

The Cross Through Roman Eyes

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Matthew 27:1-2, 11-26
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What will you do with Jesus who is called Christ? That is the ultimate question. Regardless of your age or occupation, your ethnicity, gender, or religion, each of you must answer the question, what will you do with Jesus who is called Christ? You cannot evade the question, avoid the question, ignore the question, or sidestep the question because the answer to this question determines your eternal future. What will you do with Jesus who is called Christ? The Messiah, The Holy One, Son of God, son of man, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, what will you do with Jesus who is called Christ? Today we'll meet the man who first asked that question some 2000 years ago. A man who was the most unwilling of actors in the most dreadful of dramas. A man who was caught in a collision of forces that he could neither control nor comprehend. A man asked to determine the fate of the Son of God.

The man's name was Pontius Pilate. And my aim in our time together is to enter into the heart and mind of Pilate. I want to appear as it were through Pilate's eyes and listen through Pilate's ears so that you can grasp his perspective on the events that led up to the cross of Jesus Christ. I want to understand how did Pilate come to answer the question, what will you do with Jesus who is called Christ? And you should know that as we walk through this text, each of you will be confronted with the same burning question, what will you do with Jesus who is called Christ?

Our story has three scenes. So we begin our journey into the mind of Pilate with *scene #1), The Conflict*. We'll pick it up in Matthew 27 verse one. "When morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people took counsel against Jesus to put him to death and they bound him and led him away and delivered him over to Pilate the governor." Well it's early Friday morning, five A.M. six A.M. Jesus has already been arrested. The disciples have already scattered. The religious leaders have already convened a trial and decided the fate of Jesus. He is to die and he is to die upon a cross. But there is a catch. Since Rome jealously guards what they call *ius gladii*, the right of the sword, the Jewish leaders needed Rome to sanction the assassination of Jesus. And so it is in verse 2 that they bind him as a common criminal and they lead him to meet Pilate, the governor.

And in verse 2, the curtains part and out steps onto the stage of history's grandest drama the man in whose hands lay the fate of Jesus Christ, at least from a human perspective, and this man's name is Pilate. Pontius Pilate, the sixth governor of Judea. He was Rome's official representative. He possessed full military and judicial powers. Pilate must have been something of an able administrator because he ruled for 10 years from 26 A.D. to 36 A.D. and yet Pilate's tenure as governor was punctuated by substantial turmoil occasioned by his own significant missteps. See,

ancient sources tell us that Pilate was a vicious and violent man. He was cruel and brutish. He despised the Jews and he made no attempt to understand their traditions or their beliefs. In fact, at the time of our text, Pilate's wholesale insensitivity to all things Jewish had placed his career in serious jeopardy.

It had strained his relationship with the Jews to the breaking point and there are three incidents in particular that you should know about so that you can understand the scene in which we find ourselves. When Pilate first assumed the governorship, on his first visit to Judea, he had the Roman legions march into Jerusalem. But what he did that no other had done is he had his legions carry poles affixed with the image of the emperor and the image of the empire, the eagle. Well to the Jews that was sacrilege. These images were nothing short of blasphemy. And so they were responded with protest. They protested for five days. They said, "Pilate, please remove the offending images." Pilate obstinately refused. In fact, a dramatic showdown occurred whereby Pilate threatened to massacre the whole group of delegates from the Jews and they called his bluff. They knelt to the ground, they bared their necks, and they said, "Execute us."

Pilate relented. He removed the images. But there was a second event not too long later. See, Pilate wanted to build an aqueduct to provide water for the Jerusalem city. So he raided the Temple Treasury to pay for it. Understandably, the Jews were incited and a large crowd formed and on Pilate's orders, his soldiers infiltrated the group disguised as civilians. And then on Pilate's order, they pulled out their clubs and their daggers and they began to beat the people to death. Mistake number two. Well Pilate's third incident involved yet another unnecessary offense. See, Pilate wanted to curry favor with the emperor Tiberius. So he placed shields in Herod's former palace in Jerusalem with the image of the emperor. Well as before, the Jews were upset. As before, they viewed this as blasphemy. As before, Pilate said, "I will not remove the shields."

