

The Heart of the Gospel: Gethsemane to the Burial of Christ

Chapter 11: The Civil Trial of Christ—“Behold the Man”

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Then Pilate therefore took Jesus, and scourged him. And the soldiers platted a crown of thorns, and put it on his head, and they put on him a purple robe, and said, “Hail, King of the Jews!” And they smote him with their hands. Pilate therefore went forth again, and saith unto them, “Behold, I bring him forth to you, that ye may know that I find no fault in him.” Then came Jesus forth, wearing the crown of thorns, and the purple robe. And Pilate saith unto them, “Behold the man!” When the chief priests therefore and officers saw him, they cried out, saying, “Crucify him, crucify him.” Pilate saith unto them, “Take ye him, and crucify him: for I find no fault in him.” The Jews answered him, “We have a law, and by our law he ought to die, because he made himself the Son of God.” When Pilate therefore heard that saying, he was the more afraid; and went again into the judgment hall, and saith unto Jesus, “Whence art thou?” But Jesus gave him no answer. Then saith Pilate unto him, “Speakest thou not unto me? Knowest thou not that I have power to crucify thee, and have power to release thee?” Jesus answered, “Thou couldest have no power at all against me, except it were given thee from above: therefore he that delivered me unto thee hath the greater sin.” And from thenceforth Pilate sought to release him: but the Jews cried out, saying, “If thou let this man go, thou art not Caesar’s friend: whosoever maketh himself a king speaketh against Caesar.” When Pilate therefore heard that saying, he brought Jesus forth, and sat down in the judgment seat in a place that is called the Pavement, but in the Hebrew, Gabbatha. And it was the preparation of the passover, and about the sixth hour: and he saith unto the Jews, “Behold your King!” But they cried out, “Away with him, away with him, crucify him.” Pilate saith unto them, “Shall I crucify your King?” The chief priests answered, “We have no king but Caesar.” Then delivered he him therefore unto them to be crucified. And they took Jesus, and led him away. (John 19:1-16)

Pilate’s attempt to set Jesus free by the use of the custom of the release of a prisoner was an abysmal failure. The people wanted Barabbas to go free, not the Savior. The governor, however, was not yet ready to give up his idea of manipulating matters so that the Jews themselves would allow the Nazarene to go free. In this final attempt Pilate would appeal to their pity and sense of mercy. He would have Christ flogged and mocked, hoping the ghastly sight of a severely beaten, bloodied and humiliated man would cause the Jewish people to feel sorry for Jesus. Further, the Jews’ desire that our Lord be punished would hopefully be satiated and the penalty of crucifixion could be avoided. Pilate, as we shall see was guilty here of underestimating the hatred of the Jews for the Savior. There would be no cries of mercy for the Nazarene. Pilate’s attempt simply resulted in more bold cries of “Crucify Him.”

Before we examine this section of Scripture we need to note the *apparent* discrepancy between John’s account and that of the synoptics Mark (15:15) and Matthew (27:26), which *appear* to place the scourging immediately after the sentence of crucifixion. There are a number of reasons as to why there is no discrepancy between John and the two synoptics. First, the discrepancy only appears because Mark and Matthew give an abbreviated record of events at that point, while John goes into much greater detail. “Mark’s past participle, *phragellosas* (‘after flogging him’), indicates that the *death sentence was passed only after his scourging* (Blinzler,

334). If that be so Mark, Matthew, and John all record the events in question...in the same order—only John interposes other happenings, of which the synoptics appear to know nothing...”¹ Second, our first point is supported by the fact that both Mark and Matthew do not record the actual sentence of crucifixion. They merely record the events of the scourging and the delivery to be crucified in their proper chronological order leaving others to fill in the details. “Scourging was standard practice before a crucifixion and the Synoptics mention it accordingly. But it is only John who lets us see ‘that Jesus was not scourged in order to be crucified but in order to escape crucifixion’ (Lenski).”²

Jesus Is Scourged

In desperation, Pilate hands Christ over to be scourged. Scourging was always the normal punishment before crucifixion. The Roman concept of execution was that it should be as horrifying as possible as a deterrent to crime. That is why scourging was an integral part of the execution process. Pilate (as noted) at this time hoped that the horrible effect of scourging upon the Nazarene would elicit pity from the Jews. If it didn’t, then the Savior was already set for execution. The Greek word for scourging *phragelloo* (Mt. 27:26, *phragellosas*) “is a loanword from the Latin *flagello*, and denotes flogging with whips normally made of leather and sometimes weighted with pieces of metal or bone.”³ John uses the original Greek expression *mastigoun*.

