is where you see the incredible power of sin. We thought about that this morning, didn't we? The power of sin.

They've just been falsely accusing Jesus of causing unrest in the region, a kind of insurrection in their eyes. They've come accusing Jesus of that and now they're wanting to release a man who had rightly been accused of that very same thing.

It makes no sense. It makes no sense whatsoever. Is it not frightening the effect that sin can have on people?

[18:01] You see, we often talk about sin as being blinding. And sin is blinding. It's right to say that. But it's more than that. Sin is a deceiving.

It's deceiving. If something blinds you, it stops you seeing something. It prevents you from seeing. But if something is deceiving, it makes you see something that is not there.

And that is the danger and in many ways the power of sin. It doesn't just blind. It deceives. And their sin here, it's not just blinding them to who Christ is, it's making them see Christ for someone who he is not.

It's making them see Christ as a criminal. They see the Son of God as a criminal. The crowd are so deceived by their own sin that they would release a murderer and a rebel who was declared innocent by Pilate, by Herod, declared innocent throughout the narrative.

And by the way, if the crowd here can find fault with Jesus, Christian friend, how much more will they find fault with us?

[19:26] If they found fault with the sinless Son of God, if they found fault with someone who had no sin, imagine what they'll do to us. Imagine what this crowd would do with us.

They will have plenty of opportunity to point a finger at us, won't they? I mean, we're sinners. Oh yes, we are sinners saved by grace, but we are sinners nonetheless.

And the moment we stumble, the moment we fall, and we will do, we will do, the moment we do that, the finger of accusation will be out.

The finger of guilt will be out as they seek to bring shame on the name of Jesus Christ. This crowd loves to do that.

The cries of the world loves to do that. I wonder if you are in here tonight and you find yourself part of this crowd.

[20:30] Maybe you enjoy pointing the finger of guilt at Christians who sin. Maybe you delight in seeing the sin of the Christian.

Oh friends, I hope that that is not the case. I hope you do not delight in the sin of Christ's people. See, for some people it appeases their conscience to do that.

It appeases their conscience to see a Christian fall, to see a Christian sin, and to come with the finger of accusation. accusation. If Christ was accused, then so too we will be accused.

And even more so. Friends, as a Christian, we live with a target on our backs. We can't get away from that fact.

It is part of the cost of discipleship, if you like. We deny ourselves, we pick up our cross and we follow him. And when we do that, that cross that cross on our backs, it becomes a target.

[21:38] It becomes a target for the world. It becomes a target for the devil. If they hated Jesus, if this crowd hates Jesus, they will hate us.

And don't be surprised when you experience that. But Pilate, then, he responds to this call for him to release Barabbas.

And you see that in verse 20. He tries to reason with them to release Jesus. And we read that Pilate actually desired to release Jesus.

Pilate, he's seeing the injustice that's going on here. He wants to release Jesus. But the crowd are having none of it. Crucify him.

Crucify him. They kept chanting these words. And you get the idea that as they continued to chant these words of crucify him, that they get louder and louder, that they get full of more hatred, that they get filled with the conviction of the crowd as this cry gets ever louder.

[22 : 46] Crucify him. Crucify him. As I read these words, I cannot but think of Jesus hearing these words.

He'll be around somewhere, I don't know where exactly he was, but he would have heard these cries. He would have heard the people here shouting for his crucifixion. And this must have hurt. It must have hurt. It must have pained our saviour. Yes, he is fully God. And he knew exactly what was happening. He knew that his path was directed to the cross he knew that he was to die for the sins of his people.

He knew all these things. But he wasn't just a hundred percent God. He was a hundred percent man. And we mustn't forget that. He had a burden for the lost.

He had a burden for these lost souls. He lamented, we read over Jerusalem. He humbled himself in a way that no man ever has or ever will.

[23 : 57] And yet these cries go out from the very people he came to save. Crucify him. Crucify him. And as he hears this rejection and hatred and the voices of this crowd, surely it must have been like an arrow into the very heart of Christ's humanity if you like.

Oh would you not have felt that? Felt those chants, those words. One of his disciples had just betrayed him. The others had run away.

They'd fled him. And now here come the crowd demanding his crucifixion. Coming with their passionate hatred that this man would be put to death.

And not just death. That wasn't good enough for them. They wanted him to be crucified. One of the most humiliating and painful forms of execution ever invented.

