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John 19:1-16

Fifty-third Message

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THE TRIAL OF THE KING – PART II

About 18 months ago, while my daughter and her husband were serving as missionaries in Ecuador, we received an urgent prayer request. The director of a missionary organization in that country was driving with his family from Quito to the coast, and as they were going through a small town, an 80-year-old woman attempted to cross the street in front of their car. The driver could not stop in time and the car struck the woman. They took her to a clinic, and after an initial examination it looked as though she would be fine. Several witnesses gave testimony to the police that the driver was not at fault. However, two hours later the woman died, and the man was put in jail. Later, he was moved to a prison some distance away. He was totally at the mercy of a corrupt system that was based on power and money. Thankfully, things turned out all right in the end. But it raises the question, how can this kind of injustice happen? What do we do and how do we live when the bottom falls out?

In our studies in the gospel of John we are in the middle of Jesus' trial before Pilate. The trial, consisting of seven "scenes," is held both outside and inside the Praetorium, the residence of the Roman commander, because the Jews who brought Jesus to Pilate would be ceremonially unclean if they entered the Praetorium. Pilate spoke to them outside four times and twice to Jesus inside. These dialogues are laced with irony, tension, sarcasm, and manipulation. The irony is that the Jews, trying to remain ritually clean for the Passover, sought to kill the Passover Lamb, who could provide true cleansing. As we come to the last four scenes in the drama, the themes of the first three scenes are repeated and amplified. In scene 4, right in the middle of the trial, Pilate has Jesus flogged.

Pilate then took Jesus and scourged Him. And the soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on His head, and put a purple robe on Him; and they began to come up to Him and say, "Hail, King of the Jews!" and to give Him slaps in the face. (John 19:1-3)

Pilate was looking for a way to escape having to deal with Jesus. Wanting to set him free, he had offered the yearly Passover pardon. But the Jews didn't want any part of that, choosing Barabbas instead. Pilate had Jesus flogged, hoping to appease them and at the same time teach Jesus a lesson. Of the three forms of flogging this was probably the least severe. The flogging recorded in Mark 15:15, the harshest of the three, was carried out with leather thongs fitted with pieces of bone or lead.

The soldiers seem to enjoy this exercise and take sport in mocking Jesus. They make a crown, likely with the 12-inch spikes of a date palm, to increase the pain and flow of blood. They dress Jesus with a purple robe, probably a military cloak (purple was the color of majesty and royalty). They slap him on the face. They taunt him with shouts of "Hail, king of the Jews." They stage a mock coronation. The irony is that these Gentile soldiers speak better than they know. In fact, Jesus is the king of the Jews. We recall the words of Psalm 2, "But as for Me, I have installed My King upon Zion, My holy mountain" (Ps 2:6).

Several years ago I visited a site in Jerusalem where Jesus may have been scourged. Entering the building, I went downstairs to where the ancient pavement had been uncovered. Markings indicated that it was a place where games were played. Even though this site is associated with the more severe beating of Mark 15, I recall very well how sobering and holy it was to stand in silence and contemplate the agony and humiliation that Jesus suffered. The phrase from the Apostles' Creed which I recited on many Sunday mornings when I was growing up came to mind: "[He] suffered under Pontius Pilate."

Pilate came out again and said to them, "Behold, I am bringing Him out to you so that you may know that I find no guilt in Him." Jesus then came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, "Behold, the Man!" So when the chief priests and the officers saw Him, they cried out saying, "Crucify, crucify!" Pilate said to them, "Take Him yourselves and crucify Him, for I find no guilt in Him." The Jews answered him, "We have a law, and by that law He ought to die because He made Himself out to be the Son of God." Therefore when Pilate heard this statement, he was even more afraid; (19:4-7)

For a third time, Pilate meets the Jewish leaders outside the Praetorium. Pilate reiterates his conviction that Jesus was guilty of nothing. Presenting Jesus dressed in this robe, his crown of thorns, and bloodied face, Pilate announces, "Behold, the man" (Latin - *Ecce Homo*). This famous phrase has been used as a title for many works of art, the best known of which is a painting by the Swiss artist Antonio Ciseri. Friedrich Nietzsche used the same words for the title of his autobiography. They were also supposedly used as a greeting by Napoleon, and even a phrase used to introduce the television series "Mr. Bean."