The procedure for scourging in the first century is well documented by Roman historians (e.g., Josephus, Eusebius, Cicero, Suetonius). The victim would first be stripped down to his loincloth. Then his feet would be secured behind his body to rings or posts. His body was bent forward with his arms around a pillar and secured on the other side of the pillar exposing the victim’s back. A strong soldier was given a short handled whip that contained several leather strips or “lashes.” At the ends of the lashes were secured pieces of bone and/or metal which would tear the flesh. “The strokes were laid on with full force, and when the executioners tired, the officers shouted: *Adde virgas!* (Livy 26, 16), or: *Firme!* (Suetonius, Caligula 26), demanding more force. The effect was horrible. The skin and the flesh of the back were gashed to the very bone, and where the armed ends of the lashes struck, deep, bloody holes were torn. When Jesus, the son of Ananus, who cried woe over Jerusalem, was scourged by the procurator Albinus, ‘he was whipped until his bones were laid bare,’ Josephus, *Wars*, 6, 6, 3. In Smyrna just before Polycarp’s martyrdom a number of other martyrs were scourged until, as Eusebius 4, 15 reports, the deepest veins and the arteries were exposed, and even the inner organs of the body were seen.”⁴ It was not uncommon for victims to die from this brutal procedure. While the gospel accounts spare us from the details of our Lord’s beating, we know that this scourging was so severe that Jesus was unable to carry the cross all the way to the site of execution. Thus, Simon of Cyrene was ordered by the soldiers to carry Christ’s cross (Mk. 15:21; Lk. 23:26; Mt. 27:32).

This scourging took place at the Praetorium or common hall. “The ‘Pillar of the Scourging’ is now shown in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, but in the fourth century it was shown to the Bordeaux Pilgrim in the traditional house of Caiaphas.”⁵ The original pillar to

¹ George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 335.

² Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 790.

³ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 634.

⁴ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John’s Gospel*, 1245.

⁵ J. H. Bernard, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary of the Gospel According to St. John*, 2:614.

which our Lord was bound was at the Praetorium and likely did not survive the destruction of Jerusalem. “The soldiers took Him to a room in their barracks, and feasted their cruel instincts on His sufferings. We will not describe the shame and pain of this revolting punishment. What it must have been to Him, with His honor and love for human nature, to be handled by those coarse men, and to look so closely at human nature’s uttermost brutality!”⁶ Indeed, scourging was so brutal that the Romans called it the intermediate death.

What is so significant about this scourging is that here is the first shedding of blood of the Savior. In Gethsemane Jesus was in such heart agony and distress that He sweated great drops of blood. This blood was pressed out of Him on account of His soul sufferings alone. After the Jewish trial no doubt some blood was shed from our Lord’s nose and mouth when He was beaten by the temple guards (Mk. 14:65; Mt. 26:67-68; Lk. 22:63-64). But here with the cruel torture of scourging, the Son of God’s blood flowed freely in streams down His back, sides and legs. The Savior’s blood and pieces of His flesh were sprinkled throughout the Praetorium. Heathen dogs were tearing the Lord’s flesh. Sinful men were pounding the blood from His body. This is significant, for the Bible says “without the shedding of blood there is no remission” (Heb. 9:22).

