

Trials

John 18:19-19:16

October 16, 2022

A couple of notes before we begin: we are going through a lot of material today. There is so much here we could get bogged down for months in these interactions. Yet, getting bogged down is exactly what did NOT happen then. What I want you to hear and feel is just *how quickly* these steps to the cross took place. These things took a matter of hours.

Consider: from the time of Jesus' arrest to his appearances before Pilate, it would be like in the time from when you had dinner last night through this time this morning. He would be walking to the cross by the time we conclude fellowship hour.

Clearly, we are not going to cover everything there is to cover about these events. Even though we will not, know this: God had everything covered. God knew exactly what was going to happen at each step of the way. God was in control at every moment. There was not one moment where God was not in control.

One final preliminary thought: because this is tough material, why don't we just skip it and get to the good stuff? We know the resurrection is coming, so why dwell on this unpleasantness? As a preacher, as a person, it is nice to send you out with a spring in your step and whistling a happy tune. It is difficult to do today because we come face to face with the consequences of sin. We are looking at what judgment on our sins looks like. Jesus took in and on his body the consequences of all our sins – yours, mine, and ours together. Paul would later write, "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."¹ **That** is the good news; **that** is the feel-good aspect: that God loves us so much that He made a way for justice to be served *and* grace to be ours. God did this for us. Jesus did this for us. We need to look. We need to see.

Read John 18:19-19:16

This is the Word of the LORD.

Prayer of Invocation

I am going to begin with Peter. When we concluded last week, Peter had been rendered helpless. He thought of himself as Jesus' right-hand man. He had pledged his willingness to die for Jesus, but he could not prevent Jesus from being taken into custody. All he could do was follow. Lost, confused, uncertain about what he should do next, Peter was dependent on John to get him close – to get him into the courtyard of the high priest. It was there that the woman first addressed him, "You are not also one of this man's disciples, are you?" She apparently knew that John was a disciple and was now asking Peter – and not in a particularly threatening way. Even so, he responded, "I am not."

As Annas' questioning concluded and Jesus was bound over to Caiaphas, Peter's descent into denial continued. The people standing around warming themselves started getting suspicious of Peter's demeanor and presence. They began to press the issue. "You *are* one of them, aren't you?" A more literal translation of Peter's response would be, "That's not me." It was more than a denial; it was a distancing from his identity. It was the equivalent of saying, "I have no association with that person,

¹ 2 Corinthians 5:21

with those people.” When the relative of the slave challenged him again, John simply reported that Peter denied it – and that is when the cock crowed.

In the **larger picture** of the gospel, Peter’s denial was important because Jesus would walk this walk alone. It was necessary to see even his closest brothers fall away so that there could be no question that Jesus was unique – individually filling the priestly function God had prepared for him.

In the **immediate picture**, this was devastating for Peter. Christ had dismissed his profession of loyalty – that had to hurt – and then, Jesus was right. Peter *had* denied Jesus and stood apart from all he had championed for three years.

The brokenness Peter experienced is important for all of us to experience. It is the startling realization that we are not as righteous, as loyal, as virtuous as we think we are. Peter’s brokenness is the jolt that wakes us up to the utter desperation of our situation. The delusions to which we cling – that somehow we have earned or deserve or *can* stand with Jesus on his walk to the cross and the salvation He provided – all of that falls away when we realize Jesus stands and stood alone.

When we say we come to the cross empty handed – this is what we are saying. What – if it were stripped away from you like Peter’s self-perception – what would break you and leave you empty-handed before the Lord? (anything more?)

Hearing Before Annas.

Now we come to the legal – if we can call it that – the legal proceedings. Jesus had been arrested and brought before Annas, the father-in-law of the high priest. Jesus was brought in to see him late at night. Annas was the real power. As we mentioned last week, he had served as high priest, his five sons had served as high priest, and now his son-in-law was high priest. Although it seems like high priest should be a position with high moral qualifications, history had shown that corruption was a common occurrence. Corruption was evident here and throughout the rest of the entire process.

