

John 19:8 -11

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Date: 01 April 2007

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- [0 : 00] Would you turn with me to the portion of God's Word we read, to John's Gospel, chapter 19, reading again there at verse 8.
- When Pilate heard this, he was even more afraid, and he went back inside the palace. Where do you come from? he asked Jesus.
- But Jesus gave him no answer. Do you refuse to speak to me, Pilate said? Don't you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?
- Jesus answered, you would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above. Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin.
- Especially the words of verse 11. Then you would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above. Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin.
- [1 : 05] The city of Jerusalem was always on edge at Passover time.
- There were so many people crowded into the city. So many pilgrims came and had to find lodgings as best they could. There was movement at all hours of the day and night.
- It was restless. It was tense. And the Roman governor was always in Jerusalem at Passover time. Just in case trouble arose.
- And at that particular Passover that we're reading of here, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, felt the tension.
- Knew there was trouble in the air. And it came to a head in the middle of the night when he was awakened and was told well before dawn that the Jewish authorities wanted him to convene a special court to have an extraordinary hearing to dispose of a case that they considered to be most urgent.
- [2 : 18] Now Pilate and the Jews, to put it mildly, had never got on well. He probably could have seen the Jewish authorities far enough on that particular early morning.
- But he had his duty as Roman governor to do. And he heard the case. Indeed, because of the religious scruples of the Jews, they wouldn't come into the palace of the governor.
- He actually went so far as to go outside to hear what they had to say. And we read in the earlier portion, particularly at the end of chapter 18 there, that Pilate began to hear the case and reached the conclusion, I find no basis for a charge against him.
- And it's at that point that Pilate forgets the standards that the Roman governor of Judea or wherever should have implemented.
- Because if that was the verdict that he reached, and it wasn't a casual verdict, he repeats it two or three times. I find no basis for a charge against him.
- [3 : 35] If that was his assessment of the situation, he should have immediately released Jesus. There was no point in continuing. But when he went out again and told the Jews that were waiting outside, the reaction to his announcement was such that Pilate knew he would have a riot on his hands if he released Jesus immediately.

You see, a Roman governor in those days had a set of priorities. Avoiding riots took precedence over administering justice. Just as ensuring that the tribute got back to Caesar in Rome took precedence over avoiding riots.

The number one priority of any governor was to make sure that the tribute for Rome got back there. The number two priority was to make sure that he didn't have to call on an extra Roman army to come and quell a riot in his province.

And if those two conditions were satisfied, then it was good enough to administer justice. So Pilate's in a situation which he can't control anymore.

He knows where justice lies. He's reached his own verdict. But there's the possibility of a riot starting in the city because of the public reaction to his verdict.

[5 : 03] I find no fault. I find no basis for a charge. Now John doesn't tell us, but somewhere around the end of chapter 18 in the timescale, Pilate availed himself of one way of delaying matters.

He heard someone say Jesus was from Galilee, and so he sent him off to Herod Antipas, who was also in Jerusalem for the Passover. What Luke tells us about that probably fits in somewhere after verse 38 in John's presentation.

But that delay didn't achieve anything. So Pilate next tried to have Jesus released in terms of the special custom at the Passover of releasing one favoured prisoner.

And that didn't work either because the chief priests were ready and they suggested to the crowd that they shout for Barabbas rather than for Jesus. And somewhere in about the end of the verses, at the end of chapter 18, Pilate also heard from his wife, I've been greatly troubled in my sleep tonight.

Probably in the time after Pilate had got out of his bed for this early morning interview, this early morning session of the court, because of this man. I have nothing to do with him.

[6 : 24] So there's Pilate, very frustrated. He's not getting his way and he can't think of any way to manipulate the situation. A Roman governor shouldn't be in this position.

Rome was the authority. Rome was the empire. And Rome's representatives shouldn't be thwarted at every turn. And it must have seemed to the chief priests and to the Jewish officials that they'd achieved what they wanted when they heard that Pilate had ordered that Jesus be flogged.

Because such scourging was the normal precursor of crucifixion. When the Romans crucified someone, it wasn't enough that they hung him on a cross.

They first of all inflicted this cruel scourging on the individual. And the Jewish authorities were wanting Jesus crucified.

One reason for that was probably so that it would be seen as something the hated Romans had done rather than something that they were responsible for. because crucifixion, as is evident here, was something that only the Romans were allowed to do.

