

**Luke 23:1-12**  
**Jesus Before Pilate**

One of the great achievements of modern western jurisprudence is the jury trial. In ages past, the king or perhaps a local noble sat in judgment over the accused, or even worse, the accused might be subjected to a trial by ordeal. In the latter case, a person might have to carry a piece of hot iron a certain distance, and their guilt or innocence would be determined by how quickly their hand healed from the resulting burn. Or they might have their hands and feet bound and be thrown into a body of water. If they floated, they were considered guilty; if they sank they were deemed innocent. However, beginning with Article 39 of the Magna Carta, signed by the English King John in 1215, it was made common law that “no freeman shall be arrested or imprisoned . . . except according to the lawful sentence of his peers.”

Such a privilege obviously did not exist in the time of Jesus. Though the trial by ordeal had passed into history, the law was still regulated by kings and local rulers. As Luke continues his narrative, two such rulers make their appearance. Pilate was the local Roman procurator, and Herod served as the Roman-approved Jewish king. Each of these men had their respective spheres of authority, and each had the same basic motivation - to keep the peace and thereby keep their position.

But while both Pilate and Herod believed they held authority in the matter concerning this allegedly rebellious rabbi, it is important for us to remember that neither had any more power over Jesus than God granted them. Pilate might say to Jesus, “do You not know that I have authority to release You, and I have authority to crucify You?” (John 19:10). But the truth was, as Jesus replied, “you would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given you from above” (John 19:11).

Also, we must remember that every act of the night before and of the day to come had been ordained by God. And the role of Biblical prophecy cannot be ignored. One example will suffice. The Sanhedrin wanted to maintain their veneer of justice by having Jesus executed by the Roman government rather than by the violence of the mob (as Stephen would be). In fact, though, Jesus was executed by Roman law because Biblical prophecy required that He be crucified,

“For dogs have surrounded me;  
A band of evildoers has encompassed me;  
They pierced my hands and my feet” (Psalm 22:16).

“<sup>18</sup>Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem; and the Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn Him to death, <sup>19</sup>and will hand Him over to the Gentiles to mock and scourge and crucify Him, and on the third day He will be raised up”  
(Matthew 20:18-19).

Events unfolded as God had ordained and in alignment with Biblical prophecy. Those who believed they held power were merely fulfilling God’s perfect plan. They were, nevertheless, still responsible for their actions. But it was God’s plan, not theirs, that would unfold.

### **The Accusation of the Sanhedrin**

The Sanhedrin wanted to act in unanimity. Therefore, after their midnight trial of Jesus, “the whole body of them got up and brought Him before Pilate” (v. 1). Their hope was that Pilate would recognize that the entire body of Jewish leaders could not be mistaken and enforce their judgment immediately. As Roman procurator, it was customary for Pilate to spend Passover in Jerusalem. It was considered a proactive strategy in case trouble should occur. Knowing this, the Sanhedrin took Jesus to Pilate’s temporary headquarters at Herod’s palace, the praetorium. Having not celebrated Passover themselves yet, “they themselves did not enter into the Praetorium so that they would not be defiled, but might eat the Passover” (John 18:28).

Pilate was the fifth procurator of Judea and Samaria. There is little in the historical record about Pilate, but we have the writings of Philo of Alexandria (20 BC- 50 AD) a Jewish philosopher. He quoted a letter from the Jewish king Herod Agrippa I to the emperor Caligula which described Pilate as “inflexible, merciless, and obstinate.” Pilate clearly had no love for the Jews he governed. He had used the temple treasury to pay for additions to the local aqueduct, and when he took command of Judea as Roman governor in 26 AD, he marched his army into Jerusalem carrying banners which bore images that the Jews considered idolatrous. He later threatened to execute those who protested, though he backed down from this when he realized it was likely to arouse more negative attention than he wanted from the Roman authorities.

