

Luke 23:13-25

The Final Verdict

We have arrived at the final stages of Jesus' trial. It had been a long and exhausting night. After enjoying a heartfelt dinner with His disciples, Jesus had gone out with them to pray. In the garden of Gethsemane He was disappointed by His sleeping disciples and betrayed by Judas. After His arrest, Jesus was taken to the home of the high priest, Caiaphas, where He was questioned first by the former high priest Annas. After an hour or so, Jesus was questioned by Caiaphas and members of the Sanhedrin. In the early hours of Friday morning, the Sanhedrin adjourned, and Jesus was held as prisoner until morning. Though they were not abiding by their own rules, the Jewish leaders wanted to maintain at least the pretense of justice, and refused to pass an official verdict on Jesus until morning when the Sanhedrin was permitted to meet legally. With the sunrise, the Sanhedrin met again and passed summary judgment on Jesus.

Then the members of the Sanhedrin made their way to the praetorium, where Pilate was living during the Passover. There they demanded that Pilate respect their wishes and execute this rebellious rabbi. They presented their case, accusing Jesus of undermining the authority of Rome by encouraging His followers to not pay the taxes Rome demanded. They also claimed that Jesus was undermining the authority of the Roman-backed king, Herod Antipas, by claiming to be a king in His own right.

Pilate questioned Jesus privately and, after some time, came to the conclusion that Jesus was neither a menace to Rome nor a threat to Herod. But the Jewish leaders demanded that Jesus be executed. Sensing that he was losing control of the situation, Pilate took advantage of a loophole in Roman law that allowed a person to be tried in the area where their crimes had been committed. Since Jesus began His ministry in Galilee, and since Galilee was under the jurisdiction of Herod Antipas, Pilate remanded the situation to him for judgment. Whatever Herod decided would suit Pilate fine.

Herod had longed wanted to meet Jesus. He had heard of His ministry and was both intrigued by, and concerned about, Him. When Jesus refused to meet with him, Herod tried to have Him killed. That plan not having come to fruition, Herod relished the opportunity to question this rabbi in the confines of his palace. There he hoped to see Jesus perform some miracle demonstrating His power. When Jesus again refused to oblige, Herod, sensing that this weary and beaten rabbi was no rival, simply sent Him back to Pilate.

Pilate's Sentence

We saw last week that Pilate was "inflexible, merciless, and obstinate" or at least that was how he was described by contemporaries. His question to Jesus "what is truth?" (John 18:38) leads us to believe he was arrogant and cynical as well. Having worked his way up the Roman bureaucracy to the point of being governor of Judea, Pilate possessed a knowledge of political and military affairs and an intuitive understanding that Rome wanted peace and taxes from the provinces under its control.

The morning had been busy. From the Sanhedrin's meeting just after sunrise, the original petition to Pilate, then Jesus being sent to Herod, and then back to Pilate, all took place within an hour or so. For

when Jesus brought before Pilate this second time “it was about the sixth hour” (John 19:14). The rush reminds again how even the Roman and Jewish sense of due process of law was not honored in the trial.

Pilate understood that Jesus was no threat to Rome or to Herod. The motives of the Jewish leaders were clear. Pilate “knew that because of envy they had handed Him over” (Matthew 27:18). So after, hearing that Jesus had been returned by Herod, “Pilate summoned the chief priests and the rulers and the people” (v.13). His hopes of avoiding either giving in to the religious leaders and losing his authority among them or refusing their request and running the risk of rioting were gone. He would have to choose between one or the other.

Pilate had created this situation for himself. He had placed himself under this pressure from the Jewish people he ruled because of his previous treatment of them. Several relatively minor incidents had demonstrated his lack of concern for his subjects, such as when he used money from the temple treasury to build aqueducts into that city or when he had ordered the massacre of several (perhaps rebellious) Galileans when they made their sacrifices in the temple.

