

The Death of Messiah

We come now to the place where all the headlines scream out, “The Darkness Wins”. Jesus is arrested and put on trial and ultimately sentenced to die by crucifixion. But, He is not a victim. Everything we will see as we move into John 18 and 19 shows that Jesus is fully in control. He knows why He has come and what awaits Him through this process. It is others who are “on trial” in these chapters and those others include the Jewish leaders, Peter, and the political ruler, Pontius Pilate.

Let’s start at the beginning of John 18:

After saying these things, Jesus crossed the Kidron Valley with His disciples and entered a grove of olive trees. Judas, the betrayer, knew this place, because Jesus had gone there many times with His disciples. The leading priests and Pharisees had given Judas a battalion (or cohort) of Roman soldiers and Temple guards to accompany him. Now, with blazing torches, lanterns and weapons, they arrived at the olive grove.

Jesus fully realized all that was going to happen to Him. Stepping forward to meet them, He asked, “Whom are you looking for?”

“Jesus of Nazareth,” they replied.

“I am He,” Jesus said. Judas was standing there with them when Jesus identified Himself. And as He said, “I am He,” they all fell backward to the ground! Once more He asked them, “Whom are you searching for?”

And again they replied, “Jesus of Nazareth.”

“I told you that I am He,” Jesus said. “And since I am the One you want, let these others go.” He did this to fulfill His own statement: “I have not lost a single one of those you gave Me.” (18:1-9)

A Roman cohort or battalion was 600 armed soldiers, more than enough to take down an unarmed Jewish rabbi - or at least you’d think so. But when these soldiers confront Jesus in this grove of trees, it is they who are nervous, not Jesus. It was Jesus who stepped forward to meet the men who had come to arrest Him. It was Jesus who asked them who they were looking for. He wasn’t intimidated or trying to hide from these men of violence, but He stepped up to their challenge and, when He announced who He was - ego eimi; “I, I am” or “I am He” - they all fell backward and onto the ground.

But Jesus wasn’t trying to figure out a way to escape and so He gave them a second opportunity and, this time, He was arrested, tied up and taken to Annas, the father-in-law of Caiaphas who was high priest. Just a quick note on that: the text says that Caiaphas was the high priest *that year*. Under Jewish law the high priest was chosen for a lifetime, but now the Romans had taken that authority away from the Jews and made one person high priest for just one year.

What I’d like to do is follow through on each of the three parties that John is putting on trial. I’ll start now with the religious leaders, move on to Peter and finish by looking at Pontius Pilate. First, starting at verse 19, the High Priest questions Jesus:

Inside, the high priest began asking Jesus about His followers and what He had been teaching them. Jesus replied, "What I teach is widely known, because I have preached regularly in the synagogues and the Temple. I have been heard by people everywhere and I teach nothing in private that I have not said in public. Why are you asking Me this question? Ask those who heard Me. They know what I said."

One of the Temple guards standing there struck Jesus on the face. "Is that the way to answer the high priest?" he demanded.

Jesus replied, "If I said anything wrong, you must give evidence for it. Should you hit a man for telling the truth?"

Then Annas bound Jesus and sent him to Caiaphas, the high priest. (18:19-24)

It's interesting that Annas wants to know what Jesus has been teaching His disciples. I think he wants to know if Jesus has been teaching any subversive doctrines, maybe things that would undermine Roman authority in the land, or that would undermine the authority of the chief priests and teachers of the law. He is frightened by what this Galilean preacher might have been saying to the people, and what it might all lead to. Has He been preparing His disciples for a revolutionary movement that would cause Rome to come down hard on Judea? Has He planted the idea that He is the coming Messiah in the heads of people who could cause trouble for the chief priests? The questions he asks Jesus reveal a fear within, but Jesus answers him very directly and assures him that he has nothing to worry about. He has taught His disciples nothing that He hasn't spoken of openly in the hearing of the rest of the people.

The guard strikes Jesus because He comes across as being disrespectful to the High Priest, but, again, Jesus comes back with this confident reply that puts the guard on the defensive: "If I said anything wrong, you must give evidence for it." Who is on trial here? Jesus doesn't seem at all defensive before them. But He puts them on the defensive by asking them questions, and by implying that they should already know the answers to the ones they are asking.

The next person who is on trial in John's account is the disciple Peter. Why would he be under the microscope? Peter made a great claim for himself right at the end of chapter 13. Right after Jesus had said that He was going away and that the disciples couldn't come with Him at this time, Peter objected:

"Lord, why can't I follow You now? I will lay down my life for You."

Then Jesus answered, "Will you really lay down your life for Me? I tell you the truth, before the rooster crows, you will disown Me three times." (13:47,48)

Peter's bold claim will now be put to the test, as will Jesus' prophecy that His disciple will disown Him three times before the rooster crows in the morning.

