

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

Chapter 12: The Civil Trial of Christ—Jesus Condemned to Death

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Pilate saith unto them, “What shall I do then with Jesus which is called Christ?” They all say unto him, “Let him be crucified.” And the governor said, “Why, what evil hath he done?” But they cried out the more, saying, “Let him be crucified.” When Pilate saw that he could prevail nothing, but that rather a tumult was made, he took water, and washed his hands before the multitude, saying, “I am innocent of the blood of this just person: see ye to it.” Then answered all the people, and said, “His blood be on us, and on our children.” Then released he Barabbas unto them: and when he had scourged Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified. (Mt. 27:22:26)

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. (Jn. 19:14-16)

As we turn our attention to the conviction of Christ we will examine: (1) Pilate’s final actions; and, (2) The Jews’ expression of their hatred toward Jesus.

(1) During this most amazing trial in history Pilate has come to the conclusion that all of his appeals have had absolutely no effect upon the Jews and that his only option is to condemn a completely innocent man to death. Consequently, as the trial draws to a close, we see Pilate do three things: first, he angrily makes one last appeal; second, he attempts to make himself innocent in the matter of the Savior’s death; and, third he gives the Jews what they wanted by passing sentence against Jesus.

The governor’s frustration is seen in his statement to the Jews, “Behold your king!”¹ Pilate knew that the Jews emphatically rejected the kingship of Christ, so this statement is spoken with scorn and sarcasm. Pilate is angry at the Jews and thus purposely inflames their rage. The Jews respond like wild dogs that have injured a young deer: “Away with Him, away with Him!” In other words, “Take Him away and crucify Him.” As Matthew puts it, “Let Him be crucified” (27:22, 23). To this response Pilate makes his last appeal, “Shall I crucify your king?” (Jn. 19:15). Matthew adds, “What evil has He done?” (Mt. 27:23). Pilate knows that he cannot change the mind of this mob. Therefore, he makes this final appeal in order to focus responsibility for the Savior’s death on the Jews.

Matthew’s account tells us that Pilate then resorts to some symbolism to placate his own guilt and place the blame squarely upon the Jews. “When Pilate saw that he could not prevail at

¹ Leon Morris writes, “Pilate...did not deliver sentence as might have been expected, but said, ‘Behold your King!’ As in the case of ‘Behold, the man!’ (v. 5) John’s irony lurks behind the words. For Pilate there was no question of kingship. It was plain to him that Jesus was not a king in any sense in which he understood the term. He was simply using the terms of the accusation in a last ditch effort to get the Jews to drop proceedings. But for John the kingship was real. He wants us to see Jesus as King in the very act in which He went to death for the salvation of men” (*The Gospel According to John*, 802).

all, but rather that a tumult was rising, he took water and washed his hands before the multitude saying, ‘I am innocent of the blood of this just Person. You see to it’” (Mt. 27:24). The washing of the hands with water as a public sign of innocence was found among Greeks and had precedence in the Old Testament.² For example, when the elders of a city found a man who was slain and did not know who killed him, “all the elders of that city nearest to the slain man shall wash their hands over the heifer whose neck was broken in the valley. Then, they shall answer and say, ‘Our hands have not shed this blood, nor have our eyes seen it’” (Deut. 21:6-7; cf. Ps. 26:6; 73:13). The crowd understood exactly what the governor was doing, for he accompanied the sign with the words: “I am innocent of the blood of this righteous Man.” “The judge was saying, as it were, ‘Since I do not at all believe that Jesus is guilty of any crime, I refuse to assume any responsibility for his death by crucifixion. I am free from the guilt of shedding his blood.’”³

Pilate declared that Christ was an innocent, righteous Man. Yet he was willing to use his authority as a magistrate to send the Savior to His death. The governor was engaged in a great self-deception when he believed that a water ritual and his statement that he was not responsible shifted all his accountability to the Jews. Pilate admitted publicly that in essence the execution of Jesus was nothing short of cold-blooded murder. Therefore, the only moral thing for Pilate to do would have been to release the Savior. Pilate, however, was convinced that he could remove his own responsibility by words and public gestures *without* the accompanying right deeds. He was sorely mistaken. Pilate’s self-deception should be a warning to every believer of the sinful heart’s amazingly deceitful ability to justify or excuse sinful behavior.