The prophet Isaiah refers explicitly to Christ’s scourging when he says, “But He was wounded for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed” (Isa. 53:5). Edward J. Young’s comments on this passage are excellent:

The sins we had committed were borne by the servant. Inasmuch as sin, however, is something immaterial, how can one be said to bear it? The answer is that sin involves not merely an inward corruption of the heart but also guilt before God. In saying that the servant bore our sins, therefore, Isaiah is in reality declaring that he bore the guilt of our sins. Yet even guilt is intangible; but guilt involves liability both to censure and to punishment, and with this we meet the heart of the matter. When the servant bore the guilt of our sins, we are saying that he bore the punishment that was due to us because of those sins, and that is to say that he was our substitute. His punishment was vicarious. Because we had transgressed, he was pierced to death; and being pierced and crushed was the punishment that he bore in our stead. It may be that in the violence of the figures used there is a secondary reference to the actual death of the crucifixion, but the main thrust is that as our substitute he bore the penalty that was rightfully ours. If, however, the language is to have meaning, the servant must be one who was himself utterly free of transgression and iniquity, else his vicarious suffering could be of no avail. If one who himself was iniquitous bore the sins of another, then there is a travesty upon justice, for the sinbearer in this case would have need that his own sins be borne by another. Inasmuch as the vicarious suffering is for those who had transgressed God’s holy law, and inasmuch as the vicarious punishment of the servant actually sets us free in the sight of a holy God, we may say with assurance that there is only One of whom these words may be spoken, namely Jesus the Christ.⁷

This horrible beating was part of the seamless garment of Christ’s suffering in our place that culminated on the cross. “He was wounded for our transgressions, to make atonement for them and to purchase for us the pardon of them. Our sins were the thorns in his head, the nails in His hands and feet, the spear in His side. Wounds and bruises were the consequences of sin, what we deserved and what we brought upon ourselves.”⁸ In ourselves, apart from Jesus, we have sin, guilt, suffering and death. But in Christ alone we find life, peace and salvation because He

⁶ James Stalker, *Life of Christ*, 137-138.

⁷ Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 3:347-348.

⁸ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 4:305.

endured the sufferings that we deserved in our place. “He alone brought medicine to us, and even procures [spiritual] health by his weakness, and life by his death; for he alone hath pacified the Father, he alone hath reconciled us to him.”⁹

The Bible often focuses our attention on the blood of Christ to emphasize that His expiatory suffering culminated in death and that His death was not a normal death, but a bloody sacrificial death. Thus, we are told that “the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin” (1 Jn. 1:7); that our sins are washed and we are freed by His blood (Rev. 1:5; 7:14). Paul says, “Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith” (Rom. 3:24-25). Our Lord’s bloody, painful, sacrificial death turned aside God’s wrath toward us. The wrath we deserved was placed on Him when He suffered. His scourging was at the hands of men, but ultimately Jesus was scourged by God Himself (see Jn. 19:11). Hebrews 9:12 says, “Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption.” Jesus has “made peace through the blood of the cross” (Col. 1:20). Peter speaks of Christians having their sins cleansed and forgiven by saying the blood of Christ was sprinkled upon them (1 Pet. 1:2); they were redeemed “with the precious blood of Christ” (1 Pet. 1:19).

In Ephesians Paul says, “In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins” (1:7). The apostle is teaching that we were in bondage as a result of sin. Having broken God’s law we were slaves to sin and under the curse of the law. But Jesus, by shedding His own blood, paid the ransom price to set us free. He secured our emancipation from the guilt, penalty and power of sin. How did our Lord achieve this redemption? “Through His blood” “Why did he not say ‘by his death’? Many people object to this: they say they cannot abide this ‘theology of blood.’ If it were ‘by his death’ they would not object so much. They feel that the words of the Apostle are too materialistic and that they savour of the blood sacrifices of primitive people. Hence we must emphasize again the fact that the Apostle in his use of terms is always deliberate. I suggest that he deliberately emphasizes the blood because what happened in the death of our Lord can only be understood adequately in terms of the Old Testament sacrificial language.”¹⁰

The Bible places great importance upon the blood of Christ for a number of reasons. First, the Scriptures equate blood and life. “And whatever man of the house of Israel, or of the strangers who sojourn among you, who eats any blood, I will set My face against that person who eats blood, and will cut him off from among his people. For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul” (Lev. 17:10-11). Jehovah gives two reasons why blood is not to be consumed by man. First, blood is the essence of life. Thus, to avoid eating flesh with blood shows a respect for God-created life. Second, blood is used to atone for the guilt of sin. “The nature of Old Testament sacrifice was such that whenever cleansing from sin was required there had to be a blood ritual, since the relationship with God could not be renewed without it.”¹¹

⁹ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 3:117.