Not as before, the Jews appealed directly to the emperor Tiberius himself. Tiberius was infuriated. He ordered Pilate, "Remove the shields. Preserve the peace." Well Pilate obeyed, but not without imperiling his relationship with the emperor. He was now on very thin ice with Tiberius, and this is the man and this is the situation in which we find ourselves in verse two. A man whose violent hatred of the Jews and whose significant political missteps had combined to create a scene crackling with tension and brimming with hostility. It was a scene ripe for conflict. This conflict began to boil in the pot known as Jerusalem. And our narrative picks up in verse 11. "Now Jesus stood before the governor and the governor asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" Well see, Matthew does not include this in his gospel account, but what Luke 23 tells us is, the Jewish leaders had leveled three allegations against Jesus, all of which were patently false.

He misleads our nation, he forbids us to pay taxes to Caesar, and third, he claims to be a king. Well it was the third charge which caught Pilate's ears. He claims to be a king. For Rome would tolerate no competition for its rule. So Pilate was duty bound to investigate this third claim, hence the question of verse 11, "Are you the king of the Jews?" That question is included in each of the gospel accounts and in each of the gospel accounts, the word you is emphatic. It says more

like this. "You? You're the king of the Jews?" This was ridiculous to Pilate you see. You could almost hear scorn dripping from his lips. "You, this pathetic figure standing in front of me, bound before me. Your face beaten and bloodied because you've been beaten by the Jewish leaders. You're a king?"

"Where's your kingdom? Where's your crown? Where's your army? Where are your supporters?" You see, Pilate thought this was absurd and indeed it seemed so because Pilate was a man familiar with power. Pilate knew majestic royal might. He had spent time in Rome. He had walked those hallowed halls. He had rubbed shoulders with Roman aristocrats. Pilate knew power and this man before him, he had no power. And if he was a king, why would the Jews have surrendered their ruler to me? Pilate knew the Jews had no love for the Romans. So the absurdity of the allegations brought by the Jewish leaders, absurdity was not lost on Pilate. This man was no king. And yet, Jesus' answer must have surprised him. Look what he said. "You have said so." Which simply means, "Oh, I am a king, but not in the way that you understand it, Pilate."

Though Pilate hears the answer, I don't think he comprehends the answer, but what he does know is, "This man before me, he's no threat to Rome." But what must have been so curious for Pilate is verse 12 how the religious leaders insistently proclaimed and demanded that this man must be punished because he is a violator of Rome. That phrase, "He was accused," indicates that they grew more and more vocal and emphatic and dramatic in their accusations, which would've made the end of verse 12 even more shocking. He, Jesus, gave no answer. Well see, that would've been shocking and indeed it was to Pilate, but it's not shocking to the biblical reader because Isaiah 53:7 foretold this moment. "And he was oppressed and he was afflicted", speaking of Jesus, of the Messiah to come. "Yet he opened not his mouth. Like a lamb that is led to slaughter and like a sheep that before it shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth."

You see what is happening here beyond Pilate's grasp is that Jesus is perfectly fulfilling his role in accordance with the father's will. If the lamb was not slaughtered, man could not be saved. But Pilate had not Isaiah 53 on his mind. What Pilate was turning over was the question of verse 13 and then he posed it to Jesus. "Do you not hear how many things they testify against you?" By the way, that phrase, 'How many things,' could also be translated, 'How great are the things?' Which points to the serious and the weighty nature of the accusations. What Pilate is saying is, "You're being accused of a capital offense. This is punishable by death. Why are you not answering?"

But Matthew goes to great lengths to emphasize the lack of response on Jesus's part. Look at verse 14. "But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge." Literally in the Greek it says, "He did not reply to him up to not even one word." Imagine Pilate in this moment. His mind was blown, he was stunned here. In fact, the text says at the end of verse 14, "He was greatly amazed," which is exceedingly, beyond comprehension, he was stunned. He was staggered by this supposed king's reticence. Why didn't he say something to these charges? I mean, Pilate just imagine. Pilate had been a governor for years. He had presided over hundreds of cases, seen

hundreds of accused, and in all of those cases, he had seen them passionately, emotionally, vigorously protest their innocence.