First test: the disciples have split up, but two of them, Peter and John, have followed the cohort that have arrested Jesus, and John, who has met the high priest, is invited

inside. He says something to the woman watching the gate and she lets Peter in as well, but not before asking,

“Aren’t you one of Jesus’ disciples?”

“No,” he said, “I am not.”

The guards and the household servants were standing around a charcoal fire they had made because it was cold. And Peter stood there with them, warming himself. (18:17,18)

Notice the charcoal fire - this will be important for later on. Now we move to the second and third denials.

We’re starting at verse 25:

Meanwhile, as Simon Peter was standing by the fire, they asked him again,

“Aren’t you one of His disciples?”

“I am not,” he said.

But one of the household servants of the high priest, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, asked, “Didn’t I see you out there in the olive grove with Jesus?” Again Peter denied it. And immediately a rooster crowed. (vv. 25-27)

Who are these people who have intimidated Peter so much that he can’t even admit to knowing, or being with, Jesus. The lady who watches the gate, one of the household servants and the very vague “they”, which we must assume refers back to the guards and servants who were standing around the fire, the charcoal fire. These are the people before whom Peter is afraid to stand and declare that he is one of Jesus’ followers. These are the ones who have shut Peter down only hours after he has declared that he is willing to die for his Master. What happened?

What happens to any of us when words have to become actions? How many times have we found that it’s easier to say, “I’ll do it!” than it is to actually do it? We only know how brave we are when we face the situation that requires bravery ... or how compassionate we are when we encounter a person in real need ... or how loyal we are when a promise or a friendship is put to the test. Words are easy, life isn’t always. Peter saw his Master taken away by hundreds of soldiers, knew that He was hated by the powers that ran things in Judea at the time and his own courage fell to the floor. What will happen to me if these guys decide to go arrest me next?

So, the religious establishment, those in charge of Jesus’ arrest, the ones who will accuse Him before Pilate, are intimidated by Jesus who offers Himself willingly. He steps forward, He controls the dialogue and He demands an answer from the guard who struck Him. The religious people have their own agenda and will pursue it doggedly, but they have no real answers, no refutation for Jesus’ claims about who He is or where He’s come from or what He is about to do for the world.

Peter is challenged, not by people who pose a direct threat to his life or safety, but by the fear of what threats might be around him, who these people might talk to. He fails his test simply because fear overwhelms him. Jesus’ prophecy about him proves accurate and Peter can’t escape his failure.

But there is yet another person on trial in these chapters, and he is probably the most fascinating of them all. Pontius Pilate was made the prefect of Judea in about 26 A.D. Outside of the Gospels, he is remembered for offending the Jews on several occasions and for rather harsh treatment on those who crossed him. But in the Gospels, he is the one heroic figure who stands against those Jewish leaders and proclaims Jesus' innocence.

The early morning hours went like this: after His arrest, Jesus was taken to the home of Annas and then to see Caiaphas where He was tried and found guilty of blasphemy. From there He was taken to the Jerusalem headquarters of the governor, Pilate. The governor was normally stationed at the Roman town of Caesarea in the north and came to Jerusalem for special occasions or in times of unrest. Because his quarters were considered ceremonially unclean and a Jew going in there would be judged "defiled", the Jewish Council members refused to meet with Pilate inside the Roman headquarters, so he came out to hear their accusations.

So Pilate the governor went out to meet them and asked, "What is your charge against this man?"

"We wouldn't have handed him over to you if he weren't a criminal!" they retorted.

"Then take him away and judge him by your own laws," Pilate told them.

"Only the Romans are permitted to execute someone," the Jewish leaders replied. This fulfilled Jesus' prediction about the way He would die. (29-32)

Pilate clearly doesn't respect the Jewish leaders and their desires, and his misgivings about them and their motives grow stronger in the following verses:

Then Pilate went back inside and called for Jesus to be brought to him. "Are you the King of the Jews?" he asked Him.

Jesus replied, "Is this your own question, or did others tell you about Me?"

"Am I a Jew?" Pilate asked. "Your own people and their leading priests brought you here. Why? What have you done?"

Then Jesus answered, "I am not an earthly king - if I were, My followers would have fought when I was arrested by the Jewish leaders. But My kingdom is not of this world."

Pilate replied, "You are a king, then?"

"You say that I am a king and you are right," Jesus said. "I was born for that purpose and I came to bring truth to the world. All who love the truth recognize that what I say is true."