¹⁰ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *God’s Ultimate Purpose: An Exposition of Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, [1978] 1979), 155. Gordon Clark writes, “Note particularly the mention of Christ’s blood. Some modern versions, of which the iniquitous *Good News for Modern Man* is an example, mistranslate *aimatos* (blood) as death. *Aima* is blood, not death. The theological effect of this incorrect translation is to obscure the truth that Jesus’ death fulfills the anticipatory sacrifices of lambs, sacrifices whose purpose is to cleanse from sin. As Hebrews says, “without shedding of blood is no remission” (9:22). *Good News* could not squirm out of the Hebrews passage, for blood occurs in five successive verses; but here Christ’s relation to the Mosaic sacrifices is obscured” (*Ephesians* [Jefferson, MD: The Trinity Foundation, 1985], 16).

¹¹ R. K. Harrison, *Leviticus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 181.

Thus, the Bible emphasizes Christ's shed blood; for it represents His giving of His own life in the place of the believing sinner. Believers receive expiation only in the shed blood of Christ; they are "justified by His blood" (Rom. 5:9).

Second, the blood of Christ points to the sacrificial character of His death. Jesus did not die in an accident, nor did He die as an example or martyr. He suffered unto death as a blood sacrifice. Christ's life blood was poured out unto death in order to expiate sin and give life to His people. The importance of Christ's sacrificial death is set forth repeatedly throughout history in the institution of the Lord's supper. Exhibiting the cup of red wine to the apostles, Jesus said, "This is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins" (Mt. 26:28). The Lord's supper has the bread which represents our Lord's body and the wine which represents His shed blood. The body and the blood are separate, for the blood has been separated from the body by sacrifice. "That is what the wine in the cup means: it means the death of Jesus in our stead. It means the blood poured out from the heart of the incarnate God, that we might have fellowship with God, the sin which divided us being expiated by his death."¹²

The Crown of Thorns

The soldiers' blood lust was not satisfied with the scourging of our Lord. When they were done tearing His sacred flesh they (like Herod's guards before them) decided to mock the kingship of the Savior. John says, "And the soldiers twisted a crown of thorns and put it on his head; and they put on Him a purple robe. Then they said, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' And they struck Him with their hands" (19:3).

The soldiers somewhere near the Praetorium collected some thorny twigs and crudely wove them together in a circle for a mock crown. Palestine has so many species of thorny plants that the kind of plant the soldiers used can never be established with any certainty. After the crown was fashioned the soldiers pressed it upon the Savior's head, forcing many of the thorns deep into His flesh. This would have caused little streams of blood to run down Christ's face, neck and body. The crown of thorns was a clever satanic mixture of mockery and torture. In God's providence the crown of thorns was appropriate for the sin-bearer, the second Adam, for a number of reasons.

a) Thorns are a symbol of the curse. God told Adam after he fell into sin, "Cursed is the ground for your sake.... Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you" (Gen. 3:17, 18). Because of sin Adam and all mankind were barred from Paradise. The cultivation of the ground was rendered painful and very difficult as a result of the fall. But the second Adam took the curse upon Himself and in His estate of humiliation He wore it as a crown. The Savior has taken the crown of the fall, curse and sin and placed it upon His own head for us. As Spurgeon so eloquently put it, "He has spoiled sin of its richest regalia, and he wears it himself. Glorious champion, all hail! What if I say that the thorns constituted a mural crown? Paradise was set round with a hedge of thorns so sharp that none could enter it, but our champion leaped first upon the bristling rampart, and bore the blood-red banner of his cross into the heart of that better new Eden, which thus he won for us never to be lost again. Jesus wears the mural chaplet which denotes that he has opened Paradise."¹³ "Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us" (Gal. 3:13).

¹² Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Life and Work of Our Lord* (Grand Rapids: Baker, [1904] 1996), 3:35.

