

3. Who is on trial?

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Date: 31 October 2012

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[0 : 00] Now let's pray. In this is love. Not that we love God, but that he loves us and gave his son to die for our sins.

Father, as we will spend these moments contemplating the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ, contemplating his trial, his rejection by the great ones of the world, and as we are faced once again with our attitude towards that cross, we pray indeed that we may be able to say in our hearts what we have sung with our lips, where the whole realm of nature mine, that were an offering far too small, love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.

Father, may the reality of all that he endured for us, may the wonder of his great love with which he loved us even to death, may that grip our hearts, may it expand our minds and our affections, and send us out into the world more truly to be his followers and more faithfully to be his people.

We ask this in his name. Amen. Now in the Bibles we are reading on page 883.

This is the third of this short series on the cross, and we come now particularly to the trial before Pilate and before Herod.

[1 : 46] We are going to read actually verses 1 to 25. This is Luke 23 verse 1. Then the whole company of them arose, that's those who had arrested Jesus plus the various assorted Jewish leaders, and brought him before Pilate.

And they began to accuse him, saying, We found this man misleading our nation, and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ a king.

And Pilate asked him, Are you the king of the Jews? Jesus answered him, You have said so. Then Pilate said to the chief priests and to the crowds, I find no guilt in this man.

But they were urgent, saying, He stirs up the people, teaching throughout all Judea from Galilee, even to this place. When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean.

And when he learned that he belonged to Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him over to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that very time. When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had long desired to see him, because he had heard about him, and he was hoping to see some sign done by him.

[3 : 04] So he questioned him at some length, but Jesus made no answer. Chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him. And Herod, with his soldiers, treated him with contempt, and mocked him.

Then they arrayed him in splendid clothing, and sent him back to Pilate. And Herod and Pilate became friends with each other that very day, for before this they had been at enmity with each other.

Pilate then called together the chief priests, and the rulers, and the people, and said to them, You brought me this man, as one who was misleading the people. And after examining him before you, behold, I did not find this man guilty of any of the charges against him.

Neither did Herod, for he sent him back to us. Look, nothing deserving death has been done by him. I will therefore punish and release him. But they all cried together, Away with this man!

Release to us Barabbas! A man who had been thrown into prison for an insurrection, started in the city, and for murder. Pilate addressed them once more, desiring to release Jesus, but they kept shouting, Crucify him!

[4 : 20] Crucify him! A third time he said to them, Why? What evil has he done? I have found in him no guilt deserving death. I will therefore punish and release him.

But they were urgent, demanding with loud cries that he should be crucified. And their voices prevailed. So Pilate decided that their demand should be granted.

He released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, for whom they asked. That he delivered Jesus over to their will.

Amen. That is the word of God. May he bless it to our hearts. Amen. One of the most dramatic things you get in human society is a spectacular trial scene, particularly the kind of scene where some brilliant barrister rescues an innocent person against whom the evidence seems to be overwhelming.

But by clever arguments and by powerful rhetoric, the barrister manages to have him released. There's nothing like that here, is there?

[5 : 38] Here the judge pronounces Jesus to be innocent and still condemns him. That's what we've got here. Now, as we've looked at the account of these events in this Gospel, I suggest to you that Luke has a particular emphasis.

I particularly compared him with Mark. When Mark gives the same account, not a contradictory account, but Mark emphasizes the utter isolation of Jesus.

His apparent helplessness in the hands of his enemies. Now, Luke does not deny that, but Luke particularly talks about the authority of Jesus.

And the fact that although he is on trial, he is actually the one who is to be the judge. That's why I've called today, Who is on Trial?

In one sense it's very obvious. Herod and Pilate, the military, civil, religious leaders. They are in the judgment seat. Jesus is on trial.

[6 : 42] And yet, who is the real judge? Who is on trial? It's very interesting. Later on, when Luke talks about this incident in his second book, he sees this as fulfilling Psalm 2.

This is what he says in Acts chapter 4. He said, David, David, our father, the Lord's servant, said by the Holy Spirit, Why did the nations rage and the people plot in vain?

The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord and against his anointed. For truly in this city, there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom he anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel.

You see what Luke is saying? Luke is saying, although they seem to be in control, this was prophesied long ago in Psalm 2, that God's king would be rejected, that God's king would be mocked, that God's king would be ridiculed, and yet, he is going to sit on the judgment seat.

And Luke is going to tell us that Paul, at a later stage, is to stand in the city of Athens and say, God has appointed a day in which he will judge the world in righteousness by the one whom he has appointed.

[8 : 04] So with that in mind, let's look at this little incident for a few moments. You'll notice how it centers around two men. We begin with Pilate, we go on to Herod, and then we return to Pilate, which of course is a lesson in itself.

