

## The Trial Of Jesus Part 3 “What Is Truth?”

Text: John 18:33-38

Suggested Hymns:

176, 129, 147, 175, 163

- 1) The Sanhedrin Lacked  
The Power Of Capital Punishment
- 2) Jesus Is Taken To Pilate
- 3) The King Of Truth

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is John 18:33-38, <sup>33</sup> *Then Pilate entered the Praetorium again, called Jesus, and said to Him, “Are You the King of the Jews?”* <sup>34</sup> *Jesus answered him, “Are you speaking for yourself about this, or did others tell you this concerning Me?”*

<sup>35</sup> *Pilate answered, “Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered You to me. What have You done?”* <sup>36</sup> *Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here.”*

<sup>37</sup> *Pilate therefore said to Him, “Are You a king then?”* *Jesus answered, “You say rightly that I am a king. For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice.”* <sup>38</sup> *Pilate said to Him, “What is truth?”* (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

*“What is truth?”* Lord grant that we continue in the truth that Jesus is our Redeemer and King.

*“Suffered under Pontius Pilate.”* With these words the Apostles’ Creed forever stigmatises the name of Pilate and at the same time fixes the approximate date of the suffering of Jesus.

Today we will be considering Jesus' trial before Pilate and Pilate's question, *What is truth?* May the Lord bless our meditation.

### **1. The Sanhedrin Lacked The Power Of Capital Punishment**

The sentence of death had been passed on Jesus by the Sanhedrin, the highest domestic court in the land. Gladly these judges would have carried out their sentence, presumably by stoning, but it was not in their power. A capital sentence had to be confirmed by the provincial governor, in this case, Pontius Pilate. And this he did in the end.

The governorship of Pilate coincided about the same time as the beginning of the ministry of John the Baptist. He had been in office long enough to become thoroughly acquainted with the most difficult race which the experienced officials of Rome ever had to manage. There was no love lost between Pilate and the Jews. He despised them, and they hated him.

Pilate's usual residence was at the coastal town of Caesarea, in itself a little Rome. But the pomp and the perils of the Passover Festival, when the heaving lava of glowing patriotism was always apt to leap into flame, yearly summoned him to the capital of the nation, Jerusalem.

At such times, especially when accompanied by his wife, he would occupy the gorgeous palace which had the architectural extravagance of the first Herod who built it.

It was a luxurious residence, overlooking Jerusalem, to the southwest of the hill on which the Temple was built. In front of it extended a broad pavement, locally called Gabbatha, flanked by porticoes and columns of marble.

And here, in the open and from a raised platform the trials were conducted on account of the popular prejudice against entering the Gentile ruler's house.

Besides, being in the season of the Passover, when every trace of leaven had to be removed, there was all the more reason to guard against ceremonial defilement. In this matter Pilate had to yield to his subjects' scruples, although he probably cursed them in his heart.

### **2. Jesus Is Taken To Pilate**

The Jewish day begins at six o'clock in the morning so it may have been soon after six o'clock on that memorable April morning that a dignified

procession, no doubt followed by a thrill-seeking crowd, was seen approaching Pilate's palace. The matter was very urgent and had to be completely dispatched before sundown on the same day which had just begun.

The long-bearded and wise-looking judges, probably headed by Caiaphas himself, would not enter into the Praetorium or Judgment-hall and so Pilate went out to them.

They were afraid of leaven which would be found in the Gentile's house, but they did not shrink from the shedding of holy and innocent blood. Thus there are many people who are exacting in observing religious protocol, but are utterly conscienceless in the violation of the clear commandments of God.

Disturbed in that early hour, Pilate was not in a pleasant mood, although he knew that disturbances might be expected during the Passover season. In a half-necessary condescension he had to accommodate himself to what he considered the ridiculous superstitions of a hated race.

As he ascended the tribunal, no doubt accompanied by secretaries and guarded by bronzed representatives of the power of Rome, he cast one haughty look over the priestly notables and the turbulent mob.

Noticing also a bound victim in their midst, he immediately demanded, ***“What accusation do you bring against this Man?”***<sup>1</sup> The question took them by surprise. It almost seems as if they expected Pilate to accept the verdict of the Sanhedrin and to sign the bill of execution without questioning it.

This manner of dispensing justice was sometimes observed by provincial governors, either out of indolence or in blind reliance upon the native courts. And especially, as in this case, in religious matters, which a foreigner was not expected to understand, it was not always the unreasonable course to pursue.

In a the somewhat offended reply, they said, ***“If He were not an evildoer, we would not have delivered Him up to you.”*** But this morning Pilate was not in a yielding mood. He would not give the sanction of his tribunal to their dark decree. He would not be the executioner where he had not been the judge.

Very well, ***“You take Him and judge Him according to your law.”*** If you do not want me to review the case, then you must be satisfied with what your law allows.

This meant that they would have to impose excommunication, fines, imprisonment, forty stripes less one, and similar punishments, which would not at all have satisfied their thirst for blood and would not be the sentence upon which they had agreed.

Remember the words in Luke 19:47, ***“And [Jesus] was teaching daily in the temple. But the chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people sought to destroy Him.***

They were now forced into the humiliating confession, ***“It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death,”***<sup>2</sup> thus revealing their infernal desire as well as acknowledging the power of Rome. What fiendishness is revealed in these words!

And even if they did have the right to inflict capital punishment, it was decreed in the counsel of God as well as foretold by His Son that Christ was to die, not by stoning or by strangulation, but by the Roman mode of crucifixion.