Pilate’s final act in the trial was to pronounce sentence regarding Jesus. What is particularly interesting regarding this point is that none of the gospels give us an explicit pronouncement of sentence against our Lord. The closest statement we have is found in Luke 23:24-25: “So Pilate gave sentence that it should be as they requested. And he released to them the one they requested...but he delivered Jesus to their will.” “In 2 Macc. 4:47 and 3 Macc. 4:2 the term ‘gave sentence’ (*epekrinen*) is a technical term for giving a judicial sentence.”⁴ Note that Pilate does not pronounce that Christ is guilty; but instead he declares that the sentence should be as the Jews requested. This point is emphasized by the statement that “he delivered Jesus to their will.” “This pronouncement, made by a judge who again and again had declared that Jesus was innocent, was the most shocking travesty of justice history has ever recorded.”⁵ “Luke begins and ends by referring to the Jews, first to *their demand* that Pilate granted and finally to *their will* to which he gave Jesus up. We cannot miss the emphasis on the Jews’ responsibility for Jesus’ death.”⁶ “He delivered Him *to the mob* (John xix.16), and thus *to the will of the mob* (Luke xxiii.25), making use, however, of the soldiers to see the execution legally consummated.”⁷

Pilate, the centurion and his quaternion of soldiers (although guilty for their own actions) were merely carrying out the decision of the chief priests and the Jewish mob. We must remember that behind all of this wicked madness lies God’s sovereign will. Christ “was delivered up because of our offenses” (Rom. 4:25). God “did not spare His own Son, but

² “Washing hands was a typically Jewish (but also sometimes Gentile) way of declaring one’s innocence (Deut. 21:6; Letter of Aristeas 306)” (Craig S. Keener, *The Bible Background Commentary*, 126).

³ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 956.

⁴ Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, 582.

⁵ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Luke*, 1019.

⁶ Leon Morris, *Luke*, 353.

⁷ James Morison, *A Practical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew*, 584.

delivered Him up for us all” (Rom. 8:32). Our Lord was delivered over to suffering and death, so that we would forever be delivered from the sufferings of hell and eternal death. What an amazing and glorious salvation!

(2) As we turn our attention to the Jews’ response to Pilate’s final arguments in our Lord’s trial, there are two statements to consider.

First, in response to Pilate’s question, “Shall I crucify your king,” the chief priests answered, “We have no king but Caesar!” (Jn. 19:15). John, writing under divine inspiration, wants us to know that this statement was not simply from some thugs in the crowd, but came directly from the leadership of the Jewish nation. The leaders of the Jewish people became so wrapped up in their hatred and denunciation of Christ that they renounced their allegiance to God and their hope in the coming deliverance of the Messiah. When they rejected God incarnate for a wicked pagan emperor, they unwittingly revealed their complete apostasy and denunciation of Jehovah.

The chief priests had made this statement to Pilate to emphasize that they were completely loyal to Caesar in order to scare Pilate, whom they were accusing of being disloyal. These men, in reality, hated Caesar and could not care less if the emperor was loyally served or brutally murdered. Yet, in God’s providence, their words had a deeper significance than they themselves intended. According to the Old Testament the ideal for faithful Jews was that God Himself would be their king (see Judg. 8:23; 1 Sam. 8:7). Jesus the Messiah, the God-man, was the Man whom God intended to rule the whole world and have victory over all of His enemies. “When they despised Christ their true King, and delivered Him up to death, they ceased, in fact, to be God’s people and kingdom, and sank entirely under the power of this world, which God used for the execution of His wrath: comp. Lukexix.27”⁸ Beasley-Murray writes,

The implications of this statement are to be weighed. In the context of the trial of Jesus, of the Man who proclaimed to the nation the kingdom of God, and manifested it in his deeds, and called on Israel to repent and believe, it is nothing less than the abandonment of the messianic hope of Israel. For it is not Jesus alone whom they reject; any claimant to the messianic office is excluded on the basis of the slogan, ‘No king but Caesar.’ Their repudiation of Jesus in the name of a pretended loyalty to the emperor entailed their repudiation of the promise of the kingdom of God, with which the gift of the Messiah is inseparably bound in Jewish faith, and Israel’s vocation to be its heir, its instrument, and its proclaimer to the nations.⁹

They confessed with their mouths Caesar instead of Christ and they received their apostate confession. Their confession was like an unconscious prophecy. “Justly therefore they were delivered into Caesar’s hands, and endured the heaviest calamities.”¹⁰ “[T]hey madly proclaimed to the world, though they knew it not, that ‘the scepter had departed from Judah’ and that Messiah must have come. (Gen. xlix.10.)”¹¹

Second, after Pilate washed his hands and proclaimed his innocence regarding the blood of Christ, “all the people answered and said, ‘His blood be on us and on our children’” (Mt. 27:25). The Jewish crowd was so obsessed with obtaining the sentence of crucifixion from Pilate that they were immediately willing to absolve the governor of all responsibility and take that responsibility upon themselves and their own children. This statement reveals their complete

⁸ E. W. Hengstenberg, *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*, 2:405.

⁹ George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 343.

¹⁰ Cyril as quoted in J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3:323.