[7 : 46] The local Jewish authorities were not permitted to inflict capital punishment. So they must have felt that they'd got their way when Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged.

But Pilate had something else in mind. He's still trying to score points off the Jewish officials. He detests the people he rules over. And so he has the man who has been scourged and mocked brought out and says, here is the man.

Behold the man. He is appealing to the pity of the crowd. Pilate, on behalf of Jesus, is appealing to the pity of the crowd and it almost worked.

Notice the beginning of verse 6. As soon as the chief priests and their officials saw him, they shouted, crucify! Crucify!

It's not the crowd. The crowd is stunned into silence at that point. It's the instigators, the chief priests, who take up this shout.

[9 : 02] John's absence of any mention at that point of the crowd is a key feature in the situation. Pilate almost turned the situation in the direction he wanted.

But the cry of crucify wins the day. The chief priests apply extra pressure on Pilate because they, previously to this, had been alleging against Jesus that he was a troublemaker against the Roman Emperor.

He was making himself a king. And now in verse 7, they bring in the charge, a religious charge. He claims to be the Son of God. And the impact of that on Pilate is not what he expected at all.

He becomes more afraid. Like other high class Romans, and these were the men who were officials in the provinces of the Roman Empire, Pilate was cynical.

about religion. Either the religion of Rome or the religion of other peoples. Pilate and those of his class looked with disdain on the local religions that they found throughout the Empire.

[10 : 31] And most particularly, they looked down on the intricate and distinctive tenets of Judaism. But for all his cynicism, Pilate is still superstitious.

To pagan years, talk of someone who is a son of God, a divine son, stirred up memories of the stories and their myths when deities or the offspring of deities came and visited earth in humble guise.

You'll remember how the people of Lystra in Acts 14 were ready to shout, the gods have come down to us in the likeness of men.

And Pilate, hearing this, he claimed to be the son of God, is probably beginning to wonder, is this a similar situation? Am I here dealing with someone who is in some way a son of the gods?

Will it be the case that if I act against him, I will bring down divine vengeance on my own head? You see, Pilate had already interviewed Jesus.

[11 : 46] He could not but have been struck by his dignified demeanor. And here's something else that stirs up within him. Questions, doubts.

Who is it that I'm really dealing with? Is this an earth-born human? Or is this one of the progeny of the many gods of Greece and Rome, of the ancient pantheon?

How is this going to impinge on me? And so when he goes back into the palace along with Jesus, he asks him the question, where do you come from?

Now, Pilate already knew that he came from Galilee in so far he'd already sent him to Herod Antipas by this time.

Pilate's not saying, where were you born? Where do your people come from? He's aware that something that's potentially much more disastrous for him himself has come to light.

[12 : 56] Pilate is the more afraid. He has already had some measure of fear. The situation was getting out of his control. But now the thought of who exactly it is that he's dealing with causes him considerable internal terror, tremor, trembling.

And that's the first feature of the passage I want to leave with you. The fear of Pilate as he grapples with a situation he doesn't really understand.

The fear of a man who is conforming to all the normal thought patterns of his day, all the normal ways of dealing with situations that he's learned as a soldier, as a Roman governor, as one of the upper class in Rome.

He's brought all the conventional wisdom, he's brought all his skill and guile to this situation, and he's left baffled. He's left baffled and afraid.

The fear of Pilate as he fails to comprehend the claims of Jesus as he is confronted by them. He's relying on Pilate's relying on worldly wisdom.

[14 : 16] He's relying on what we would nowadays call common sense, what was natural to the sophisticated minds of Rome. And he's baffled by Jesus.

He just can't get his mind round who it is who's there before him. So, firstly, we have Pilate afraid as he is confronted by Jesus.

But then secondly, we see here the silence of Jesus. He didn't reply. Pilate went back inside the palace.

Where do you come from? He asked Jesus. But Jesus gave him no answer. No answer. Now, there have been various explanations proposed for this.

One is that Pilate wouldn't have understood no matter what answer Jesus gave him. If Jesus had said, yes, I am a son of God, I am the son of God, Pilate would have interpreted it in terms of his own pagan thinking and would have misunderstood totally what was being said.

[15 : 34] And if Jesus said, no, that would have been equally misleading. And so there are those who say, no matter which answer Jesus gave, Pilate wouldn't have understood and therefore Jesus gave no answer.