And there is the instance of Pilate’s cruelty recorded by Luke earlier in his narrative, when some people reported to Jesus “about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices” (Luke 13:1). All we know of what is reported is that some people from Galilee had made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and were offering their sacrifices when they were killed. Some have argued from outside sources that the atrocity occurred during the Feast of Dedication, though others suggest it was during Passover. Perhaps the men from Galilee were zealots who had pushed Pilate to far. Galilee was rife with political zealots among the Jews. It is clear that the event took place on the temple grounds, since that was the only place at which sacrifices could be offered.

Pilate would eventually lose his place when he opposed a group of Samaritans who sought to climb Mount Gerizim to find sacred relics allegedly left behind by Moses. The ensuing complaints to Rome resulted in Pilate's being forced to return to Rome to explain himself, and he died (some say by his own hand) along the way.

So this was the man to whom the Sanhedrin brought Jesus. There was no hope of anything that we might recognize as a fair trial. Neither Jesus’ accusers nor his judge had any interest in that. Luke offers us only a brief synopsis of the encounter, but John’s gospel gives us more detail. Pilate confronted his visitors with the simple question “what accusation do you bring against this Man?” (John 18:29). Apparently expecting Pilate to simply take their word for the guilt of their prisoner and grant summary judgment, some leader of the Sanhedrin insolently responded “if this Man were not an evildoer, we would not have delivered Him to you” (John 18:30). Pilate was not amused and, no doubt turning his back, said “take Him yourselves, and judge Him according to your law” (John 18:31).

Pilate must have been well aware of who Jesus was. Surely he had heard of the triumphal entry, no sensible Roman procurator could have been ignorant of such an event during Passover. Perhaps, he had even been advised as to some details about this rabbi now before him. But to Pilate, the cleansing of the temple and reports of heretical teachings were all matters exclusive to the Jews. They did not touch Roman political authority, and he saw no reason to get involved.

The Sanhedrin, however, knew they were “not permitted to put anyone to death” (John 18:31). And since they wanted Jesus killed, and killed by Rome, Pilate’s permission was required. Therefore they came up with accusations that they knew would gain Pilate’s interest. They claimed Jesus had been “misleading our nation and forbidding to pay taxes to Caesar, and saying that He Himself is Christ, a King” (v. 2). Notice that the Sanhedrin did not bring before Pilate the charge of blasphemy. Though that had been their chief concern a few hours before, they knew it would be of no interest to a Roman procurator. Also, the first charge, that of misleading the nation, must be seen in the context of the other two charges. That is, Jesus had misled the nation by telling them not to pay taxes and by claiming to be the rightful king.

These latter two accusations were significant enough to prompt a response from Pilate. The first was, of course a lie. In fact, Jesus had specifically told the people to pay their rightful taxes, “render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Luke 20:25). The second was more problematic. If Jesus did claim to be a king, and challenged the Roman-endorsed kingship of Herod, Pilate might be compelled to intervene. Therefore, Pilate focused on the ‘king’ question.

### **Interrogation and Exoneration by Pilate**

Again, John’s account gives us more detail. Pilate went back inside the praetorium and demanded Jesus be brought before him for a private interview. In other words, there is no reason to think Jesus had been present when the Sanhedrin confronted Pilate outside the praetorium. Pilate’s question was straightforward, “are You the King of the Jews?” (v. 3). Pilate’s words could be seen as mocking the idea, as if he were saying “so *you* are king for the Jews.”

Not having been present when the Sanhedrin made their case, Jesus responded “are you saying this on your own initiative, or did others tell you about Me?” (John 18:34). In other words, Jesus wanted to know if Pilate was concerned that He might be a potential threat to Roman rule by being a king in the earthly, political sense of the word. If that was what Pilate was getting at, then Jesus could answer no, that was not what He was. However, if Pilate’s question had to do with spiritual matters, then the answer would be different.

