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John 18:28-40

Fifty-second Message

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THE TRIAL OF THE KING – PART I

I am by profession an electrical engineer, working in the high-tech industry in Silicon Valley for the last 17 years. As an engineer in the corporate world, I've seen the best and worst of company politics and stressful situations. Many of you may have had similar experiences. We all face stressful situations, trials, and conflicts. How will we handle these? I'd like to begin by sharing one such trial in my work life that left an indelible mark on me.

In a previous company, I engaged in a discussion with a colleague in our lab. We were under a schedule crunch to integrate and test our product. In the context of debugging the system, I suggested that the design needed to be modified for our product to work properly. My colleague, who designed this system, was furious that *anyone* could possibly recommend an improvement to *his* design. He completely blew up in front of everyone. He attacked me verbally, calling me names and saying I was ignorant and incompetent. It was a vicious, venomous attack. In my opinion it was unfair, unprovoked, and unjustified. I was completely humiliated in front of the company. I was floored. I had no idea why he was destroying my credibility in the company. What was I to do in the face of these false accusations and humiliation? What would you do? What would our Lord do?

We have come to chapter 18 of John's gospel. Last week, we covered Jesus' appearance before the high priest and Peter's three-fold denial. Today, we see Jesus put on trial. He faced an angry mob of Jewish leaders and a morally weak Roman governor in whose hands his own life rested. He faced a mock trial in which he was denounced, falsely accused, and humiliated. We come to the Trial of the King.

The trial can be viewed as a movie with six scenes. The camera moves from one dramatic scene to the next as the cast of characters comes in and out. The scenes alternate from outside to inside the governor's mansion, with Pilate meeting with the Jews, then Jesus, in alternating confrontations that escalate in intensity, emotion, and drama. We will focus on the first three scenes this week; this will take us to the end of chapter 18. We'll find that, of the three scenes, the center scene is the most important one, as Jesus faces Pilate alone and in private. We'll see the kingdom and power of Jesus facing the kingdom and power of the Roman governor.

Then they led Jesus from Caiaphas into the Praetorium, and it was early; and they themselves did not enter into the Praetorium so that they would not be defiled, but might eat the Passover. Therefore Pilate went out to them and said, "What accusation do you bring against this Man?" They answered and said to him, "If this Man were not an evildoer, we would not have delivered Him to you." So Pilate said to them, "Take Him yourselves, and judge Him according to your law." The

Jews said to him," We are not permitted to put anyone to death," to fulfill the word of Jesus which He spoke, signifying by what kind of death He was about to die. (John 18:28-32)

The Praetorium was the palace of the Roman governor. The Jews brought Jesus there early, perhaps 6 a.m. John noted that the Jews did not enter the governor's mansion themselves. Entering the house of a Gentile could cause them to be defiled or ceremonially unclean, and thus unable to eat their Passover. "Passover" refers to one of the several meals eaten during the week long Festival of the Unleavened Bread. On the one hand, the Jews were painstakingly adhering to strict laws so that they could eat and celebrate God's delivery of Israel from slavery; on the other hand, they were fanatically pursuing the execution of Jesus. This is so incongruous! How ironic is it for the Jews to be righteous and "clean" in their own eyes while ruthlessly pursuing the death of an innocent man?

Pontius Pilate was the Roman governor of Judea from A.D. 26 to A.D. 37. He was the representative of the Roman Empire, the military and judicial leader of the region. Historians have recorded him as a weak, indecisive man who was often brutal in his treatment of his subjects. It appears in this scene that Pilate was tolerant of the Jewish ways, because he went out to meet them early in the morning.

Pilate begins with a simple question, "Of what crime are you accusing this man?" The Jews cannot verbalize a valid accusation before the Roman court of law. They make an implied and vague accusation, saying, "He must be guilty of doing evil because we brought him to you."

Since the Jews cannot articulate a formal accusation, Pilate does not want to take on this trial from the mob. There is no criminal charge against Roman laws, so he is not willing to hold a Roman trial. Resisting the manipulation by the Jews, he asks them to take Jesus and deal with him themselves.