Pilate tries to evade responsibility, but he can't. Jesus is going to return. So first of all, in verses 1 to 5, we have accusation.

Accusation. The whole company of them, verse 2, began to accuse him. Now look, it's particularly emphasizing the different responses to Jesus.

And there are three particular accusations that are made here. Two of these are false, and one is true, but it's not true in the way that the accusers imagine.

It's not just a general accusation, two false accusations, one accusation which is true, but not true in the way that they imagine. First of all, they say, we found this man misleading our nation and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar.

[9 : 12] They say, this man is a revolutionary. This man has actually led people against the kingdom, against the authorities, and they give no evidence whatsoever.

This is simply prejudice. This is a knee-jerk reaction, and they're basically, they're not really presenting legal evidence. If a good barrister would have torn this to shreds in a few seconds, they give no reaction, they give no evidence at all.

This is a knee-jerk reaction. That's the first accusation. He's a revolutionary. Second accusation is he forbids us to give tribute to Caesar. Now, that is a lie, because back in chapter 20, Jesus has said, give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's.

He had not said to people, don't pay your taxes. He had people might have liked, I mean, people usually like to be told they don't have to pay taxes after all. He hasn't said that at all.

He said, Caesar is the authority. Pay him what you owe him. And so, this is showing total lack of integrity. He's a revolutionary. He's saying, don't pay your taxes.

[10:30] And both of these are blatant lies. And the third accusation, they say, he himself is Christ. He himself is the Messiah. Now, this is, of course, absolutely true.

But it's not true in the way they think it is. They think he's setting up an alternative earthly kingdom. This man is going to overthrow the Romans. He's going to set up kingship in Jerusalem.

And this accusation is absolutely true, because he is a king. But he is not the king in the way they imagine he is.

He is the king. He is the Christ. The long-promised one. This is he of whom the prophets promised in their faithful word. And he's going to say this to his disciples in chapter 24.

Ought not the Messiah to have suffered these things and then entered into his glory. The one thing that never crosses their minds, And the one thing that never crosses the minds of millions is that this true king is going to come to his kingdom through suffering.

[11:40] He's going to come to his kingdom through death. And, of course, it is this third accusation which interests Pilate, because Pilate is actually rather afraid of the Jews.

Other historians tell us about Pilate. They tell us that he was essentially a weak man. And weak people are dangerous when they get into a corner. And Pilate was a man who loved power, loved authority.

So when he hears this king of the Jews, Other disciples say, If you let this man go, you are not Caesar's friend. He thought of the terrible Tiberius in Rome with his furious rages, and he thought, And he thought, This is something I'm going to avoid.

So there is accusation. You know, these are still the kind of things that are said about Jesus. Some people see him simply as a revolutionary. Others see him as someone who would be an earthly ruler.

But the point is, These words, Are you the king of the Jews? And Jesus answered, You have said so. Pilate, you've said it yourself. Now secondly, The second act, If you like, Verses 6 to 12, I would call evasion.

[12:59] Pilate is a weak man. Pilate had the chance to be strong, And he fails to take it. And he finds a wonderful opportunity to pass the buck. When, verse 6, When Pilate heard this, He asked whether the man was a Galilean.

When he learned he belonged to Herod's jurisdiction, He sent him over to Herod. Now this, of course, Is totally disingenuous, The way that Pilate is behaving. Pilate would be the last person to admit that Herod had any jurisdiction at all.

Because Pilate is the Roman representative. Herod is only ruling as a puppet king under the jurisdiction of Rome. Pilate is the representative of Rome.

So the last thing he would want was to pass over a decision to Herod. But he sees political advantage in it. And so, Jesus is sent to Herod.

Herod, A representative of that family, Whose destinies were so bound up with Jesus and his church. This is Herod Antipas, The murderer of John the Baptist.

[14:04] And the one whom Jesus has called that fox. A sly, Devious man. And Herod, And we are told, Verse 8, When Herod saw Jesus, He was very glad.

See, When Herod murdered John the Baptist, And then heard of Jesus, He was terrified. Herod was a superstitious man. And Herod said, John the Baptist has risen from the dead.

He'd heard about Jesus, And he has an interest in him. But it's the wrong kind of interest. Verse 8, He had long desired to see him, Because he had heard about him, He was hoping to see some sign, Done by him.

Herod wanted a miracle. Herod wanted magic. Herod wanted to see some sensational event, That he could no doubt talk about later. And there is still a problem with many people.

They want miracles. They want magic. They don't want Jesus who comes and says, Take up your cross and follow me. They want a Jesus who is like a kind of slot machine, Into which we feed our desires, And the results come out.

[15:18] He had an interest in Jesus, But it was not a saving interest. It was not the kind of interest that was going to lead him, Committing his life. And that leads to his refusal to take Jesus seriously.