¹³ Charles H. Spurgeon, "The Crown of Thorns," 20:227.

b) The crown of thorns is a fitting symbol of humiliation and suffering unto victory. The curse that the first Adam brought was worldwide and comprehensive. The second Adam by His suffering unto the death of the cross definitively conquered the curse. The crown of gold had to be preceded by the crown of thorns. It is on the basis of our Lord's redemptive suffering that He rules over all things in heaven and on earth (Mt. 28:19ff.). It is on the basis of the Messiah's redemptive suffering that even the curse of creation is conquered. "For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now" (Rom. 8:20-23). The crown of thorns was necessary for the dominion mandate to be restored to its original God-glorifying purpose. Because Christ wore the crown of thorns and endured the full brunt of God's curse against sin, the whole creation looks forward to the day of redemption when the curse is no more.

c) In the crown of thorns we see tangible proof that Jesus' kingdom is not of this world. Only a redemptive King would allow Himself to be crowned with a symbol of the curse and an instrument of severe pain. Other kings conquer with swords and spears, but this holy King conquers through His precious sinless blood. In Leviticus we read that the high priest would place both his hands on the head of the goat to symbolize the imputation of Israel's sin to the spotless animal (Lev. 16:21). But here God places thorns upon His Son's head, symbolizing the sin and curse of the whole redeemed race as well as the whole world under a curse. As far as sin and the curse are found our Lord has conquered. "Here, as in every step of Christ's passion, we see His complete and perfect substitution for sinners. He, the innocent sin-bearer, wore the crown of thorns, that we, the guilty, might wear a crown of glory. Vast is the contrast which there will be between the crown of glory that Christ will wear at His second advent, and the crown of thorns which He wore at His first coming."¹⁴ When we contemplate what our Lord did to remove our guilt and curse, we can begin to understand why we shall cast our crowns of glory at His pierced feet and cry out: "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom, and strength and honor and glory and blessing" (Rev. 5:12)!

Christ Mocked by the Soldiers

The soldiers did not stop their ridicule with the crown of thorns. They proceeded to array Jesus with a purple garment. Purple represented the royal color signifying the dress of a king.¹⁵ If the soldiers did not reuse the cloth that came from Herod's soldiers, they would likely have used either an old worn rug or a soldier's faded mantle. "Once more we should call to mind the symbolical nature of this transaction also. Our Lord was clothed with a robe of shame and contempt, that we might be clothed with a spotless garment of righteousness, and stand in white robes before the throne of God."¹⁶

¹⁴ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3:304.

¹⁵ Leon Morris' comments on the color of the robe are very helpful: "John's word is *porphuroun* (cf. Mark 15:17, *porphuran*). Matthew speaks of a *chlamuda kokkinen* (Matt. 27:28). In strictness scarlet was the color formed from the dried bodies of a scale insect that lived on the oak, while purple, a very costly color, came from the shell fish *murex*. But the ancients do not seem to have distinguished very sharply between colors, at least in their nomenclature. Purple was the color for royalty, but the soldiers would not have had access to a genuine purple cloak. A scarlet cloak, however, would be easy to obtain, and it would give the general idea well enough" (*The Gospel According to John*, 791, footnote 4).

¹⁶ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3:305.

Mark and Matthew add the detail of placing a stick in the Savior's hand which represented the royal diadem. "When they had twisted a crown of thorns, they put it on His head, and a reed in His right hand. And they bowed the knee before and mocked Him, saying, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' Then they spat on Him, and took the reed and struck Him on the head" (Mt. 27:29-30). The phrase, "Hail, King of the Jews," was done in mock imitation of the words that were addressed to the Roman emperor, "Hail Caesar!" Since the Roman soldiers were not knowledgeable of the Scriptures or theology it is likely that in mocking Jesus they were making fun of the Jews and their hopes. "It was the kingdom of the Jews itself that the soldiers laughed at. They regarded Jesus as the representative of the Messianic hope of the Jews. They would turn to ridicule these royal hopes, which were known far in the heathen world, more especially as they aspired...to the dominion of the whole earth."¹⁷ "Here then is the Gospel of our salvation: the Savior was scourged, that we might go free, He was crowned with thorns, that we might be crowned with blessing and glory; He was clothed with a robe of contempt, that we might receive the robe of righteousness; He was rejected as king, that we might be made kings and priests unto God."¹⁸ Everything that we deserved as fallen creatures, as accursed sinners was placed upon Jesus. "See here the wonderful condescension of our Lord Jesus in his sufferings for us. Great and generous minds can bear anything better than ignominy, any toil, any pain, any loss, rather than reproach; yet this the great and holy Jesus submitted to for us."¹⁹