The way that the Jews respond makes clear their deadly intention. They are not looking for a fair trial. They want to put Jesus to death; they were looking for nothing less than an execution.

They came to the Roman governor for an execution because they were forbidden from executing people in their own jurisdiction. Execution was a right retained by the Romans only. Rarely were the Jews allowed to execute someone. An example of this occurred when the Jews stoned Steven, in Acts 7.

A Roman execution would be death by crucifixion. So this was a fulfillment of Jesus' prediction of the manner of his death. After his triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, he predicted his own death in these verses:

“And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself.” But He was saying this to indicate the kind of death by which He was to die. (John 12:32-33)

“Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem; and the Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn Him to death, and will hand Him over to the Gentiles to mock and scourge and crucify Him, and on the third day He will be raised up.” (Matt 20:18-19)

So Jesus predicted his death by crucifixion – a form of execution which only the Romans would carry out.

Demanding an execution seems to be arbitrary and unnecessary, but it was completely in accordance with God’s plan. A thousand years before Jesus’ crucifixion, it was predicted that the Messiah would not die not by the Jewish method of stoning, but by crucifixion. Psalm 22 accurately described many gory details of the death of the Messiah, including the piercing of his hands and feet (22:16). The Son of Man would be given on the cross for the sins of the world. Jesus knew this and was prepared for it.

The murderous intention of the Jews having been revealed, the camera now shifts into the Praetorium for the second scene: a private meeting between Pilate and Jesus.

Therefore Pilate entered again into the Praetorium, and summoned Jesus and said to Him, “Are You the King of the Jews?” Jesus answered, “Are you saying this on your own initiative, or did others tell you about Me?” Pilate answered, “I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests delivered You to me; what have You done?” Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm.” Therefore Pilate said to Him, “So You are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say correctly that I am a king. For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice.” Pilate said to Him, “What is truth?” (18:33-38)

The central scene of this passage shifts inside the governor’s mansion. Pilate asks Jesus point blank, “Are you the King of the Jews?” This is Pilate’s first question directed to Jesus. In verse 34, Jesus turns the trial around on Pilate. Rather than answering him, Jesus interrogates him with a piercing question, “Are you asking this, or are you someone else’s mouthpiece?” You don’t just do that to any judge who holds your life in his hands! Jesus is bold and takes control here.

To Jesus’ counter-question, Pilate answers contemptuously, “I am not a Jew, am I?” Pilate appears flustered, perhaps embarrassed that he did not come up with this himself. He states that it was the Jews and the chief priests that have called Jesus the “King.” “I am not a Jew, am I?” indicates that Pilate doesn’t care. He has no stake in this at all. It doesn’t matter to him who Jesus is.

Pilate’s response is hauntingly familiar to me from my personal experience. When I was a graduate student at Stanford, I lived with a non-Christian roommate who like me was also a scientist. I shared my faith in Christ with him, telling him at one point that Jesus is King of my life. His response was not unlike that of Pilate: “I am not a Christian, am I? What do I care that this Jesus

is the King?” Essentially, my roommate was saying, “I’m not of your kind. I am not a religious fanatic, and I’m better for it. What is Jesus to me?”

In verse 36, Jesus does respond to Pilate. However, his response is remarkable. In two short verses, he proclaims his kingship, reveals his mission, and offers an invitation to Pilate to seek the truth.

Jesus does have a kingdom, but its source of power is not from the kind of physical or political might that Pilate is thinking of. If it were, then Jesus’ servants would have fought militarily on his behalf. Rather, it is a spiritual kingdom, set up in the hearts of men, with a different army, fighting a spiritual battle, with different weapons. Of course, Pilate does not understand any of this. He thinks only of a social, political, or military kingship. The nature of Jesus’ true kingdom is instead governed by righteousness, faith, and love. In Christ’s kingdom we are his true servants, fighting spiritual powers and principalities, using his weapons of truth, faith, and love, as Paul exhorts us to do (Eph 6:10-20). Our conflict in the world is not a political one, but spiritual. In Christ’s kingdom, we are his messengers, demonstrating truth with our lives. For this indeed is Jesus’ own mission on earth, which he proclaims in verse 37:

“For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth.”