Verse 11, Herod with his soldiers, Treated him with contempt, And mocked him. This man is no threat to us, Thought Herod and his friends.

Let's indulge in a spot of mockery. And this of course shows his shallowness, His instability. And then verse 12, Here is the real key to what's happening.

Herod and Pilate, Became friends with each other. That kind of political friendship, That depends on finding somebody you hate, More than you hate each other.

That's what's happening here. These two politicians, Herod Antipas and Pontius Pilate, Had found at last, Something to unite around.

[16:18] And it was a negative, Tragic, Disastrous thing for them. I would not be at all surprised, If that evening, An invitation came to Herod, To eat at the, Eat with Pilate, And his wife.

As the two of them, Made common cause, Against the Lord of glory, Who is on trial, Herod Antipas, And Pontius Pilate, Were on trial, And were found wanting.

That leads us to the third movement, In the scene, Which is, Condemnation. Essentially, Pilate had tried, To evade responsibility, And, But, Verse 12, He sent him, Back, To Pilate.

You're not going to get out of this, Pilate, You can't just evade this, And essentially, What Pilate does, Is he lets others, Make the decision, For him. Verse 15, Look, Nothing deserving death, I will therefore punish him, That meant flogging, And release him.

In other words, This man is innocent, But because I'm afraid of you, I'm going to give him a token punishment, And then, I'll let him go. He's trying to be neutral, He's trying to stand above the fray, And make no decision.

[17:42] But look at, Look at verse, Look at verse, 14 and 15, I did not find this man guilty, Of any of your charges, Neither did Herod, For he sent him back, To us.

Isn't this always a sign, Of a weak individual, Cannot, Will not make decisions, For themselves, But always hide behind, The decisions of others. Anyone who's ever worked, On a church staff, Knows this.

Kind of complete, Oh, A lot of us, Are saying this. A lot of people, Don't like this very much. Not, Not, Not brave enough, To, To be, Decisive, Themselves.

This is, This is Pontius Pilate. And he's, And of course, Faced with this, Savage, And murderous hatred, From the Jewish leader, He simply capitulates.

Verse 18, They all cried out together, Away with this man, And released to us, Barabbas. And we are told, He is a man, Who had started, An insurrection, And for murder.

[18:52] And, It was a custom, Some of the gospels tell us, To, For the governor, To release, A prominent prisoner, On the, On the day, Of the festival.

Pilate addressed them, Once more, Desiring to release Jesus, But they kept shouting, Crucify him, Crucify him. They, They know their man, They know this is a weak man, Who will not stand up, For anything.

And so they, They drown him down, They shout him down. They don't, They don't even bother, To argue, They present no evidence. Here's a supreme irony.

Barabbas had done, What Jesus was accused, Of doing. Barabbas actually, Had led, An insurrection. Barabbas actually, Had refused, To give tribute, To Caesar.

Barabbas had represented, Himself, As if not king, At least as leader, Of the Jewish people. They, So they, Hull down the innocent, And call, And call for the guilty, To be set free.

[20:00] As you know, The story of Barabbas, Is our story, Isn't it? If anyone there, Could have said, This man, Died, For me.

It was Barabbas, Wasn't it? Because that's exactly, What happened. Jesus died, For Barabbas. You know, Jesus died, For you and me as well.

And I think, It's highly unlikely, That anybody here, Has led an insurrection, In the city. But even if you have, There is forgiveness. And even if you haven't, We still need forgiveness.

This is the man, Who would have said, Jesus died for me. Verse 23, They were urgent, Demanding with loud cries, That she'd be crucified, And their voices prevailed.

The voice of prejudice, The voice of ignorance, The voice of hatred, Drown out justice. So Pilate, Decided that the man, Should be granted. And Luke leaves us, In no doubt, About what Pilate, He released the man, Who had been thrown, Into prison, For insurrection, And murder.

[21:04] This is what, The representative of Rome, Is doing, But he delivered Jesus, Over to their will. That's what happens, To a person, Who tries to evade.

And that of course, Is what is the story, Not just of Pilate, And Herod. That's the story, Of humanity. The old hymn, Were you there, When they crucified, My Lord?

Well we were all there, Weren't we? We may not have played, The part of Barabbas, We may not have played, The part of Pilate. We may not have, Shouted down, The innocent. Nevertheless, This story is saying to us, Psalm, What will you, The old hymn says, What will you do? With Jesus, Neutral, You cannot be, One day, Your heart, Will be asking, What will he, Do with me?

Amen. Let's pray. Father, These words, This passage is solemn, It leaves us, Face to face, With Jesus Christ, The one who died, For us and rose again, The one who will sit, On the judgment seat, Save us from the cowardly, Evasions, Of Herod, And Pilate, And help us instead, To stand with him, And with those who love him, All the days of our life, We ask this in his name, Amen.