Pilate's Last Appeal

After our Lord is severely beaten, mocked and dressed in "wretched clothes that make him look more like a clown than a king,"²⁰ Pilate brings Christ out of the Praetorium and presents Him to the Jews.²¹ "Then Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. And Pilate said to them, 'Behold the Man!'" (Jn. 19:5). Pilate's purpose in this presentation was to show the Jews that Jesus was a harmless, pitiful creature. In this state of supreme humiliation He obviously was not a threat to the Romans or the Jews. The governor hoped this shocking, pathetic sight of the Savior covered in blood, in severe pain, with a beaten and distorted face, with the ridiculous mock robe and crown of thorns would cause the Jews to have mercy and drop the charges.

In this presentation of Christ we see the very essence of the gospel: that victory could only come after the abyss of humiliation and suffering. On the one hand we have Pilate saying, "Here is the Man! Look at this pitiful wretched creature!" On the other hand the Jewish people are screaming for His death by crucifixion. Yet, this man of sorrows, beaten beyond recognition, covered in blood and stripes was the king of truth who came down from heaven. Preceded by Pilate's second statement of the innocence of Christ, the Messiah King of Scripture is boldly and emphatically set before the Jews. "'Behold the man:' look once more on this man, this man who is a man no more, Isa. liii.3, a worm and no man, Ps.xxii.7, in His deepest misery lustrous with innocence and righteousness, silent and patient in His sufferings, like a lamb led to the slaughter,

¹⁷ E. W. Hengstenberg, *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*, 2:389.

¹⁸ Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John*, 3:209-210.

¹⁹ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:1189.

²⁰ George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 337.

²¹ "That 'Ecco Homo' ['behold the Man'] of his sounds over the world and draws the eyes of all generations to that marred visage. And lo, as we look, the shame is gone; it has lifted off Him and fallen on Pilate himself, on the soldiery, the priests, and the mob. His outflashing glory has scorched away every speck of disgrace, and tipped the crown of thorns with a hundred points of flaming brightness" (James Stalker, *Life of Christ*, 138).

and like a sheep that is dumb before her shearers.”²² Pilate’s indecisiveness led to the increase of our Lord’s humiliation and the great aggravation of the Jews’ guilt. “Truly, ‘though He was rich, yet for our sakes He became poor.’ (2 Cor. viii.9.) Since the world began, the sun never shone on a more surprising spectacle both for angels and men.”²³

As in the preceding attempts to set Jesus free, Pilate is totally disappointed by the Jews’ response. The Jews were not softened in their hatred of Christ by the pitiful sight of the torn, bleeding, humiliated Savior. “Like beasts of prey they have tasted blood, they thirsted for more. The humiliating figure of their Messiah crowned with thorns by these heathen, instead of humbling, only infuriated them.”²⁴ They cried out, “crucify, crucify!” What a tragic sight—the chosen people, even in the face of the bloodied, tortured Savior demand the death of their own Messiah by crucifixion. The visible church had become a synagogue of Satan. In the name of their corrupt religion, they repeatedly demanded the judicial torture and murder of the Prince of Life.

Pilate is surprised and angered by this response and for the third time emphatically declares the innocence of Jesus. “You take and crucify Him for I find no fault in Him” (Jn. 19:6). John, like Luke (see 23:4, 14, 22), “is careful to record that Pilate three times affirmed his conviction of Jesus’ innocence.”²⁵ This is the third time that Pilate’s plan to avoid being responsible for the death of Christ has completely failed. The sending of our Lord to Herod; the choice of Barabbas or Jesus; and now the presentation of the scourged and humiliated Savior all failed because the Jews were utterly determined that the Nazarene die an accursed death. The governor is so frustrated that he tells the Jews to go out and crucify Him themselves—an act contrary to Roman law. “Pilate was disgusted at their lawless clamor, indignant at their challenging his decision, angry at their insistence. ‘Take ye him’, if you want; ‘and crucify’ if you dare.”²⁶

At this point the Jews accuse Jesus of blasphemy (Jn. 19:7), which leads to Pilate’s second interrogation of the Savior (Jn. 19:9-11).