At this point Jesus appears a beaten, harmless, pathetic figure. Pilate's announcement is laced with irony. The man that Pilate presents clearly is not dangerous. To imagine so would be ridiculous.

On the other hand, Jesus is indeed the man, the Word become flesh, the man for all seasons, the one who displays the glory of God, the man who fully represents what man was intended to be, the man the world needs, the man through whom everything started and in whom everything will end, the man to whom every knee will bow. In John 1, John the Baptist twice proclaims, "Behold, the Lamb of God." Pilate proclaims, "Behold, the man." Now the man will become the slaughtered Passover sacrifice. "Jesus is both the humiliated and wounded victim of the world's hatred and the one who is to rule over all."¹

The Jews say no Pilate's judgment and cry out for Jesus to be crucified. The verb "to crucify" occurs 11 times in this chapter. The Jews hate Jesus and they hate Pilate's mockery of them. In this chess game Pilate responds with disgust and sarcasm by telling the Jews to do it themselves. The pronouns are emphatic: "You" take him, "I" find no guilt.

The Jews claim that Jesus has made himself out to be a son (Son) of God, and point to the law that condemns him to death for blasphemy. The reference is Lev 24:16: "Moreover, the one who blasphemes the name of the LORD shall surely be put to death; all the congregation shall certainly stone him. The alien as well as the native, when he blasphemes the Name, shall be put to death." Non-Roman citizens found guilty of sedition could expect to be crucified.

In this gospel, the charge of blasphemy has been a rising theme (5:18; 8:58, 59; 10:33, 36). However, claiming to be God's son did not automatically qualify for a charge of blasphemy, since sometimes the king of Israel was referred to as God's Son (Ps 2:7, 89:26-27).

Previously, the Jews had appealed to political motives, but now that their case is slipping away they reveal their deepest motives and press the theological issue. In Jesus' claim the Jews hear overtones not only of his being the Messiah but also of sharing the authority of God himself.

Pilate, with all the power of Rome behind him, becomes more fearful. He isn't worried about blasphemy or Jesus being dangerous to Rome. He fears because he is superstitious. The Jew heard the word "Son" with a capital "S"; Pilate heard it with a small "s." To him, the term "Son of God" implied some divine being who had divine powers. Pilate had just had this Son of God whipped and feared that he had acted unwisely. Suppose that you were unknowingly rude to someone of high standing. How do you think you would feel when you found out the person's true identity and that he had the power to hurt you? You would be fearful, just like Pilate.

and he entered into the Praetorium again and said to Jesus, "Where are You from?" But Jesus gave him no answer. So Pilate said to Him, "You do not speak to me? Do You not

know that I have authority to release You, and I have authority to crucify You?" Jesus answered, "You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given you from above; for this reason he who delivered Me to you has the greater sin." (19:9-11)

Back inside, away from the hated Jews, Pilate concentrates on Jesus for a second time. He asks him, "Where are you from?" Pilate is self-serving. He seeks to alleviate his fears about Jesus' divine powers and so asks him about his origins.

Jesus is silent – an overwhelming and eloquent silence. We recall Isa 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." Jesus feels no need to answer to Pilate. His question cannot be answered quickly; he doesn't want to know the deep truth. Words are not important; they are not the point. The point is Jesus: He is the Word.

In the silence of God we encounter God and hear him. In the first dialogue Pilate had asked Jesus, "What is truth?" In silence we hear truth: the truth of who we are, the truth of who God is, the truth of the gospel, the truth of who we are following. God's word is most powerful in silence.