Remember: the temple authorities had been seeking Jesus’ life for a long time. Multiple times in this gospel, John had made clear that there were plots to kill Jesus.

Annas asked Jesus about his teaching. We do not get the transcript, but it is not difficult to imagine that Annas was looking to trap Jesus in blasphemous statements. It was not a search for truth or justice. It was an inquisition to make the case, not a question about whether a case was there.

It was the hatred of the world that Jesus had described to the disciples just hours before. Jesus said, “I have spoken openly to the world.” The rest is important, too; but that is such a critical statement because it is the ongoing problem Jesus came to address. God has spoken openly to the world and the world has rejected him and hated him.

The environment was hostile, too. When Jesus spoke, he was struck by a member of the temple police. Interestingly, the temple policeman said, “Is that how you answer the high priest?” Annas was not currently the high priest. Annas held onto the title and the power even if he was not installed. This had the feel of Al Pacino holding court in the Godfather. Jesus, however, was not intimidated. “If I have

spoken wrongly, testify to the wrong. But if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?" The answer is simple: hatred.

So Jesus was bound and sent to Caiaphas for further official proceedings. The transfer took place late enough at night – or early the next morning before daylight – that the cock crowed after Peter's third denial.

Just as Peter's denial was important to demonstrate that Jesus stood alone, this kangaroo court hearing was important to show the rejection by God's chosen people. Those who were called to be a priestly kingdom and holy nation specifically rejected the one whom they had been chosen to serve.

Hearing #1 before Pilate: What is the accusation?

Early in the morning, they took Jesus to Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea. In the gospel of John, there were multiple times when Pilate left the leaders outside, returned to Jesus inside, and had conversations.

You need to know Pilate was not particularly sympathetic to the Jews – neither to the chief priests and temple leaders or Jesus. In fact, he was more antagonistic than anything else. The rush to get to Pilate early in the morning was for two reasons: 1) the chief priests wanted to remain ritually clean for their Passover meals; and, 2) Roman officials were known to work early in the morning and wrap their business by 10 or 11.

There is the sense in the text that there had been some conversations outside of John's hearing. Pilate's opening line to the temple authorities indicated his enmity with the Jews. He went out to them – oh, that probably rankled him because of the hypocrisy of their desiring to be religiously pure and politically murderous – and asked, "What accusation do you bring against this man?" The stumbling non-answer from those who had brought Jesus to him revealed their surprise at being asked. They thought they had covered it, that Pilate would not care, and that Pilate would just do what they wanted because he was inclined towards cruelty towards the Jews anyway. Killing Jesus would not be a big deal. Suddenly, it seemed, Pilate was concerned about procedure.

Actually, it was likely he was not all that concerned about process at this point, other than to stick it the Jews. When they answered, "If this man were not a criminal, we would not hand him over to you," Pilate was unimpressed. "Deal with him yourself. Don't waste my time." Then, the intent of the Jewish leaders was declared publicly, "We are not permitted to put anyone to death." Again, it was not a charge they were bringing; it was an execution they were seeking.

So, Pilate went inside to talk with Jesus. "Are you king of the Jews?" Note: Pilate knew what was the charge.

Pilate asked three questions which – if he was being a stickler for procedure – was the minimum he was required to do under Roman law. "Are you king of the Jews?" "What have you done?" "So you are a king?"

The exchange between Jesus and Pilate was fascinating because it demonstrated the world's indifference to the one true God. "Are you king of the Jews?" Pilate asked. In response Jesus asked, "Do you ask on your own, or did others tell you about me?" Pilate's answer was essentially, "Of course I

am not asking on my own. I could not care any less about you. However, your people and your chief priests have handed you over. So, what have you done?"

Unlike the chief priests, Pilate actually spoke the truth. He did *not* care. If he had heard of Jesus at all prior to that morning, it would have been only in some intelligence reports about potential rebels. More likely, he was hearing and encountering Jesus for the first time that morning. He only was asking for information to see if anything was there.