More troubling, when he had first taken office, he had brought emblems into the temple bearing the image of Caesar. When the Jews protested this idolatrous breach of their sacred place, Pilate at first refused to meet with them. When they persisted, Pilate agreed to meet, but at the meeting called in his soldiers and threatened to have them all killed if they continued to protest. When the Jewish leaders expressed their willingness to die rather than agree to allow the emblems to remain, Pilate backed down. He recognized that news of such a slaughter would be unwelcome in Rome and quite likely provoke a riot in Jerusalem.

A second incident also involved pagan symbols. Pilate had shields engraved with the image of Tiberius Caesar hung in the praetorium in Jerusalem. They were inscribed with a reference to Tiberius’ divinity, and this was what offended the Jews. When they protested to Tiberius, he ordered Pilate to have the offensive shields removed and taken to the Gentile city of Caesarea. It is clear, then that these incidents, and others, had placed Pilate in a dangerous position relative to the Jews he ruled. He knew that they would appeal to Rome if he did not do as they wished, and he knew that Rome would listen.

Pilate tried to calm the situation by appealing to the Jewish sense of justice. “You brought this man to me as one who incites the people to rebellion, and behold, having examined Him before you, I have found no guilt in this man regarding the charges which you make against Him” (v. 14). In fact, Pilate continued, “nor has Herod, for he sent Him back to us; and behold, nothing deserving death has been done by Him” (v. 15). It is striking that even the Roman government that executed Jesus could find no guilt in Him. What a testimony to the blameless life He led. What a confirmation of 1 Peter 1:19, that Jesus was “a lamb unblemished and spotless.”

Sensing that the crowd was not satisfied Pilate, no doubt hoping to mitigate the situation, continued “therefore I will punish Him and release Him” (v. 16). Though Pilate admitted that he could find no fault in his prisoner, and further acknowledging that the local Jewish king concurred in his innocence, Pilate nevertheless agreed to torture his prisoner simply to please the bloodthirsty crowd before him. His was motivated only by political expediency.

Pilate's Substitute

Pilate had tried to dismiss the case himself. When that had not worked, he sent Jesus to Herod, trying to free himself from involvement. When that, too, failed, he had tried to simply have Jesus punished and then released. But now the crowds indicated that even that was insufficient. Finally, Pilate had another idea. It occurred to him that he “was obliged to release to them at the feast one prisoner” (v. 17). Though this verse is not found in the earliest manuscripts of Luke’s gospel, it is attested to in the narratives of both Matthew and Mark, and therefore we can assume its reliability. Such an act was Rome’s way of trying to placate the people they ruled and, perhaps, make up for the oversights and lack of judgment of their less popular rulers like Pilate.

Pilate must have been well aware of Jesus’ popularity with the masses. He had heard of His triumphal entry. He recognized that some, at least, wanted Him to be a king. Perhaps he could kill two birds with one stone. By releasing Jesus, he could fulfill his obligations to the Jews at Passover and eliminate the predicament he found himself in regarding the Jewish leaders. In effect, he would appeal to the crowds instead of to their leaders and release Jesus without losing face.

Mark’s gospel adds detail that Luke omits.

“⁶Now at the feast he used to release for them any one prisoner whom they requested. ⁷The man named Barabbas had been imprisoned with the insurrectionists who had committed murder in the insurrection. ⁸The crowd went up and began asking him to do as he had been accustomed to do for them. ⁹Pilate answered them, saying, ‘do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?’ ¹⁰For he was aware that the chief priests had handed Him over because of envy. ¹¹But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to ask him to release Barabbas for them instead”
(Mark 15:6-11).

The prospect of releasing Barabbas must not have been particularly appealing to Pilate. After all, “he was one who had been thrown into prison for an insurrection made in the city, and for murder” (v. 19). Rather than releasing an innocuous rabbi, now Pilate was being compelled to set free someone who actually was interested in fomenting rebellion against Rome. Barabbas was, no doubt, scheduled for crucifixion, and putting him back on the streets was not something Pilate could have relished.