The main tactic of the Jews which stopped Pilate’s attempt to set Christ free is found in John 19:12-15: “From then on Pilate sought to release Him, but the Jews cried out, saying, ‘If you let this Man go, you are not Caesar’s friend. Whoever makes himself a king speaks against Caesar.’ When Pilate therefore heard that saying, he brought Jesus out and sat down in the judgment seat in a place that is called the Pavement, but in Hebrew, Gabbatha. Now it was the Preparation Day of the Passover, and about the sixth hour. And he said to the Jews, ‘Behold your King!’ But they cried out, ‘Away with Him, away with Him! Crucify Him!’ Pilate said to them, ‘Shall I crucify your King?’ The chief priests answered, ‘We have no king but Caesar!’”

The Jews in their wicked cunning finally bring out their trump card. This is the argument that brings Pilate to his knees. The argument is basically as follows: “Jesus had made Himself a king. Anyone who declares himself a king is an enemy of Caesar. Therefore if you let Christ go, then you are not a friend of Caesar. You are not loyal to Caesar. You are in fact an enemy of Caesar.” This argument was an indirect threat to Pilate’s life. The Jewish leaders are making it known to the governor that if he lets the Nazarene go, then the Jews will send a number of complaints and charges unto Caesar. Not only would they bring up his past failures, which were

²² E. W. Hengstenberg, *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*, 2:391.

²³ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3:307.

²⁴ Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John*, 3:211.

²⁵ J. H. Bernard, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John*, 2:617.

²⁶ Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John*, 3:212.

serious; but they also would accuse Pilate of releasing a Jewish revolutionary against Rome who claimed to be king. “And that 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.”²⁷

This Jewish accusation reveals the length they were willing to go to place Jesus on the cross. These wicked liars had just convinced the people to let a truly dangerous revolutionary go in the place of our Lord who never countenanced acts of violence or revolution; who bid the Jews to render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s. These very men who passionately hated Caesar and Roman rule are accusing the highest Roman official in Judea of disloyalty to Rome. “What a frightful snarl of lies and hypocrisy!... The scene was a devil’s masterpiece in lying.”²⁸ Pilate knew the Jews were despicable liars and hypocrites; and, he also knew that the Savior was no political or military threat to Rome whatsoever. But Pilate was unwilling to jeopardize his own life to secure the life of the Nazarene. He would rather send an innocent man to a horrible death than allow himself to be scrutinized by his superiors and possibly lose his own position, property and life. Pilate was a pragmatist and a coward who sent the sinless Son of God to the cross to save his own skin. In the final analysis, “Pilate had to choose between *Christ and the world*. When the issue was clearly defined, he did not hesitate; he decided to please the people and win their applause, rather than intensify their already fierce hatred against him and condemn him to Caesar.”²⁹

We must see the hand of God in all of this. Jesus the Messiah had to be condemned and had to die a sacrificial death on the cross. Yet Pilate, in God’s sovereign plan, conducted the trial of Christ in such a manner as to prove decisively and repeatedly that the Nazarene was completely innocent. The governor, yielding to impressions of the truth, publicly declared three times, “I find no fault in Him” (Jn. 18:38; 19:4, 6; cf. Lk. 23:4, 14); yet being the weak, sinful, cowardly man that he was, he sent the Savior to His death. Pilate was a fitting instrument in the hand of God. The sinlessness of Christ was exalted and the necessary propitiatory death was accomplished.

When Pilate heard this new Jewish argument regarding loyalty to Caesar, he gave up. He brought Jesus outside and placed Him in the public spot for the pronouncement of the sentence. John tells us that Pilate “sat down in the judgment seat called The Pavement, but in Hebrew, Gabbatha” (19:13). “The condemnation must be spoken under the open heaven, in the presence of the accused.”³⁰ When John describes this announcement regarding the guilt and condemnation of Christ, it is clear that this event holds a universal significance for him. Note how he so carefully ties this momentous event to history. He not only designates the place by both its Greek and Hebrew (or Aramaic) names, but also specifies the day and the hour. The Jews gathered before Pilate did not know that their wicked actions would lead to the fulfillment of the Passover, a second, greater Exodus wherein the Savior’s sacrificial blood would set sinners free in all nations. The crucial hour of redemption, the most important event in human history, has arrived.