In the answer to the second question, "What have you done," Jesus responded with the gospel he had been proclaiming since the very beginning. "My kingdom is not from this world." Yes, he was talking about the kingdom of God. He was talking about the kingdom of God he was personally ushering in – at that moment. He *was* being revolutionary; just not in a way Pilate would or could recognize.

"So you *are* a king?" Pilate almost seemed surprised to get a direct answer.

"You say that I am a king," Jesus responded. The explanation that followed indicated that Jesus was not talking about being the king of a political kingdom challenging the Roman Empire; rather, he was talking about something qualitatively different. We know that the kingdom Jesus was revealing was the kingdom of God; Pilate heard this esoteric rambling about "belonging to the truth." So Pilate ended up posing the right question without understanding what he was asking, "What is truth?"

What is truth? Jesus had just declared to the disciples, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." Here, Jesus said, "Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." Pilate was not listening. He was not listening because Pilate's understanding of truth was much more akin to truth today: power determines truth. Jesus was a prisoner. Pilate was a governor in a position of power. Pilate did not understand what Jesus was saying; nor was he inclined to investigate further. Pilate had the authority of a judge to determine what was true.

What we see here is so close to what we have experienced in our own time. Truth has been made relative, as if whoever's experts are in control determine what is allowed thought. I do not want to go too far down this road other than to say this: a great deal of the anxiety we see expressed in our culture today is directly related to the notion that *the* truth cannot be known and/or that the truth is subjective. Fill in your own illustration.

Here, Pilate's impression was that Jesus was not a political threat or revolutionary. So, he went out to the chief priests and temple authorities and said, "I find no case against this man." Ironically, that judgment was both accurate and erroneous. Jesus was not a political threat or revolutionary in the commonly understood way. Jesus *was* very much a threat to the world in that he had been given all authority on heaven and earth, and was exactly king of the Jews. And Romans. And everyone else.

Because Pilate recognized the hatred of the chief priests and the temple authorities, he taunted them with the Passover custom of releasing a prisoner for them. We know it was a taunt because, having just declared that Jesus was not a political threat or revolutionary, he asked the crowd, "Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?" Pilate did not care about justice. He was toying with the crowd. The Jews – offered one more opportunity to repent and come clean – refused and asked for the wrong Barabbas (name meaning son of the father), who *was* a bandit; someone who *had* led an insurrection.

Hearing #2 before Pilate: Behold the man!

When the crowd shouted for a different prisoner, Pilate had Jesus flogged. Why? On the one hand, Pilate had found him innocent. On the other, he was about to have a riot because the Jews wanted Jesus dead. This may have looked like a middle road option where everyone got what they wanted.

I am going to go to the Word Biblical Commentary here to help us understand what was involved in Jesus' flogging:

The delinquent was stripped, bound to a post or a pillar, or sometimes simply thrown on the ground, and beaten by a number of torturers until the latter grew tired and the flesh of the delinquent hung in bleeding shreds. In the provinces this was the task of soldiers. Three different kinds of implements were customary. Rods were used on freemen; military punishments were inflicted with sticks; but for slaves scourges or whips were used, the leather thongs of these being often fitted with a spike or with several pieces of bone or lead joined to form a chain. The scourging of Jesus was carried out with these last-named instruments... .

It is generally believed that the suffering of this severe scourging was the reason why Jesus was unable to carry his cross all the way to his execution, and why he died so soon after being crucified.²

It was after the beating that the soldiers dressed up Jesus in the crown of thorns and purple robe. Imagine if there had been social media in that day and age. Though they were mocking him, though they were striking him in the face, the soldiers were declaring the truth that the world rejected: here was the King of the Jews. Here was the one worthy of praise.