While this negotiation was taking place, Pilate’s superstitious wife “sent him a message, saying, ‘have nothing to do with that righteous Man; for last night I suffered greatly in a dream because of Him’” (Matthew 27:19). Her superstitious fears encouraged her to warn her husband, in case he participated in the death of this man and the gods turned against him.

While Pilate was dealing with this interruption, the Jewish leaders worked their way among the crowd inciting and manipulating them. Many had begun to gather in the early morning as word spread of the events taking place at the palace. As dozens, and then hundreds, gathered the Jewish leaders moved among them. The adulation with which many of these same people had welcomed Jesus just a few days before, the rapt attention with which they had listened to Him teach in the temple, the nods of approval they gave when He confounded the Jewish leaders, were all dissolved in the passions of the moment.

Perhaps the Jewish leaders used the argument that this was really a matter of the will of Pilate or the will of the Jewish people. Perhaps they intimated that what was at stake was their own distinctive sense of rule and law. Perhaps they insisted that this was ultimately a matter of Roman authority or Jewish sovereignty. In any case, the Jewish leaders persuaded the people to ask not for Jesus, but for Barabbas, to be released.

Pilate's Surrender

Pilate was now in the awful position of having to execute an innocent man and release a guilty one. But it seemed there was nothing else to be done. Unwilling to give in just yet, and “wanting to release Jesus, [Pilate] addressed them again” (v. 20). We need to recognize that Pilate’s desire to release Jesus was now no longer motivated by either a belief in His innocence, nor in his wife’s superstitious dreams. He simply did not want to release Barabbas.

His appeals went unheeded. The crowd still did not want Jesus released. Frustrated, Pilate shouted to the crowd “then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?” (Matthew 27:22). Mark adds that Pilate mockingly added, “Him whom you call the King of the Jews?” (Mark 15:12). The cry came back loud and clear, “they kept on calling out, saying, “Crucify, crucify Him!” (v. 21).

Pilate tried to persuade them one last time. “He said to them the third time, ‘why, what evil has this man done? I have found in Him no guilt demanding death; therefore I will punish Him and release Him’” (v. 22). He appealed to their sense of justice. But they had none. He offered a punishment short of death. But they would not be satisfied. The intensity of the crowd was increasing. Ever greater numbers of people were arriving, interested to see what the disturbance was about. Pilate had to be concerned that things were getting out of hand.

All Pilate’s efforts were to no avail. “They were insistent, with loud voices asking that He be crucified. And their voices began to prevail” (v. 23). The word Luke used for ‘insistent’ is the same word he used when describing the crowds pressing in on Jesus around the Sea of Galilee, “now it happened that while the crowd was pressing around Him and listening to the word of God” (Luke 5:1). The mob, for that is what the crowd had by now become, was oppressive.

As Matthew informs us, “Pilate saw that he was accomplishing nothing, but rather that a riot was starting” (Matthew 27:24). He had to choose between protecting himself or protecting Jesus, and the choice was simple. In an act that has become a symbol of appeasement, Pilate “took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd, saying, ‘I am innocent of this Man’s blood’” (Matthew 27:24). The Jews must have recognized the irony (or was it mockery) that Pilate used a Jewish law to demonstrate his innocence in the matter.

“¹If a slain person is found lying in the open country in the land which the Lord your God gives you to possess, and it is not known who has struck him, ²then your elders and your judges shall go out and measure the distance to the cities which are around the slain one. ³It shall be that the city which is nearest to the slain man, that is, the elders of that city, shall take a heifer of the herd, which has not been worked and which has not pulled in a yoke; ⁴and the elders of that city shall bring the heifer down to a valley with running water, which has not been plowed or sown, and

shall break the heifer's neck there in the valley. ⁵Then the priests, the sons of Levi, shall come near, for the Lord your God has chosen them to serve Him and to bless in the name of the Lord; and every dispute and every assault shall be settled by them. ⁶All the elders of that city which is nearest to the slain man shall wash their hands over the heifer whose neck was broken in the valley; ⁷and they shall answer and say, 'Our hands did not shed this blood, nor did our eyes see it. ⁸Forgive Your people Israel whom You have redeemed, O Lord, and do not place the guilt of innocent blood in the midst of Your people Israel.' And the bloodguiltiness shall be forgiven them. ⁹So you shall remove the guilt of innocent blood from your midst, when you do what is right in the eyes of the Lord." (Deuteronomy 21:9).