The silence irritates Pilate. He considers Jesus to be foolish, since Pilate has executive and judicial authority to determine his fate. Jesus tells him he has it wrong. He would have no authority if God had not given it to him. In the first dialogue Jesus told Pilate that his kingdom was not of this world. Now he says his authority is greater than Rome's. Jesus is not talking about civil authority, even though that is from God. The grammar seems to indicate that what is given to Pilate is the entire turn of events – the event of the betrayal itself. Just as new birth is from above, so also is Pilate's authority (3:3, 5). Pilate thinks Jesus is on trial, but it is really the other way around.

Pilate has a rather passive role. He is but a pawn in this chess game. It wasn't his idea to kill Jesus. That is why the one who has the greater sin is the one who handed Jesus over in the first place. This is likely a reference to Caiaphas, not Judas. Caiaphas is the one who took the active role in bringing Jesus down (Acts 2:23). Pilate is not cleared of guilt but his sin is less in comparison.

As a result of this Pilate made efforts to release Him, but the Jews cried out saying, "If you release this Man, you are no friend of Caesar; everyone who makes himself out to be a king opposes Caesar." Therefore when Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus out, and sat down on the judgment seat at a place called The Pavement, but in Hebrew, Gabbatha. Now it was the day of preparation for the Passover; it was about the sixth hour. And he said to the Jews, "Behold, your King!" So 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.” So he then handed Him over to them to be crucified. (19:12-16)

Once again Pilate attempts to release Jesus, knowing that he is not guilty of sedition or blasphemy. But the Jews are determined. They manipulate Pilate, saying that he is no friend of Caesar. This statement would have made Pilate fearful because Tiberius Caesar was known for his cruel treatment of subordinates he suspected of opposing him. What would happen if the Jews told Caesar that Pilate had refused to charge and execute a man who claimed to be a king in opposition to Caesar?

The irony is that the Jews make themselves out to be loyal subjects of Caesar, more loyal even than Pilate, in order to execute Jesus. The Jews hated Rome. Eventually they would revolt against Caesar and be crushed. John is aware of this fact and so are his readers.

Pilate capitulates. He takes his seat of judgment on the bema seat in an area called the stone pavement or Gabbatha. The language is ambiguous. One could read this, “Jesus sat down on the judgment seat.” Perhaps this is intentional. John is implying that Jesus is really the judge.

It is the day of preparation for Passover, the sixth hour. We could spend a lot of time trying to match John’s timing with the Synoptic Gospels. There are ways to do this. But John’s focus is not on chronology. His use of time is symbolic. John is presenting Jesus as being sent to execution about the same time the Passover lambs are being slaughtered. Carson suggests that Passover can refer to the entire feast and week. The day of preparation usually refers to Friday, the preparation of the Sabbath before Passover week. John inserts this fact to prepare the reader for the piercing of Jesus’ side, because his body had to be taken down that day, before the Sabbath. (Sabbath controversy is highlighted in chapters 5 and 9.) The mention of the sixth hour, probably meaning noon, means that the proceedings had dragged on quite a while.

Pilate knows he is stuck, but that doesn’t stop him from taunting the Jews one more time as he acclaims Jesus as their king. But the irony is that Pilate speaks better than he knows, for Jesus is the long-awaited king of the Jews.

The Jews get very angry at Pilate’s taunt and shout out for Jesus to be crucified. For a third time they proclaim allegiance to Caesar as their king. It is ironic that the Jews are the ones who commit blasphemy, not Jesus, because God is the only true king of Israel (Jud 8:23; 1 Sam 8:7). The Jews are rejecting Jesus’ messianic claim but also disavowing the kingship of the Lord himself. They are completely blind.

Pilate’s final act is to hand Jesus over, probably to the soldiers, to be crucified. He has lost this chess duel and is forced to grant the demands of the Jews.

Many of us take this story for granted. But if this were a movie we were watching for the first time, we would be on the edge of our seat. We would be feeling all sorts of emotions

as we watched horrible injustice take place. The text tells the story of salvation and redemption, but it isn’t just a history lesson. It is showing us how to live – the way of the cross. I have three reflections before we share the Lord’s Table together.

