

Pilate Before Jesus, Pt 1 – John 18:28-38

Main Idea: Every time you read Scripture you stand before Christ!

I. The Accusation | John 18:28-32

The end of John 18 describes the Jewish leaders taking Jesus to Pilate's residence in Jerusalem. Earlier that morning, a series of Jewish trials had taken place in which Jesus was falsely accused of various crimes. Annas (high priest emeritus) had examined Jesus first, then Caiaphas (current high priest), along with the Sanhedrin, decided that Jesus was guilty of blasphemy for making Himself equal to God (Matthew 26:59-68). In all His trials, Jesus admitted that He was the Son of God (Mark 14:61-63). It was now time to execute Jesus. The problem was that the execution of the death penalty lied in the hands of the Romans. The right to execute the death penalty had been removed from the Jews around 6 A.D. when Judea became a Roman province. With a verdict in the hands of the Jewish leaders, Jesus was now brought to the Roman governor of Judea to be tried and executed. The Gospels tell us little about Pontius Pilate other than his role in Jesus' trial. Still, other extra-biblical references to Pilate can help us understand him better. The Jewish historian Josephus refers to Pilate in his two major works, *The Jewish War* and *The Antiquities of the Jews*, as a man who was both morally weak and cruelly brutal. Appointed by Tiberius Caesar in 26 A.D., **Pilate's tactless policies often spurred public outrage and revolt, which he then savagely suppressed.** How fitting was Pilate then to represent the kingdom of this world as it encountered the kingdom of God in the person of Jesus Christ. **John's portrayal of Jesus' trial before Pilate is designed to bring the personalities of both into sharp contrast.** John sees the judicial aspect of the occasion as less prominent than the characters of both Pilate and Christ. **According to John, the trial at hand describes Pontius Pilate standing before Jesus, and not the other way around.**

The governor's headquarters was where Pilate stayed every time there were massive gatherings of Jewish pilgrims for their annual feasts. It was Passover Friday, and Jerusalem was filled with pilgrims from all over the Mediterranean. The Jews who brought Jesus to Pilate did not go into the governor's headquarters so that they would not be defiled and prevented from partaking in the Passover (v.28). The Passover feast lasted seven days, and in order to participate in the entire feast, the priests and the officials had to maintain complete ceremonial cleanliness from all forms of defilement (Ex. 13; Deut. 16). To enter a Gentile residence would have brought the Jews into ceremonial defilement, so they turned Jesus over to the governor's guard and stayed outside. **The religious leaders of Israel regarded ceremonial defilement as more serious than moral defilement. False religious systems make people focus their attention on traditions and rituals more than on the intentions of their hearts.** These men were scrupulous to avoid any ritual defilement even while carrying out the vilest act of human history. As they delivered Christ to be slaughtered, they first made sure their hands were ceremonially clean. But instead of looking disdainfully at the people who delivered Jesus to Pilate, we must see ourselves in that crowd because this is what fallen humanity is like. R.C. Sproul once said, "Religion without faith is a deadly thing."¹

As the Jews stayed outside, Pilate went to them with a question: "What accusation do you bring against this man?" (v.29). Note that this was the first legal step taken in all Jesus' trials. As a professional judge, Pilate asked the very question the Jews should have asked earlier. The Jews answered him arrogantly, saying, "If this man were not doing evil, we would not have delivered Him over to you" (v.30). Ultimately, the Jews were not seeking to give Pilate a charge against Jesus; they simply wanted him to accept their word that Jesus was a troublemaker deserving of death since they admitted that: "it was lawful for us to put anyone to death" (31). At last, Pilate could see their game wanting the death penalty imposed. However, what was about to happen to Jesus was neither the result of the Jewish trials nor of Pilate's decision but "to fulfill the word that Jesus had spoken to show by what kind of death He was going to die" (v.32; John 12:31-33; Mark 10:33-34). **The world would continue to play its game with Christ, but never have the final word.**

To Ponder:

1. What does the concern (from the Jews) of being ceremonially clean (while crucifying Christ) teach us as believers?
2. How does God respond to and view religious systems (Biblically)?