Yet today stands different because this man who is accused of being a king, he serenely, calmly, majestically absorbs the accusations of his enemies and utters not a single word of defense. What is going on? Pilate must have wondered. I suspect that in this moment in Pilate's chest there began to be a tightness as the reality dawned on him that no matter what the leaders say, this man is innocent, and yet that uncomfortable tightness would've also said, "I cannot afford to aggravate the Jewish sensibilities yet again. I am in a very dangerous position. A formal protest to Rome would ruin me, and Tiberius the emperor is suspicious already and he is an unforgiving man. One more charge could very well cost to me my head."

So Pilate's career and his life hung by a very slender thread, which leads us to *scene #2*) of this drama, *The Chaos*. Here the storm of conflict that had been brewing will soon break out into pure chaos. Look at verse 15. "Now at the feast the governor was accustomed to release for the crowd any one prisoner whom they wanted and they had then a notorious prisoner called Barabbas." Well apparently, Pilate had initiated a custom whereby he would release for the people at Passover one prisoner of their choosing. And no doubt the policy was designed to improve his bad relations with the people and win back some of their good favor. But today however, he had an even truer plan because today, Pilate hoped by this custom to extricate himself from a very thorny situation by pitting the desire of the people against the desire of the rulers.

You see, Pilate knew that Jesus was popular. Pilate knew that the people adored Jesus and he shrewdly calculated that if he gave the choice to the people, they would request the release of Jesus. And so in this manner, this deft maneuver, Pilate could both uphold justice by not executing an innocent man and he could avoid any complaint on the part of the leaders for the release of Jesus because it would be accomplished by the people. And of course, Pilate would've assumed the people would much rather have the miracle worker Jesus than the notorious criminal Barabbas. You see, according to Mark 15:7 and Luke 23:9, Barabbas was a rebel. He had been arrested for instigating, fomenting, insurrection and committing murder.

Now more comes from John 18:40, which declares him to be a robber, which is a word that speaks of someone who both robs and plunders. Don't think of him as a petty thief. In fact, the Roman Jewish historian Flavius Josephus uses that same word to speak of a freedom fighter. So what you have here is a choice between Jesus the miracle worker and Barabbas the terrorist. Would the people really prefer Barabbas? Further boosting Pilate's confidence here in this maneuver is verse 18, "For he knew that it was out of envy that they," the Jewish leaders, "had delivered him up."

Pilate was ignorant of many things Jewish, but he wasn't ignorant of this one fact. The Jewish leaders were envious of Jesus. He had his spies, his informants. He knew what was happening in Jerusalem. He knew that what the leaders wanted was what Jesus possessed, immense popularity, miraculous power, authoritative preaching. Jesus had captured the hearts and minds of Jerusalem

and the leaders wanted it back. They wanted to be the sole voice for God. Oh yes, Pilate was ignorant of many things, but not this thing. This was not a situation fueled by popular hatred. It was a situation fueled by envy from the leaders.

So what Pilate thought is, "If I give the people a choice, they will solve my dilemma for me because they will choose Jesus." Hence the question of verse 17, "Whom do you want me to release for you, Barabbas or Jesus who is called Christ?" And as Pilate is now feeling quite self-assured and confident, fate intervenes, or more particularly, divine providence intervenes. Verse 19, "Besides, while he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him," and what a message to receive in the middle of a judicial proceeding. "Have nothing to do with that righteous man for I have suffered much because of him today in a dream." You see, before Pilate could hear the people's answer, an aide tapped him on the shoulder and said, "Sir, your wife has an urgent message." And so Pilate leaves, he steps away to go listen to his wife. And what she tells him is, "In no uncertain terms, you must have nothing to do with Jesus, with this man."