The Greek word for pavement (*aithostroton*) can refer to “a stone pavement” or an area inlaid with stone such as marble. It can also refer to “a mosaic pavement.” The word *Gabbatha* is not related to the term pavement and simply signifies a hill of some kind. Apparently what the

²⁷ George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 340.

²⁸ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John’s Gospel*, 1269-1270.

²⁹ Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John*, 3:222.

³⁰ E. W. Hengstenberg, *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*, 2:398.

Romans called the “Pavement” the Jews called *Gabbatha*. “W. F. Albright thinks that L. H. Vincent has demonstrated that the place referred to is the courtyard of the Tower of Antonia, where there was a Roman pavement covering at least 2,500 square meters. As it stood on a rocky height the name *gabbeta*, ‘ridge’, was applicable (BNT pp. 158f).”³¹ This place is the traditional site of these amazing events.

Regarding John’s time indicators, we need to note in contradistinction from modernists that there is no contradiction between John’s account and the synoptic gospels. When John says “Now it was the Preparation Day of the Passover” (19:14), he is not designating the period immediately prior to the Passover week. “Elsewhere (Mk. 15:42, Lk. 23:54, Mt. 27:62, and Jn. 19:31) *paraskeua* means the day of preparation for the Sabbath, as here.”³² “The first statement should cause no trouble whatever. Luke 23:53 writes, ‘it was the day of preparation, and the Sabbath drew on’; compare Matt. 27:62. Mark 15:42 has, ‘the preparation, that is, the day before the Sabbath,’ ... And John himself repeats *paraskeua*, ‘the preparation,’ in v. 31 and 42. All this means that the day of the condemnation and crucifixion of Jesus is Friday.”³³

What about the time given by John (“about the sixth hour,” 19:14)? Doesn’t Mark say, “Now it was the third hour, and they crucified Him” (15:25)? As we consider this alleged “problem,” we must keep in mind that both John and Mark wrote under divine inspiration. Therefore, their records are infallible and cannot truly contradict one another. Among commentators there are at least six different solutions offered regarding this problem. We will only consider the two best solutions offered. The first argues that John is using the Roman method of keeping time, while Mark the Jewish manner. Thus, for John the sixth hour would be around 6:00 am while Mark’s third hour would be around 9:00 am. The problem with this view is that 6:00 am would be too early for the conclusion of Pilate’s trial. Also, John uses the Jewish method of reckoning time when he discusses the Samaritan woman. Further, “there appears to be no evidence that the so-called Roman method of computing time was used other than in legal matters like leases. At Rome, as elsewhere, the day was reckoned to begin at sunrise.”³⁴

The best solution is that the Jewish method of reckoning time was not nearly as precise as ours and thus John and Mark are giving approximations not exact time references. Ryle writes, “John’s sixth hour means any time after nine o’clock in the morning; any time, in fact, within the space begun by the Jewish third hour. They say that the Jews divided the twelve hours of the day into four great portions: from six to nine, from nine to twelve, from twelve to three, and from three to six. They also say that any part of the time after our six in the morning would be called the third hour, and any time after our nine in the morning would be called the sixth hour. And they conclude that both the condemnation and the crucifixion took place soon after nine o’clock,—Mark calling it the third hour, because it was near our nine o’clock; John calling it the sixth hour, because it was some time between our nine and twelve.”³⁵ This position is strengthened by the fact that John does not say, “it was the sixth hour,” but that “it was about the sixth hour.” Therefore, Mark’s “third hour” refers to a time after 9:00 am perhaps in the middle of the morning, while John’s the sixth hour indicates that perhaps the mid-morning had passed and it was closer to noon than 9:00 am. We can only be certain that Jesus was crucified between 9:00 am and noon. It had to be quite some time *before* noon because from twelve to three o’clock

³¹ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 800, footnote 31.

³² J. H. Bernard, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John*, 2:623.

³³ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John’s Gospel*, 1271.

³⁴ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 800.

³⁵ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3:320-321.

a miraculous pitch darkness covered the land (Mk. 15:33; Mt. 27:45; Lk. 23:44). Obviously the darkness did not begin until our Lord had been on the cross for some time.

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