This is Jesus’ mission, to **testify to the truth.**

The verb testify in Greek is the word from which we get “martyr.” The verb and the noun form are used nearly 50 times in this gospel, so it’s a very important theme in John. In fact, the gospel begins in chapter 1 talking about John the Baptist bearing witness: “There came a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to testify about the Light, so that all might believe through him. He was not the Light, but he came to testify about the Light” (1:6-8). To bear witness means to reveal to the world that which otherwise could not have been known. The testimony is based on personal experience. This is why Jesus came into this world: to reveal by his personal testimony. He taught the world the truth. He also confirmed the truth through his miracles and through his sinless life. He demonstrated the true way through his perfect obedience to God, even unto death.

“Truth” is used 25 times in this gospel. What is this truth? Firstly, the truth is God’s plan of judgment, of salvation, and of redemption. This divine truth is the foundation of Jesus’ kingdom. Moreover, truth is the disclosure of God in human form as his Son. Jesus says that he himself is truth: “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). Thirdly, Jesus bore witness to the true way to the Father. The true way to the Kingdom is through humiliation, suffering, and death, not by the edge of a sword. Jesus is king because he is truth. He conquers the spiritual realm by truth. He commands our hearts by truth.

Jesus’ witness of the divine truth ought to draw us to God, for everyone who is of the truth hears his voice. Jesus offers an invitation to enter into the kingdom of truth and hear and obey his voice. As a sheep hear its master’s voice, those who belong to the truth hear Jesus’ voice. In John 10:14,16 Jesus explains, “I am the

good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me... They too will listen to my voice and there shall be one flock and one shepherd." Jesus offers the ultimate invitation to enter his kingdom: to hear, obey, and follow his voice. This is the climax of this trial. How does Pilate respond to this invitation?

Pilate said to Jesus, "What is truth?" Then he turns his back and walks away. He did not understand the depth of the divine truth of which Jesus spoke. He only cared that Jesus was not a political king and not a threat to his own political career. That's all that mattered to Pilate. But the divine truth of God's salvation, his incarnation in Jesus, and the true way to the kingdom that Jesus is bearing witness to, this was all lost on Pilate.

This sets up the third and final scene of chapter 18.

And when he Pilate had said this, he went out again to the Jews and said to them, "I find no guilt in Him." But you have a custom that I release someone for you at the Passover; do you wish then that I release for you the King of the Jews?" So they cried out again, saying, "Not this Man, but Barabbas." Now Barabbas was a robber. (18:38-40)

Pilate realizes that proclaiming truth is not a crime and there is no reason to convict Jesus. He therefore goes out and pronounces Jesus not guilty. If Pilate were a governor with integrity, he would have dismissed all charges and set Jesus free, regardless of how this would impact the Jews. However, he was not such a man of integrity. He doesn't stand for what is right. Instead, he buckles under pressure and tries to appease the Jewish mob with one more compromise. On special occasions such as Passover week, the governor could release a prisoner to the people, anyone they wanted. So Pilate tries to invoke that custom and influence the mob to allow Jesus' release.

The crowd, inflamed by the Jewish leaders, demand that a robber be released – Barabbas, which ironically means "son of the father." John reports him to be a robber, while the other gospels call him a murderer who incited crowds against the Roman rule. By demanding the release of a murderer, the crowd has condemned to death the King of truth.

In chapter 19, the scenes will continue in parallel fashion, in and out of the Praetorium. (John Hanneman will pick this up next week.) For now, I would like to offer a few reflections.

Who is in control? On the surface, it seems that Pilate is in control as he negotiates in and out of his palace. However, we see that Jesus is really in control, and behind him, God is in control. When Pilate interrogates Jesus in private, Jesus turns the tables on him and with pointed questions puts him on trial. Pilate knows that Jesus is innocent, and that he himself is being manipulated by the Jews. He has the power to release Jesus or condemn him. But Pilate really has no power over Jesus except that which comes from above (John 19:11). Jesus himself said in John 10:18 that he has authority to lay down his life and take it up again – not the Jews, not the soldiers, not Pilate. It is all according to God's undeniable plan. No human actions and choices could have occurred outside of his plan and sovereignty.