But whether they understood the symbolism or not, the crowd assumed full responsibility. "His blood shall be on us and on our children!" (Matthew 27:25). By their own words they appropriated to themselves responsibility for the death of the Messiah, a fact that they were soon to be reminded of by Peter,

²²Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know - ²³this Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death" (Acts 2:22-23).

Pilate gave in. He "pronounced sentence that their demand be granted" (v. 24). Remembering his commitment to pardon one of the criminals who had been condemned to death, "he released the man they were asking for who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, but he delivered Jesus to their will" (v. 25). In frustration, he did so only "after having Jesus scourged" (Matthew 27:26). Pilate was going to exact his own pound of flesh for the troubles this rabbi had caused him.

John's gospel elaborates in detail these early morning hours.

¹Pilate then took Jesus and scourged Him. ²And the soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on His head, and put a purple robe on Him; ³and they began to come up to Him and say, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' and to give Him slaps in the face" (John 19:1-3).

To scourge a person was often, in itself, a punishment so severe as to cause death. The crown of thorns and robe were symbols of mockery. Jesus was being spared no humiliation. Matthew adds that Jesus was given a reed to hold, as if it were a royal scepter. The Romans soldiers bowed and knelt before Him as if to role play before this "king of the Jews." They slapped Him and beat Him, adding to the wounds Jesus had received the night before.

Having enjoyed their sport, Pilate had Jesus brought ought to the crowd. "Behold, the Man!" (John 19:5) he shouted. "The chief priests and the officers saw Him, they cried out saying, 'crucify, crucify!'" (John 19:6). They justified their behavior by stating that "we have a law, and by that law He ought to die because He made Himself out to be the Son of God" (John 19:7).

It was the job of Pilate to uphold local laws, and so he gave in to the Jewish leaders. He tried to compel Jesus to offer some defense, but Jesus would have none of that. Remaining silent before Pilate, Jesus humbly received the physical punishment. Desperately Pilate told Jesus, “You do not speak to me? Do You not know that I have authority to release You, and I have authority to crucify You?” (John 19:10). At last breaking His silence, Jesus responded with words that must have chilled Pilate. “You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given you from above; for this reason he who delivered Me to you has the greater sin” (John 19:11).

Unhappy with the delay, and perhaps fearing Pilate might yet come up with some way to avoid handing Jesus over to be crucified, the Jewish leaders played their final card. The riotous crowd shouted, “if you release this Man, you are no friend of Caesar; everyone who makes himself out to be a king opposes Caesar” (John 19:13). That was enough. Pilate could not afford to hold out any longer. He could not risk being branded as an enemy of Caesar. And with the words “behold your king” (John 19:14) Pilate handed Jesus over to be crucified.

Takeaways

It is interesting that the first person to be redeemed by the death of Jesus was a most unsavory character. Barabbas was a murderer and leader of rebellion against his lawful government. He was sentenced to die for his crimes. He had been duly convicted. He was in every sense of the word, guilty and worthy of death. Yet, he was redeemed, physically at least, because Jesus took his place on the cross. How can we miss the lesson for ourselves!

We must keep before us the truth that this entire series of events was orchestrated by God because He loves us. He has nothing to gain from the transaction. He has no need for our worship or our praise. He was perfect and complete before He created us, and His perfections were not diminished by our sinful rebellion. The only motivation God has for undergoing the pain and humiliation of the cross is His love. That is something to reflect on.