God’s Sovereignty

When you think about it, it is remarkable and almost absurd that Jesus was crucified. In many ways this trial was illogical and comical buffoonery. The Jews and Pilate hated each other, and yet somehow they could cooperate to put Jesus on the cross. The real reason the Jews could succeed was because God’s hand was behind it all. Judas, Caiaphas, and Pilate all act under God’s sovereignty. There is no evil that escapes the boundaries of God’s sovereignty. A large part of evangelism in the early church had to deal with why so many Jews rejected Jesus. John is very deliberate in explaining how this happened.

We can become convinced that the world is spinning out of control, that we are passive victims of a global conspiracy. But the cross tells us that this is not true. God’s sovereignty is overseeing the affairs of the world every day. Mankind makes choices, but these are within the bounds of that sovereignty. Even when life seems to be unraveling, God is in control.

Jesus’ Kingship

John’s story highlights the fact that Jesus is the king, the one with ultimate authority. The word “king” occurs nine times in this trial. Pilate was the representative of the most powerful empire in the world, but as he interrogated Jesus, Pilate stood before not only the King of the Jews, but also the King of the universe. While Pilate was weak and vacillating, Jesus was unshaken and in control. The Jews were the ones who should have known God and recognized their king. But they gave their allegiance to the king they despised rather than the king who has the authority to give life. The Jews and the Romans combine to represent the world in both passive and active ways in rebellion to Jesus’ rule.

Sometimes we act like Pilate. We know the truth and yet find ourselves passive, manipulated, and controlled by the world in denying Jesus. We play the victim and act out of fear. Sometimes we act like the Jews. We don’t recognize what God is doing in our lives or we refuse to submit our wills to his. We get caught up in our religious prejudices and systems and push Jesus away.

The cross tells us that Jesus is indeed the King. We are to avoid following both the Romans and the Jews. Rather we are to follow our King: to remain calm and patient, to know true authority, to give consistent witness, and to not waver in doing God’s will. First and foremost we are the loyal subjects of the true King. This King deserves and demands our worship, trust, and obedience.

Suffering Injustice

Jesus is the king, but he is like no other king. This king willingly gives up his life to suffering and injustice. What king would do that? Only Jesus. John’s narrative does not portray

the agony and suffering of Jesus, but it is there nonetheless. Suffering is held in tension alongside of God's sovereignty and Jesus' kingship. Jesus is the king who suffers and is crowned even while he is being flogged.

When we follow Jesus we follow him in his kingly rule, but also in his suffering. This doesn't make sense to us or sit well with us. We don't expect to face injustice. But if we read the story, this is exactly what we should expect. A religious system or belief structure that eliminates suffering and injustice is counterfeit and unbiblical.

Our life is in Christ. In Ephesians, Paul says that we have been raised with Christ and seated with him in the heavenly places (2:6). We reign with Christ in his kingdom which is not of this world. But Paul also says in Philippians that to know Christ fully and completely means to know both "the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead" (3:10-11).

We reign with Christ in victory but then the bottom falls out. We are beaten, bloodied, forsaken, despised, and not esteemed. We feel like a worm, not a person. Two-year-old children drown or are run over by a car. Cancer cuts down someone who is way too young. The company's reorganization left you out to dry.

What do we do? We are to connect these times of suffering and injustice to the suffering of Christ and see our circumstances in that light. We don't have the answers and we can't get the explanations we want. We live with the tension of suffering kingship. We find the ways and means of living in the cross. We live cross-centered lives like Jesus: with silent courage, wise character, and unshakable trust in God's sovereign plans and purposes. No matter how illogical, unfair, or unjust it is, nothing is beyond God's control. He continues to work out his salvation to the world through those who follow him in the way of the cross.

How is God asking you to submit to his kingly rule?

How is God asking you to live a cross-centered life?

May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is the new creation. Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule—to the Israel of God. (Gal 6:14-16)

¹ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Light Has Come* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 249.

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