When I viewed Jesus' trial and crucifixion in the past, I used to imagine him as the lamb portrayed in Isaiah 53:7:

**He was oppressed and He was afflicted,
Yet He did not open His mouth;
Like a lamb that is led to slaughter,
And like a sheep that is silent before its shearers,
So He did not open His mouth.**

I had in mind a helpless sacrificial lamb being led to slaughter, willingly, tragically, defenseless, and powerless. What I learned from this study of John 18 is that Jesus is *not* powerless, defenseless, or passive. Jesus is the King with the power of the entire creation at his disposal. But he is a King who reins in all his power and suffers this trial. He didn't just *allow* this to happen, he *made* this happen. Why? He did it for us, for you and for me. He did this to fulfill Scripture, to complete the plan of redemption that God set in motion since the Fall of Man, to die, then to overcome death so that we may live a new life. This is the *true way to the Kingdom!*

In this greatest trial in history, we see many characters play out their parts. From previous sermons we learned of Peter, Judas, and the high priest; in this chapter, we see the mob, Pilate, and of course, Jesus. Each person has a choice; there is free will involved. However, human free will always operates within the framework of divine determination. God's plan is in motion, and within the plan he gives us choices. We can choose how we respond to his plan, and we are always responsible for the choices we make and live with the consequences of our choices.

All of us will face trials in which we will be misunderstood or falsely accused. It may happen with colleagues, neighbors, friends, in church. We may be estranged from our parents, spouse or children, and may face these false accusations from them. How will we handle it? Will we strike back in righteous indignation? Will we respond as Peter did, or Judas, the high priest, Pilate or Jesus?

In one single verse, John 18:37, Jesus gives us the main lessons of this passage: He is King. He came to bear witness to the truth, and he invites us to listen to his voice.

How do we apply this to ourselves? I encourage you, brothers and sisters, to view Jesus in control of all situations, no matter how tough. Realize that often there is a spiritual battle at hand. Trust that the High King of Heaven is already victorious in this spiritual battle.

Secondly, let us choose to bear witness to his image. When we are falsely accused or humiliated, we can choose to accept the injustice with the dignity, resolve, and trust demonstrated by our Lord. We know that God's sovereignty and plan are at work even in our humiliation. We know not how his will is being fulfilled, but we are assured that he is sovereign and is orchestrating it.

Finally, let us remain in tune with God, hearing his voice through prayer. In this we will be better able to react in a way that honors God. It's hard, because our emotions, pride, and sin come into play. When we least want to, we "lose" it. But we can be better prepared by daily accepting his invitation, hearing his voice, and obeying him.

Getting back to the trial I described at the beginning, when I was publicly humiliated before my staff and my peers. How did I respond? I held in my anger and my adrenaline rush. I did not

strike back in self-defense. I'd like to say that it was a thoughtful, godly response in view of God's sovereignty, but it wasn't. That was the furthest from my mind. I was simply too shocked, too embarrassed, and too weak to stand up to my colleague. I faced my humiliation, took it in silence, and did not strike back, unwittingly and unknowingly obeying Jesus.

What effect did this have? Two people came up to me after the ugly incident. One was a man who worked for my colleague. He was a believer and knew that I was one, too. He encouraged me that I had walked in Jesus' path. The other person worked for me as part of my team. He was not a believer, but came to ask how I could have remained calm under such a venomous attack. What was in me that could have given me resolve to remain gracious? So I told him what was in me – no, *who* was in me – that made the difference. This was the beginning of a three-way friendship that was to continue for years. The three of us – two Christians and one non-Christian – started studying the Scriptures together, sharing lunches and sharing life. A year later, I brought my friend to a Billy Graham Crusade, at which he accepted the Lord and became a brother in Christ.

Dear friends, we don't know where humiliation will lead. Jesus is King. In his humiliation, he bore witness to the ultimate truth of God's love for us. He invites us to hear and obey his voice.

Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen. (Jude 1:24-25)

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