¹¹ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3:323.

blindness to the truth, in that they would only make such a careless statement if they were fully convinced that their cause was righteous before God. They, in essence, were saying to Pilate, “Do not concern yourself with the death of this man. If there is to be any blame for the shedding of His blood, we are happy to absolve you of any guilt in this matter and we are even willing to take the whole blame ourselves. Therefore, your conscience should now be totally free. Go ahead and condemn Him. On us and our children, not on you or on yours shall be all the responsibility and liability of judgment.” Woe unto that generation of unbelieving Jews who rejected the suffering servant, for it cost them their lives and souls. Spurgeon writes,

He that stumbleth upon this stone shall be broken, but upon whomsoever this stone shall fall it shall grind him to powder. See what came to these Jewish people: they were themselves crucified by Titus in such numbers that they could no longer find wood enough for their execution. Jerusalem destroyed is the result of Jesus crucified. Beware, ye that fight against him, for the omnipotent Father will take up his quarrel, and all the forces of creation and of providence will be at his command to wage war for truth and righteousness. The Nazarene has triumphed, and he will triumph even to the end, when he shall have all his enemies under his feet. O ye that hate him, be wise betimes, and close the hopeless contest in which you chiefly fight your own souls.¹²

Regarding the Jews’ statement we should note the following.

a) Matthew writing under divine inspiration seems to be condemning the unbelieving nation as a whole. “Throughout the passion narrative Matthew has used the term *ochlos* to refer to the crowd. But in Matt. 27:25 he switches to *pas ho laos* (‘all the people’). Elsewhere in his Gospel, Matthew uses *laos* to refer to the Jewish people taken as a collectivity. Matthew meant more than the small group of Jews who gathered around Pilate’s judgment seat at Passover time in A.D. 30.”¹³ The unbelieving nation as a whole was placed under a horrible curse as a result of their rejection of the Messiah.

b) Like their leaders’ statement regarding Caesar, the Jews are, without realizing it, indeed pronouncing a curse upon themselves and their families. In light of the destruction of Israel, Jerusalem and the temple in A.D. 67-70, their statement is almost prophetic.

c) The idea of blood or the guilt of shed blood resting upon someone or “upon their head” is a biblical concept. In 2 Samuel 1:16 David kills an Amalekite for slaying Saul saying, “Your blood is on your own head, for your own mouth has testified against you.” Jeremiah told the wicked princes and people that if they killed him, “you will surely bring innocent blood on yourselves, on this city, and on its inhabitants” (26:15). As a result of the preaching of the gospel, which included the truth about who was responsible for our Lord’s death, the Jewish council said to Peter and the other apostles, “And look, you have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this Man’s blood on us!” (Ac. 5:28).

d) This passage and its literal fulfillment does not contradict the Old Testament teaching that children must not be punished for the sins of their fathers (e.g., Ezek. 18:2-3 and Jer. 31:29-30, “In those days they shall say no more: ‘The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.’ But every one shall die for his own iniquity...”). The children were included in the curse because they (with the exception of those who converted to Christ) also hated Jesus and persecuted His church. To hate, persecute and murder believers is treated in

¹² Charles H. Spurgeon, “Pilate and Ourselves Guilty of the Saviour’s Death,” 28:137.

¹³ Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 392.

Scripture as persecuting the Lord Himself (e.g., “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” Ac. 8:4).

The Jews received a special curse because they rejected Christ in spite of: the amazing signs He did in their presence; His personal teaching; the perfect fulfillment of prophecy; their standing as the covenant people, and their very active role in His condemnation and crucifixion. Nevertheless, this curse should stand as a warning to all the enemies and opponents of the Mediator. There are many avowed enemies of the resurrected king in our day (e.g., modernists, so-called scientists, secular humanists, Islamic Fascists, etc.) who delight in insulting Jesus Christ, His people and His infallible Word. In fact, in our anti-Christian Western culture unbelievers, deniers, mockers and blasphemers are put on a pedestal by the people and the civil magistrate. “These are the true followers of the men whose mouths were full of ‘Crucify Him! Crucify Him!’ They cannot endure that Jesus should be remembered, much less revered. They claim to be ‘liberal,’ and to be large-hearted towards all religions; but their unmitigated scorn of the faith of Jesus is displayed on every possible occasion, proving that the spirit of persecution burns within them.”¹⁴

They hate the Lord because they want to maintain their human autonomy. They do not want their sins exposed. They do not want to repent and acknowledge their guilt. They hate the truth and most of all they hate the Truth incarnate. With every fiber of their being they cry out, “Away with Him. Put Him to death.” But the Truth incarnate has already conquered death; He is resurrected and sits at the right hand of Power. Take comfort, dear Christian, for He is coming again. He will come “in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power” (2 Th. 1:8-9). If you do not embrace the Lord Jesus Christ by faith, then you will end up in the ethical garbage dump of history.

The trial of the Savior has come to an end. The greatest travesty of justice in history has occurred. The most pure, holy, innocent Man in human history—the sinless Lamb of God—has been rejected, tortured, mocked and convicted. As we tearfully contemplate these painful events, we must do so with the knowledge that in God’s wonderful plan of redemption these horrible events had to occur. There was no other way for God to be just while justifying sinners (Rom. 3:26). The just had to suffer and die for the unjust. When we begin to understand this amazing salvation, our tears are mingled with joy; for victory has come by the sinless blood of the divine-human Mediator. “He shall see the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied: by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities” (Isa. 53:11).

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¹⁴ Charles H. Spurgeon, “Pilate and Ourselves Guilty of the Savior’s Death,” 28:135.