Pilate’s response showed that he was merely repeating the words of the Sanhedrin. “Your own nation and the chief priests delivered You to me; what have You done?” (John 18:35). Jesus tried to explain, “My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm.” (John 18:36). In other words, Pilate had nothing to fear in terms of a political rebellion from this rabbi. Jesus wanted that made clear.

No doubt surprised, Pilate again asked “so You are a king?” and Jesus again confirmed the accuracy of the statement “you say correctly that I am a king” (John 18:37). Luke summarized this entire interview with Jesus’ response, “it is as you say” (v. 3). After concluding their conversation with some cynical remarks about the nature of truth, Pilate stepped out onto the porch of the praetorium and addressed the crowds. The statement he made should have ended the matter when he simply “said to the chief priests and the crowds, ‘I find no guilt in this man’” (v. 4). His official judgment was that this rabbi posed no threat to Rome and had violated no Roman law.

### **An Attempt at Intimidation**

That was not what the Sanhedrin had wanted to hear. They were not interested in justice but in condemnation. Pilate must have been frustrated, trying to think of a way to satisfy these Jewish leaders without causing trouble for himself. If he simply refused to condemn Jesus, who knew where their frustrations might take them and if the resulting disturbance of the peace would bring the attention of Rome. If he gave in, he was setting himself up as a ruler with no authority over the people he governed. He would merely be a puppet for the wishes of the local Jews he despised.

The leaders of the Sanhedrin were not going to make it easy on Pilate. They “kept on insisting, saying, ‘He stirs up the people, teaching all over Judea, starting from Galilee even as far as this place’” (v. 5). Pilate must have rejoiced when he heard this statement. It offered him a way out of his predicament. Pilate “asked whether the man was a Galilean” (v. 6). When the Jewish leaders confirmed that this rabbi was indeed from Galilee, Pilate knew “that He belonged to Herod’s jurisdiction” (v. 7). Since his offenses had begun there, and since Roman law permitted a person to be tried where his crimes had been committed, Pilate saw his way out of his troubles. He “sent Him to Herod, who himself also was in Jerusalem at that time” (v. 7). To save himself the trouble of deciding the fate of Jesus, Pilate referred the case to the tetrarch Herod Antipas.

### **Seeking a Second Opinion**

Galilee was notorious as a hotbed of insurrection. It was the home of many of the zealots and, at first, this referral to Herod must have seemed like a boon for the accusers. If Pilate was reluctant to condemn Jesus, surely Herod Antipas would have no scruples in doing so.

Herod Antipas was one of the three sons of Herod the Great who inherited portions of his kingdom when he died in about 4 BC. Herod Antipas ruled the areas of Galilee and Perea from 4 BC to 39 AD. He hated, and was hated by, the Pharisees, in no small part because he had built his capital city (Tiberius) on the site of a Jewish cemetery. Educated in Rome, Herod orchestrated the building of many cities in the regions he governed, Sepphoris and Tiberius being the two largest. Ironically, since Sepphoris was located only a few miles from Nazareth, it is interesting to speculate if Joseph, Mary’s husband, was employed as a carpenter during its construction.

Herod married the daughter of a neighboring ruler, as a practical measure to unify the area. However, during a visit to his half-brother Herod Philip, Herod became attracted to his wife, Herodias, and began an affair with her. She was not only the wife of another, but his own niece as well. She agreed to leave her husband, and after Herod dissolved his marriage with his own wife, the two of them took up together. It

was for this act that John the Baptist rebuked Herod. In return, Herod imprisoned John and later had him beheaded at the request of his step-daughter.

Herod had heard of Jesus. Early in His ministry, after Jesus had sent out the twelve, the news of their work reached the king's ears.

“<sup>7</sup>Herod the tetrarch heard of all that was happening; and he was greatly perplexed, because it was said by some that John had risen from the dead, <sup>8</sup>and by some that Elijah had appeared, and by others that one of the prophets of old had risen again. <sup>9</sup>Herod said, ‘I myself had John beheaded; but who is this man about whom I hear such things?’ And he kept trying to see Him”  
(Luke 9:7-9).