I don't think that's perhaps the right way because Jesus shows on many occasions that he's able to utter words of divine wisdom in the most perplexing of situations.

The challenges of a situation he can rise to with a carefully crafted response. Just think of how he dealt with the situation.

Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar? And he came out, you would have thought he would have said either yes or no and he came out with a sublime answer instead. He doesn't do that here.

Why not? Probably because no reply was given because Pilate had already been given an answer. This isn't the first but the second interview between the two men.

[16 : 43] Pilate had already heard Jesus' testimony that he had come into the world. That he was not from this world. That his kingdom was not of this world.

That he had come to testify of the truth. Pilate had already been presented by Jesus with that measure of truth and enlightenment that he was capable of responding to.

And all Pilate had done was to turn away with a sneering what is truth. He rejected the claims set before him. Jesus and Pilate were on different levels of existence.

Jesus had already answered in so far as Pilate could receive an answer. And no further response is given because he hasn't made use of the light already provided to him.

If Nicodemus, if the Jewish authorities who had the knowledge of the testimony of scriptures of the Old Testament couldn't understand where Jesus had come from, this Roman governor couldn't be expected to grasp the truth either.

[18 : 04] There's still another way of looking at matters, however. Perhaps at this stage, the most effective response from Jesus was silence rather than any number of words.

You can sometimes answer someone very effectively without saying a word. A look could have been sufficient to say there's something woefully wrong with Pilate's procedure.

Was it not too late for the governor, the judge, the representative of Roman law, of which they were so proud?

Was it not too late for the judge to be asking questions of someone of whom he has already said, I find no guilt in him, and yet whom he has already had cruelly scourged?

Hasn't Pilate got things totally mixed up? Because he'd taken the wrong step further back and not followed through in the decision he'd reached because of fear of a riot, Pilate has got himself more and more embedded in confusion.

[19 : 20] Jesus' silence would have effectively stimulated in Pilate the perception that he'd been acting the wrong way round.

And furthermore, Jesus didn't want to be acquitted on the grounds of what Pilate's superstitious mind might have made of the claim of being the Son of God. He was there before a human tribunal.

He was there as man before a human tribunal. And the question was would human justice accord him the verdict that it should have accorded, extended to the one who was innocent?

Jesus gave no answer. It's a complex situation dealing with Pilate. He gave no answer because Pilate was already off on the wrong track.

Pilate already had the information that should have led him to act utterly differently. but he'd refused on that basis. And Jesus looks.

[20 : 24] Jesus silenced. He asks Pilate in effect, what have you done with the information you already have?

What have you done with the knowledge you already have? Is it knowledge that has led you deeper into truth? Or have you turned your back on what you know?

And have you walked off into the morass of the confusion that occurs when you act against what you know in your heart of hearts is really the case?

Jesus' silence challenges Pilate. And Jesus' message can challenge us the same way still. If we like Pilate to walk off, and say to what we hear, what is truth?

And so we see Pilate's exasperation growing. He hadn't wanted this early morning case. He hadn't been able to manipulate it the way he thought he might.

[21 : 33] Pilate doesn't want truth or justice. He wants primarily to store points off the Jewish leadership, to thwart them. And now here it is, the one he's trying to set free, won't even speak to him, won't even answer him.

And he vents his frustration and says, do you refuse to speak to me? I'm the one with authority here. I'm the one with power. It's a bit ironic actually because there's Pilate trying his hardest to show he's the one with power and he's being effectively manipulated every turn by the Jewish authorities.

But at any rate, there he is saying to Jesus, I'm here, I'm the one with power. Don't you realize I can free you or crucify you? No mention of justice, no mention of innocence, no mention of truth, no mention of conscience, I'm Pilate, I have power, don't you realize who I am?

And we then have Jesus' weighty response. And we can look at it in two ways. First of all, we have here Jesus assessing the situation of those around him.

Comparisons often made with Paul's statement in Romans 13, everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established.

[23 : 02] Pilate claimed, I've the power, I've the authority, I can make the final decision as to whether Jesus is crucified or not. It's entirely at my discretion.

And when Jesus says to him, you would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above, he's not really pointing to the emperor Tiberius in Rome, he's pointing to God.