He is rejected by the very people that he came to save. Friends, I wonder if you feel rejection. I wonder if you feel isolation.

[25 : 16] If you feel alone. Many people feel these things in our day and age. Perhaps more now than ever. Well, friends, in Jesus you have one who has experienced those very things and to a much greater degree than we ever could.

He was rejected. The man who did no wrong. The man declared innocent by numerous trials and different people and yet the roar of hatred and rejection surrounds him during these last few hours of his life.

It's incredible to think that this could happen to someone who has never sinned. That this could happen to the Son of God. But Pilate, he tries one last time in verse 22.

He tries one last time to try and reason with this crowd. And he says, why? Why do you want to do this to him? What evil has he done? Name me one thing that this man has done.

But there's no reasoning with this kind of hatred. There's no reasoning at all. They don't try and answer this question. They don't try and come up with another accusation.

[26 : 29] They just ignore the question. They don't answer Pilate at all. What do they do? They just up the decibel level. Their cries get louder. They start turning into urgent appeals.

They start turning into demands. They demand that this man be crucified. And verse 23 says there, they were urgent, demanding with loud cries that he should be crucified.

And in John 15 25, we read that they hated me without a cause. that's so true. There is no reasoning, no reasoning at all with this kind of hatred.

And that brings us to our third point, and our last point, the verdict of Pilate. Because Pilate, Pilate here, he gives up the fight. He's tried his hardest to try and reason with him, but here he gives up the fight.

He sees the anger and the hatred in this crowd boiling over into almost like a riot scene. And he sees this happening, and he doesn't want a riot.

[27 : 44] That's the last thing Pilate wants here. So he agrees to the crowd's demands, and he sentences this innocent man to death.

He sentences Jesus Christ to death on the cross. And Pilate, after this, we read in Matthew, that he took some water, and he washed his hands in front of the people to say, look, I am innocent of this man's blood.

This man's blood is not on my hands. It's on your hands. You are the ones that are demanding this. You are the ones that are shouting out for him to be crucified.

But the reality is, Pilate can say that all he likes, he is the one pronouncing the sentence. This is his decision. He doesn't have to. Hear or heed the demands of the crowd.

No, this is his decision. He gives the order. Let him be crucified. He can wash his hands all he likes. He can wash his hands all day long.

[28 : 51] But the blood of Jesus continues to stain his hands. The blood of the king of kings was on his hands.

And you know, even though Pilate here tries to wash his hands in a somewhat symbolic act, you know where the real symbolism is here.

It's in verse 25 there. He released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, for whom they asked, but he delivered Jesus over to their will.

Barabbas is let loose and Jesus is sent to be crucified. This is a remarkable picture, a remarkable picture for this crowd as they gather here and as they demand the crucifixion and as Pilate agrees to it, here they are, this crowd watching these things and they see before their very eyes a sermon, a picture sermon if you like, an illustration of substitutionary atonement.

They see the picture of the guilty walking free and the innocent man condemned to death.

[30 : 22] They see the one who deserved death walking and the man in whom there was no sin walking to his death.

It was a graphic illustration for them, a picture of the gospel message. I wonder even if this would have been a reminder to Jesus himself.

Are we talking even to Jesus as he hears the rejection resounding all over the place, the cries of rejection yet here he sees a reminder to him of the reality of his mission, that this is the whole purpose he is here.

The sinner walks free and the sinless goes towards his death. It reminds him of a substitutionary death.

He was the substitute for sinners and he still is. He still is the substitute for sinners. You see, this passage tonight, it's full of injustice.

[31 : 31] That's what I'm trying to convey to you, the utter injustice in this. It is full of injustice but there is no injustice with God. God is perfectly just.

Those who are guilty have to be punished. sinners cannot go free in the eyes of God otherwise he would cease to be just. I wonder, I used to think this when I was younger, I wonder if anyone else thinks this.

I used to think, why did God have to send Jesus? I mean, God can do everything. God can do anything. Why did he have to send his son to die?

Could he not just have forgiven sin? But he couldn't and this was the very reason why he was a just, a just God and he had to punish sin.

Sin had to be punished. And Pilate and the crowd might be happy enough with letting Barabbas free and the injustice of that but with God he has to punish sin.