They did not meet. Later, rumor had spread to Jesus that Herod wanted His life. One day, as Jesus was teaching some “Pharisees approached, saying to Him, ‘go away, leave here, for Herod wants to kill You” (Luke 13:31). We are not told why Herod wanted Jesus killed. Perhaps Herod was concerned about the increasing significance of this potential rival (though Jesus never presented Himself as such, we must remember that the people wanted Him to become king). Maybe Herod was concerned about the relationship between Jesus and John the Baptist. He may have been concerned that Jesus might avenge the death of His friend. More practically, Herod Antipas may just have been eager to get rid of a potential troublemaker before the attention of Rome was drawn to the region. Since Jesus had refused to meet with Herod Antipas, it is likely that whatever tension there was had been increasing for some time.

Finally, the two met. Interestingly, Luke reports that “Herod was very glad when he saw Jesus” (v. 8). This was not because of any genuine interest, however, but rather because, “he had wanted to see Him for a long time, because he had been hearing about Him and was hoping to see some sign performed by Him” (v. 8). In other words, Herod wanted entertainment; perhaps even to witness a miracle.

Herod “questioned Him at some length” (v. 9). But Jesus gave him no satisfaction. Despite the questioning and assertiveness Herod surely tried to demonstrate, Jesus “answered him nothing” (v. 9). Jesus offered no defense; Herod had been given his chances. This, too, was a fulfillment of prophecy,

“He was oppressed and He was afflicted,  
Yet He did not open His mouth;  
Like a lamb that is led to slaughter,  
And like a sheep that is silent before its shearers,  
So He did not open His mouth” (Isaiah 53:7).

Jesus must not have looked very threatening. Remember that He had been up all night, and had been beaten during His encounter with the Sanhedrin. He could not have looked much like a king. He had been arrested in a group of only a dozen men who were relatively unarmed and easily frightened away. Herod could not have been very impressed. “And the chief priests and the scribes were standing there, accusing Him vehemently” (v. 10). Even this rabbi's own people did not support Him. Surely this man was no threat to Rome.

In frustration, “Herod with his soldiers, after treating Him with contempt and mocking Him, dressed Him in a gorgeous robe and sent Him back to Pilate” (v. 11). Herod would not be bothered with this rabbi. He posed no threat, and Jesus refused to entertain him. Jesus was simply not worth the trouble.

Interestingly, Luke comments that “Herod and Pilate became friends with one another that very day; for before they had been enemies with each other” (v. 12). The two had had their issues. One we have already noted, the slaughter of Galileans (Herod’s subjects) during a feast (Luke 13:1). The other was when Herod had appealed to Caesar to compel Pilate to remove some Roman shields from the palace. Whatever their petty bickering in the past, the two men united on their disdain for this troublesome rabbi. Neither was willing to truly listen, neither was willing to be converted. They both saw Jesus as an inconvenience.

### **Takeaways**

What can we take away from a passage such as this. We can admire Jesus’ commitment to finish the road set before Him. We can applaud His perseverance and humility. We can marvel at His love for us.

But another perspective is to recognize the role of Satan in this. Speaking with Pharisees, Jesus said, “You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44). Lying is Satan’s oldest strategy, and specifically stirring up lies against the children of God is something Satan has done throughout the years. David complained,

“Malicious witnesses rise up;  
They ask me of things that I do not know” (Psalm 35:11).

Ahab accused Elijah, “is this you, you troubler of Israel?” (1 Kings 18:17).

And King Zedekiah's advisors disparaged Jeremiah by saying, “now let this man be put to death, inasmuch as he is discouraging the men of war who are left in this city and all the people, by speaking such words to them; for this man is not seeking the well-being of this people but rather their harm” (Jeremiah 38:4).

We should not be surprised if this continues against us today. When we take a stand for Christ, we must not be surprised if those opposed to the kingdom of God rise up with lies against us. Let us pray for grace to honor God with our response when it happens.