"What is truth?" Pilate asked. Then he went out again to the people and told them, "He is not guilty of any crime." (33-38)

What an amazing interplay of thoughts and questions. Pilate's first question is, "Are you the King of the Jews?" and his final question is, "What is truth?" In between he learns from his prisoner that Jesus is a king, but that His Kingdom is not of this world. And he arrives at the important conclusion that Jesus is not guilty, He has done nothing worthy of death by crucifixion. Pilate is now caught between the desires of the Jewish

leaders and his role in keeping the peace in Judea and the conviction that he is dealing with a man who is innocent. This conflict is what will play out in the following verses. First, Pilate asks the people if they would like him to release Jesus to them, as the Passover custom of the day was that a prisoner be released. But, egged on by the religious leaders, the people cry for a known criminal named Barabbas. Notice the name: Bar means “son of” and “abba” means “father”. Pilate has to choose between one “Son of the Father” and another “son of the father”. Which bar-abba will he choose? Pilate has Jesus flogged, He is mocked by the soldiers and beaten.

Pilate went outside again and said to the people, “I am going to bring him out to you now, but understand clearly that I find him not guilty.” Then Jesus came out wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. And Pilate said, “Here is the man!”

When they saw Him, the leading priests and Temple guards began shouting, “Crucify! Crucify!”

“You crucify him,” Pilate said. “I find him not guilty.”

The Jewish leaders replied, “By our laws he ought to die because he called himself the Son of God.”

When Pilate heard this he was more frightened than ever. He took Jesus back into the headquarters again and asked Him, “Where are you from?” But Jesus gave him no answer. “You won’t talk to me?” Pilate demanded. “Don’t you realize that I have the power to release you or to crucify you?”

Then Jesus said, “You would have no power over Me at all unless it were given to you from above. So the one who brought Me to you has the greater sin.” (19:4-11)

Part of me wants to stop and talk about all the things Pilate is saying and Jesus is saying and the crowds, prompted by the religious leaders are saying, but I think we need to read it through to the end:

Then Pilate tried to release Him, but the Jewish leaders told him, “If you release this man, you are not a friend of Caesar. Anyone who declares himself a king is a rebel against Caesar.”

When they said this, Pilate brought Jesus out to them again. Then Pilate sat down on the judgment seat on the platform that is called the Stone Pavement. It was now about noon on the day of preparation for the Passover. And Pilate said to the people, “Here is your king!”

“Away with him,” they yelled. “Away with him - crucify him!”

“What? Crucify your king?” Pilate asked.

“We have no king but Caesar,” the leading priests shouted back. (19:12-15)

At that moment, the darkest, most total rejection of Yahweh as their King, the choice to honour Caesar above God Himself, Pilate had no option left - and he handed Jesus over to be crucified.

In the end, after at least three declarations that Jesus was innocent, Pilate failed to defend Him, but he could only have done so at the cost of his position, perhaps of his life. Peter failed to defend Jesus, because he was worried about his life, his safety.

But the heaviest blow falls on the religious leaders of the Jews who plotted the whole thing, who insisted that Jesus be killed and who declared their rejection of the God they had been chosen to exalt - these are the leading priests of Judah - and their declaration was, "We have no king but Caesar." "Yahweh is our king no more." The darkness is complete and Jesus is going to the cross.

Today was as much a reading of Scripture as a sermon, but I do want to end with a challenge. When the leading priests made their fateful declaration, "We have no king but Caesar," they were bowing to their own fears. They were afraid that Rome might overreact to this Jesus, that they might lose their favoured status among the Jews, maybe even lose their lives in the upheaval of an angry Roman government coming down hard on rebellious Judah. They were afraid of losing the battle of popular support to a kind miracle-worker, a bold Messianic preacher, a man whose authority was clearly greater than their own. They liked their lives the way they were, even if Rome was in charge. They didn't want to welcome change, even if their God demanded it. And so they rejected the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Our lives can get pretty comfortable, as we live in one of most desirable places on earth. We can easily think that we have the choice that the leading priests had, that it would be wise for us to avoid conflict over the person of Jesus, that it would be prudent for us to not ruffle feathers by talking about His love and forgiveness. But we don't have that choice - not if we intend to be followers of the real King. Jesus said, in His defense before Pilate, that He had come to bring truth to the world. He continues that eye-opening ministry through those who believe into Him, but only if we have the courage and conviction to honour Him in our conversations with skeptics and doubters and haters. We can bring truth in very winsome and wonderful ways, but we can't neglect the call to be His representatives, to live out the truth that He has taught us and to obey His commandment to love God and to love one another.

Sometimes we feel afraid of how people will react. All around Jesus, before and during and after His arrest, His trial, His crucifixion and His death, there was a blanket of fear and it covered everyone - from the disciples to Pilate, from the chief priests to the Temple Guard. Ask the Spirit of the Living God to deliver you from that fear and to give you a compassionate and gracious love for those who may currently be opposed to the Good News that Jesus brought. And keep asking. I think that in the politically correct, afraid-to-offend culture that we live in, there is room for the truth, spoken with love and backed up with loving action, guided by the Holy Spirit, given to honour Jesus who died so that we might live.