¹ R. C. Sproul, *John: An Expository Commentary* (Sanford, FL: Ligonier Ministries, 2009).

II. The Examination | John 18:33-36

With the Jews outside, now is the time for Pilate to ask Jesus questions. Without much ceremony, Pilate goes straight to the point: “Are you the king of the Jews?” (v.33). The question indicates that Jesus’ accusers had already given Pilate some specific charges against Christ. Clearly their case was political, not theological. Jesus was presented to Pilate as someone who called Himself “a king,” knowing how the Romans dealt with insurrectionists. The Jews were tactful to not present Jesus as someone who claimed to be God because they knew the Romans worshiped and even encouraged all in the Empire to worship a multitude of gods. **Pilate would have no problem with a man making himself equal to God. But an insurrectionist meant a political threat, and the Romans dealt with insurrectionists by killing them publicly!** The all-knowing Christ then replies to Pilate with a question, “Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?” (v.34). Suddenly, Pilate saw himself on trial before the Judge of heaven and earth. As a response, Pilate simply reiterated what had been said about Jesus by the Jews, “Your own nation and chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done?” (v.35). The only concern Pilate had was to keep Judea functioning in order (politically). Pilate was not concerned about the Jews, but he was certainly not expecting what Jesus was going to say next, “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not of this world” (v.36).

It is important to note that **by saying, “my kingdom is not of this world,” Jesus did not say that His dominion and authority did not include this world.** This is the same Jesus who affirmed, “All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth” (Matt. 28:18). What Jesus told Pilate was that His kingdom is nothing like Pilate’s (Rome). Jesus’ kingdom is not built on violence, corruption, lies, and wars (that is the way the world functions). Jesus was clearly telling Pilate that He had no intention of leading a rebellion against the Romans, no matter what the Jews might say. **Until Christ returns, the Kingdom of God is made real within the hearts of those who believe and follow Him.** The Kingdom of God is advanced by the Gospel, not by a specific form of man-made government. **Jesus was never a threat to the political system of the Romans—His mission was never political but spiritual!**

To Ponder:

1. Based on Jesus’ statement to Pilate, how do we distinguish the kingdom of this world from the kingdom of God?
2. What does it mean for Christ’s kingdom to be a spiritual reality (until His return)?
3. How does knowing that Christ’s kingdom is not political affect the way we live as citizens under the authority of a local government?

III. The Separation of Characters | John 18:37-38

Jesus never denied His credentials. The man Pilate examined was, in fact, a King, but not like the kind of king Pilate was used to. Jesus acknowledged His royal mission as a King who had come to bear witness to the truth, “For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth” (v.37). Exemplifying the dichotomy between both kingdoms, Pilate’s answer is full of irony and wondering: “What is truth?” (v.38). With his question, Pilate was by no means asking Jesus to teach him the truth because he did not even wait for Jesus’s reply. Pilate’s response was of someone who did not even consider the possibility of absolute truth (heavily influenced by Greek philosophy). In his cynicism, Pilate was like many people today, for ours is the age when truth is a wonder. We live in a society, like the Romans, where truth is whatever you want it to be, and that what you believe may be “true for you” but “not true for others.” In short, truth is not objective but subjective! Christ’s kingdom is not of this world because its values go directly against the values of this world. **In Christ’s kingdom, truth cannot be twisted or manipulated. According to its values, the world killed the only perfect human being ever to live.** Therefore, the only way to fully know truth is by means of revelation (John 8:31-32; 14:6; 17:17). There are new fashions of theology, religion, and even “christs” offered to us today. Looking at Pilate stand before Jesus urges us to remind ourselves that while there is no guilt in Christ (v.38b; 1 Pet. 2:22; 1 John 3:5), there is nothing but guilt in all who do not recognize Him as their King, Lord, and Savior!

To Ponder:

1. What is Truth?
2. Is there absolute truth, and if so, what claim does it have on my life?
3. How would you respond to someone that said, “that may be true for you, but not for me?”