Unless you get caught up in the fact that she had a dream, it would be very unsurprising for her to have a dream about Jesus. Surely, she had heard from Pilate that the night before he was sending his soldiers to arrest some notable Jewish figure, aka Jesus. And so when she went to bed that night, it would've been on her mind that this man that she would've heard about because everybody in Jerusalem knew about Jesus, she would've been thinking about him and so she falls asleep with Jesus on her mind. Was it supernatural? The text doesn't say. Was it real? It was. And in God's providence, he orchestrated this interruption.

But I want you to notice something about how she characterizes Jesus. What does she say about him? Look down, verse 19, "Have nothing to do with that righteous man." Isn't it amazing that a pagan Roman woman could see the righteous character of Jesus and not even the Jews could perceive it? Does it not speak to the immense blindness of man? And yet, this stunning innocence of Jesus. This woman had more spiritual insight than all the Jewish leaders put together, and her words validate that Jesus does possess the very righteousness which he must possess if he is to die on the cross to bear the wrath of God for sinners.

It is curious that Pilate's response is not recorded, but I suspect that her words fueled inner chaos. I say that because the Romans were a very superstitious people and they considered dreams to be one of the mechanisms by which the gods would speak to man. So whatever misgivings Pilate had about executing an innocent man, whatever pressures he felt to avoid triggering the Jews, surely it was multiplied by this dark word from his wife. And I would contend that in Pilate's mind was also the story of Julius Caesar whose wife, if you know, received a dream, and warned him not to go to the Senate lest he be murdered. But you know what happened. Every Roman knew what happened. So I would contend that in Pilate's mind, this was there. So dark thoughts are brewing and maybe he's saying, "Is the God or the gods speaking to me? What do I do about it?"

Verse 20. "Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus." This is not what Pilate expected. And the expression is so apt here, while the cat's

away, the mouse will play because when Pilate stepped out, the Jewish leaders stepped in and they very craftily persuaded the people, "Ask for Barabbas." See, Pilate thought he was going to outmaneuver them, but as he was about to discover, this brief, divine interruption, was a tactical mistake of irreversible consequence, verse 21. "The governor again said to them," he's now back now before the people. "He says again, "Which of the two do you want me to release for you?" And of course he expects them to say Jesus and they said, "Barabbas." Pilate must have been shocked. He must have been so confused in this moment. "They want Barabbas. They want the insurrectionist. This is their Christ, their Messiah."

"How could I have miscalculated so badly Barabbas?" But see, there's irony here, thick irony, that I want you to see. The name Barabbas in Aramaic means son of the Father. Isn't that interesting? You have on one hand, Barabbas, son of the Father and on the other, the son of the Father, one man earthly, one man heavenly. One man wicked, one man righteous. One man offering salvation through the sword, one man offering salvation through divine substitution. And of course you know what the people will choose, but tragically they choose Barabbas. As one commentator said it, "They preferred the man of violence to the man of love." It is a tragic fact of history that all through the ages people have chosen the way of Barabbas and refuse the way of Jesus.

So it was in that highly charged moment the people screamed for Barabbas. Yet now Pilate, his tension, his anxiety is rising and he is desperate to avoid executing an innocent man because do not forget, he's a Roman legal authority. And so he asked in panic tones, verse 22, "Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" What he's hoping is that somehow, somehow, they'll say, "Punish him and let him go," which he would be okay with because he wouldn't be killing an innocent man. But that is not to be. You see, the crowds have made up their mind. They know how they will answer the question, "What shall I do with Jesus who is Christ?" They say, all say, "Let him be crucified."

Pilate's conscience is now in crisis mode. Moral chaos threatens to overwhelm him like a tidal wave. He is in the most awful position. So he asks the crowd again. You see, he doesn't want to let this go because he can't bring himself as a Roman, with even a shred of conscience, to murder an innocent man on account of jealous envy. And so he says once more, seeking to avert a moral crisis and a judicial calamity, verse 23, "Listen," and hear the passion in his words, "Why? What evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Let him be crucified." And at this moment, the chaos in Pilate's heart is matched only by the chaos in the street as the crowd devolves into a murderous, shrieking, frenzied mob and they are now overcome with hatred boiling in their blood and they scream over and over again. That's what it means, all the more, "Let him be crucified. Let him be crucified, and those torturous words ring in Pilate's ears.