[32 : 42] And friends that's the beauty of the gospel. that's the beauty of the gospel. You see in the gospel Jesus comes before you and he says to you you deserve the pains of hell.

But then he says to you let me take those pains for you. Let me be your substitute. Let me die for you.

Because friends if I don't take that punishment if I don't take the pains of hell for you then you must take them yourselves.

And that my friends is a solemn thought. We talk about the injustice of this trial and it is there's a lot of injustice in this trial. We talk about the evil of this crowd and there is a lot of evil in this crowd but this was God's plan.

This was God's will. That's interesting because you read there in verse 25 that Jesus was delivered over to the will of the crowd.

[33 : 52] So there's two wills at play here. The will of the crowd and the will of God. Here you have a picture of the will of sinful man and the will of God meeting in the same place.

But how vastly different they are. The will of man in their desire to put Jesus to death is born out of sin, out of evil, out of a desire to destroy this man, to destroy Jesus of Nazareth.

God's will is in a sense the same as the crowd, isn't it? God wills that his son die on the cross, but how different it is.

God's will is born out of a sense of love, a sense of compassion, a sense of this desire to save the lost, not a sense of a desire to destroy like we see in the crowd, but the very opposite, a desire to restore, to restore fallen man, and God's work of restoration was going to be through this substitutionary act, this substitutionary atonement, the death of the Lord Jesus Christ.

You see, Pilate and the crowd, they're not let off the hook here. You can't say, oh well, it's God's will, so we'll let them off the hook. No, we read here, it was their will.

[35 : 42] Oh yes, God's purposes is overriding it all, but it does not take away from man's responsibility. You cannot blame God for your unbelief.

This crowd cannot blame God for what they did. This was their will. Oh yes, it was God's will too. It is also there. You see, Jesus dies unjustly according to the ways of man, yet perfectly justly according to the ways of God.

You see, in the cross, you have the injustice of man and the justice of God powerfully colliding. A picture of the ultimate injustice and yet a picture of the ultimate justice.

It is quite a remarkable picture. Well, friends, who do we stand with tonight? As we think about Pilate, examining Jesus, as we think about Pilate, hearing the voices, the cries of this crowd, what is our verdict?

You will all have to come to a verdict on this man. What is your verdict? Do you hear the silence of Jesus here in this trial?

[37 : 06] Or do you hear the cries of the crowd? And how loud these cries are in the culture that we now live in.

Cries from the world, these cries of militant atheism that we are up against, these cries that are sweeping their way through our nation, cries that tell us, Jesus, what on earth can he do for you? He is nothing but a pathetic man. Cries that tell us, God is dead. These cries of the world that we are up against, and they are contrasted, if you like, in this passage, to the silence of Jesus. Jesus says nothing during the dialogue. He said all that he has to say. He spent three years teaching and bearing witness to himself and his father, and now the time for that part of his ministry is over in that sense.

He is led as a lamb before its shearer. He is silent. He does not open his mouth to them. Friends, as we hear the cries of the crowd, as we hear the cries of the world against us, do we feel like we want Jesus to say something?

[38 : 29] Oh, Jesus, will you not defend yourself against these cries? Friends, he has spoken, and he has said all that he needs to say, and we have it here, in his word.

We have it here, in the word of God. we read that the voices of the crowd prevailed with respect to Pilate.

Oh, I pray that the words, that the voices of the crowd would not prevail in your hearts. I pray that you would listen rather to the word of God and that offer of salvation that he gives to you.

That is why he went through all these things, to offer us salvation. Before you leave the building tonight, you will come to your verdict, you will come to your decision, will you put your trust in this man?

Will you put your trust in Jesus Christ, the sinless lamb of God? or will you side with the crowd in their cries of rejection?

[39 : 55] Our friends, I pray, I plead with you, put your trust in him. Amen. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we give you thanks for salvation.

We thank you, O God, that you did not leave us in our sin. We thank you, O God, that you did not send us straight to hell as we all deserve, as those who break your law.

We thank you that you sent your son into this world. And as we see how he was treated at the hands of that crowd, God, or may it be the case that nobody in here would treat him as such, but that we would all come looking to Jesus and call him our Savior.

May that be the testimony of every single one of us here tonight. Cleanse us now from all our sin. And may all be to your glory.

For Jesus' sake. Amen. Amen.