Pilate must have issued orders for them to NOT kill Jesus. Pilate was not done taunting the Jews. He had Jesus brought out to show his pathetic condition. He repeated his taunting judgment, "I find no case against him." In the world's eyes, Jesus was powerless. Jesus was brought out in robe and crown (of thorns), and Pilate mocked the Jews, "Behold the man!"

Blind by their own agenda, the Jews were not swayed. They were not sympathetic. They were not shamed by Jesus' physical condition. They were not sympathetic. There was no note of mercy. They wanted Jesus dead. They shouted, "Crucify him! Crucify him!"

Pilate's disdain reappeared. "Take him yourselves and crucify him." And then, for the third time, the judgment, "I find no case against him."

Then, finally, the real reason behind all of it came to the surface, "We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has claimed to be the Son of God." Yes, there was a law about the death penalty for false prophets. There was no thought that Jesus might actually be who he said he was. "The messianic pretension was serious enough, but the claim to be Son of God, with its accompanying roles of Redeemer and Revealer, was intolerable."³

² George R. Beasley-murray, Word Biblical Commentary, John, vol 36, pp. 335-336.

³ Ibid, p. 338.

Hearing #3 before Pilate: Shall I crucify your king?

So, Pilate took Jesus back inside. There was more going on here than Pilate had appreciated. The reaction of the Jews was so out of proportion to what he expected; so out of proportion to what he had seen in Jesus, he was perplexed. The crowd was bloodthirsty and a riot would look bad for him. John wrote that Pilate was afraid.

“Where are you from?” Pilate asked. Jesus had said his kingdom was not from this world. Pilate would not have given this a second thought except for the intense hatred expressed by the crowd. Jesus did not answer. Pilate asked, “Don’t you know I have the power to release you, and the power to crucify you?”

Jesus’ answer showed that God was in control. Jesus showed that he knew exactly what was happening and why it was happening. “You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above.” Jesus was telling Pilate that it was not Caesar, but God himself, who had put Pilate in this position – specifically for this purpose. Pilate was thrown by this answer. He had been trying to mock the Jews and had little regard for Jesus, but now recognized that he had stepped into something much deeper than he had imagined. He tried to figure a way out. John wrote, “From then on Pilate tried to release him.” We do not get the details, but his effort was thwarted by the Jews crying out, “If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor. Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against the emperor.”

The threat to denounce Pilate before Caesar if he sets Jesus free is evident. And that really was something for Pilate to fear! For Tiberius was notoriously suspicious of any who threatened his position, and he dealt with them ruthlessly and savagely. Pilate knew that an accusation of aiding and abetting a revolutionary king in turbulent Palestine would be highly dangerous.⁴

So, Pilate brought Jesus out one more time. He sat on the judge’s bench. Again, Pilate sat there because God intended for him to sit there. When the chief priests answered, “We have no king but the emperor,” they were saying that they believed the God of Israel was not real, was not sovereign, was not in charge. The world had won.

Pilate “handed him over to be crucified.”

Conclusion

So, let me return to our preliminary thoughts.

- We went through a lot of material quickly. From the time of his arrest to Pilate’s handing him over to be crucified, it was only a matter of hours.
- God was in control of it. There was no moment when God was not in control. Everything happened according to God’s plan, fulfilling God’s purpose.
- John was showing us what judgment on our sins looks like. Jesus took in and on his body the consequences of all our sins – yours, mine, and ours together. Paul would later write, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness

⁴ Ibid. p. 340.

of God.”⁵ **That** is the good news; **that** is the feel-good aspect: that God loves us so much that He made a way for justice to be served *and* grace to be ours. God did this for us. Jesus did this for us. We need to look. We need to see. And we need to share – we need to tell the world.

There is no other way. There is no other redemption. There is no other kingdom. There is no other savior. Jesus endured these trials and sufferings and crucifixion for you and for me. Because he did, we have hope and life.

Friends, today is not a feel-good conclusion in the ordinary sense. We cannot feel good about ourselves; but we can be grateful to God. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” This is how that promise came true.

Amen.

⁵ 2 Corinthians 5:21