That prepares us for *scene #3, The Capitulation*, where conflict gives way to chaos, chaos gives way to Capitulation. Our third and final scene here is where Pilate's resolve collapses. Verse 24. "So when Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing, but that rather a riot was beginning, he took water and washed his hands before the crowd saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood. See to

it yourselves." A riot is forming in the street below. Pilate has no political margin left. He cannot afford for this to degenerate into violence. He cannot afford for Tiberius to hear that he mishandled yet another incident with the Jews. So in a moment of weakness, writ eternal, a moment of cowardice and grave injustice, Pilate capitulates, he surrenders, he bows his will to the Jews. Self-preservation takes over and surely he's thinking, "This is what I must do to preserve my life and my career."

This is Pilate's answer to the question, "What shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" Jesus must die. But Pilate will not go down without making one last attempt to salvage his honor and rescue his tortured conscience. You see, with the crowd watching, Pilate borrows a ceremony straight from Jewish tradition, from Deuteronomy chapter 21, Pilate takes water and he washes his hands, and what he's saying symbolically is, "I am cleansing my soul of guilt and I am shifting the responsibility for this deed to you." And you know that's what he's saying because he says it, "I am innocent of this man's blood. See to it yourselves." Well a bloodthirsty mob is only too willing. Verse 25. "And all the people answered, his blood beyond us and on our children."

I wonder, was there any sense of relief in Pilate's heart or just agony? Whatever he felt, his decision is recorded in verse 26. "Then he released for them Barabbas and having scourged Jesus, delivered him to be crucified." And in case you're asking why, the simple answer is because God foretold this moment. Isaiah 53, speaking of the Messiah to come, "But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds, we are healed." As you know, the story does not end there. But what I want to do is trace a different path forward. You see, you know what happens with Jesus, but do you know what happens with Pilate? Historians tell us that a few years later, another violent mistake cost him his life. A group of Samaritan worshipers were there. Pilate orders his cavalry to attack, slaughters them. In outrage, they complain to Pilate's boss. Pilate is sacked and he is sent to Rome where he will present his case to Tiberius the emperor and where he will lose his head.

Except that's not what happened. You see, Tiberius died before Pilate got to Rome. So Pilate was banished to Gaul, to France, but there was no respite, no rescue, no relief for Pilate in France because at long last, all the shame and all the guilt came back and Pilate committed suicide. And legend has it that on certain stormy nights, his ghost emerges from the tomb and it may be seen washing its hands of guilt. What will you do with Jesus who is called Christ? You know Pilate's answer already. You know the people's answer already. You know the Jewish leaders answer already. What I do not know and what perhaps not even you know is what will you do with Jesus who is called Christ? Will you receive him or will you reject him? Or will you be like Pilate? Will you seek to wash your hands of this man Jesus?

One thing I do know, a day of reckoning is coming and every man, woman, and child will be required to give an account for what they did with Jesus who is called Christ. If you have not yet made up your mind or if your mind is made up to do anything but surrender and submit, let me plead with you, do not waste this moment. You cannot wash your guilt away if you reject Jesus

Christ. You will carry it forward into eternity and you will go to hell. But Jesus died to rescue sinners and this scene was no travesty, it was the preordained plan of God so that sinners like us could be rescued, and I would beg you, follow not in the steps of the crowd or the leaders or Pilate. Let the blood of Jesus wash your sins away. You must answer the question, "What will I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" Let's pray.

Father, what Jesus experienced, when Jesus would endure on the cross, it purchased salvation. It made possible that people like us could be rescued from the wrath of God and Father, I pray that there would be none in this room who would hear this story, this actual, factual account from history and dismiss Jesus with a wave of the hand. I pray that we would exult in Jesus and we would marvel at his perfect innocence and eternal righteousness and we would appropriate that very righteousness for ourselves, that all our guilt might be washed away, white as snow. Father, we are thankful for Jesus Christ and we pray this all in his precious name. Amen.