Recall what Jesus said in Matthew 20:18-19, ***“Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and to the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death,”***<sup>19</sup> ***“and deliver Him to the Gentiles to mock and to scourge and to crucify.”***

Therefore, since Pilate was determined to retry the case, the accusers were forced to formulate definite charges upon which they hoped that their sentence would be confirmed. A flood of vehement accusations unsubstantiated by witnesses is poured forth, out of which at last three distinct charges emerge.

First, that Jesus was perverting the nation; secondly, that He forbade people to pay the imperial taxes; and thirdly, that He set Himself up as Christ, a king. Blasphemy, for which Jesus was really condemned, was not even mentioned. They knew too well that, if they would mention this charge here, they would be sneered out of the court.

The first vague accusation, ***“perverting the nation,”***<sup>3</sup> Pilate passes by. If they had told the truth, they would probably have stated that Jesus was making too many disciples and that they were afraid that the whole nation would accept His teaching. Pilate understood perfectly well. ***“For he knew that they had handed Him over because of envy.”***<sup>4</sup>

Likewise the second accusation, “*forbidding to pay taxes to Caesar,*” Pilate passes by. Indeed, if true, that would have been a crime. But the government of Pilate was too well organised not to know that this accusation was a flagrant lie.

The very opposite had been taught by Jesus. There must have been a smile on the governor’s face at the prospect of this sudden zeal for Roman taxes.

It was the third accusation which attracted Pilate’s attention, “*saying that He Himself is Christ, a King.*”<sup>5</sup> Discounting the ungrasped Messianic reference for the present, — but if that was true that He was setting Himself up as a king, a possible rival to gloomy Tiberius, this certainly had to be investigated. Not as if there was any cause for particular worry, but it should not be said that he was “*sleeping on the job.*”

Just how much Pilate was acquainted with the life of Jesus we do not know. It is certain that he was not altogether ignorant. On the evening before he had granted a Roman guard to assist in Jesus’ arrest. Then there was the dream of his wife, which seems to show that there had been conversation in his house about that “*young enthusiast*” who was confronting the fanatic priests.

When the Sanhedrin wanted to kill Jesus, Pilate’s wife wanted to save Him. She is the fourth Gentile woman to be presented in a favourable light in the Gospel of Matthew. The others are Rahab, Ruth, and the Syro-Phoenician woman.<sup>6</sup>

It seems that while her husband has come to the conclusion that Jesus is innocent before the law, Pilate’s wife has reached the higher conviction that Jesus is righteous before God, a conviction that was soon to be echoed by the centurion at the cross.<sup>7</sup> For this reason, Pilate’s wife is sometimes compared to Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, each of whom was at first a secret believer, but at a critical moment they each made their allegiance known.

Now the accusation about saying that Jesus was Christ, a king. We assume that during these proceedings Jesus was, probably with a guard, within the walls of the Praetorium. Leaving the impatient Sanhedrin and the raging crowd, Pilate returned into the Judgment-hall.

In the silence of that interior hall Pilate stood face to face with Almighty Power. “*Are You the King of the Jews?*” he asked. That depends upon how the royalty of Jesus is understood. In His reply the Saviour is cautious, “*Are you*

*speaking for yourself about this, or did others tell you this concerning Me?”* “*Am I a Jew?*” is Pilate’s disdainful reply. “*Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered You to me. What have You done?*”

What a shame and what a charge! Israel’s own people had rejected Israel’s King! And what had Jesus done? Done? Jesus has “*Done all things well.*”<sup>8</sup> He did works of mercy and love, but still He stands as a prisoner in the court.

But in His answer Jesus reverts to the first question of Pilate. Yes, He is a King. But not a rival of Tiberius. For if that was the case His servants would fight. He still a King, but His “*kingdom is not of this world.*”

In making this explanation the word “kingdom” was used. At this point Pilate broke in and said, “*Are You a king then?*” *Jesus answered, “You say rightly that I am a king. For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice.”*

### 3. The King Of Truth

So that is it. A king. However, not a king of men, but a king of hearts and of the truth.

Truth! Truth? But “*what is truth?*” What has he, a busy, business-like Roman governor, to do with such abstractions?

At this, almost persuaded, like Felix, Pilate rushed out. So near to the fountain, and yet so far from the life-giving stream! This floating idea of unearthly royalty he set aside as completely unreal. Too bad! he thought. What a high-souled, but altogether impractical dreamer!

But this much was sure. Whoever and whatever Jesus was, He was not guilty of death. Pilate went out to the impatient Sanhedrin and pronounced an emphatic and unhesitating acquittal. “*I find no fault in Him at all.*”<sup>9</sup>

Is Jesus a King? Yes, He is. And it makes no difference whether you believe it or not. He is a King. But is He your King, so that you may “*live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness*”?

And what is truth? It is this, — a divine, everlasting, unchangeable, gracious truth, — as Jesus Himself says in John 14:6, ***“I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.”***

And in 1 Timothy 1:15, <sup>15</sup> ***This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners ....***

So let us conclude with the words of Revelation 5:12, ***“Worthy is the Lamb who was slain To receive power and riches and wisdom, And strength and honor and glory and blessing!”*** Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> John 18:29

<sup>2</sup> John 18:31

<sup>3</sup> Luke 23:2

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 27:18

<sup>5</sup> Luke 23:2

<sup>6</sup> Matt 1:5, 15:22-28

<sup>7</sup> Luke 23:47

<sup>8</sup> Mark 7:37

<sup>9</sup> John 18:38