He's inviting Pilate to depart from his normal frame of reference, from his earthbound mode of thinking. He's testing Pilate to see whether he is prepared to acknowledge that there's another level to life, that there is an ultimate reference and standard that will stand in judgment on the actions of Pilate, governor though he is.

There are the infallible scales of heavenly judgment. Where do you stand in relation to that, Pilate? Can you see that that is what ultimately matters?

How do you fare in that reckoning? We can see here something of Jesus' worldview. Even the worst evil that occurs in this world doesn't lie out with the sphere of God's sovereignty.

[24 : 27] That doesn't lessen the responsibility, the guilt of moral agents. We're still answerable for our decisions for our actions. Things that cause people to sin are bound to come, but woe to the person through whom they come.

Pilate's in a position to act because he has been delegated authority and power ultimately by God Himself. But because that power comes from God, Pilate is answerable for what he does with it.

and Jesus goes further. He assesses the relative degree of Pilate's guilt. This is one of the most sublimely incongruous scenes imaginable.

There is the prisoner. There is the prisoner who has already been scourged and mocked, who is already physically assaulted, and he is handing down the sentence on others.

He is assessing where things truly lie. He is handing down the verdict on his judges, on Pilate and Caiaphas, the one who handed me over to you.

[25 : 43] It is not a reference to Judas. Judas didn't in fact hand over Christ to Pilate. It is a reference to the Jews who admitted that they delivered him. It is the same word that is used back in chapter 18 both in verse 30 and again in verse 35 handed over.

It is the same word. It is a reference, given here it is in the singular, it is a reference to Caiaphas, the high priest, representing the Jewish people. He represented the nation.

Pilate wasn't without blame. There were responsibilities and duties that he should have performed. He failed to preserve truth and justice. But it wasn't Pilate that had instigated the trial.

It wasn't Pilate that had engineered the whole set of proceedings. Therefore, in the light of God's scrutiny of those whom he permits to hold power, their sin against light and their false accusation render them more culpable in God's sight.

So, Jesus replies by reminding Pilate of fundamental structures of judgment and governance.

[26 : 58] That no matter what the earthly authority is, it is answerable to God. And that God's judgment discriminates with respect to the measure of responsibility, with respect to the heinousness of actions taken.

salvation. But we can look at these words in a deeper sense also. Because ultimately, the narrative about the crucifixion isn't a narrative about Caiaphas or a narrative about Pilate.

Their role is secondary at best. This is a narrative about Jesus. Jesus. And he's not just telling Pilate about truth regarding divine providence in general.

He's doing that, but he's going beyond that. He's not just making the point that in a very real sense, everything that comes about in this world ultimately derives from the direction of God.

He's focusing on the interchange between himself and the Roman governor. He's focusing in this interchange about where he himself fits in.

[28 : 23] About where the one who claims to be the son of God stands in relation to Pilate. What authority, what jurisdiction does any human ruler, any politician, any governor, any king have over the son of God?

God, you would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above. And that's not simply making a point about civil authority in general.

That's not simply talking about God's providence. That's there. But it goes beyond that. He's saying this applies to Jesus. Jesus says this applies to me. I am here as more than the son of God.

God, if I were simply here as the son of God, you would have no power over me. You do now have power over me. And implicit in that is the fact that he is there as the surety for the sins of his people.

It's the only way in which we can understand these events. Jesus is saying to Pilate, you would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above because I am here on a mission.

[29 : 35] I am here as one who has a task to perform in obedience to my Father's commands. I am the one who will lay down my life and you would have no power over me at all were it not that there is this supervening divine plan that is being worked out.

It doesn't make you innocent, Pilate, but it does mean that you're grappling with realities that go beyond anything that heathen religion ever envisaged.

If Pilate is to probe the depths of the drama into which he's been thrust, he has to recognize there are grander and higher forces at play.

It's not just a grudge match with the Jews he's engaged in. If he wants to avoid sinning, Pilate must open his eyes and take a more perceptive view of matters.

He should be afraid. His actions are in the wrong, even though there's others who are more culpable. But ultimately what he's being told is the Son of God does not answer before any human tribunal because as Son of God, He is above every human tribunal.

[30 : 52] It is not as Son of God He is there, but as the Son of Man, the Shepherd of the Sheep who has come to lay down His life for them.

He is there answering not for Himself, but for His flock. And as the one who is the substitute, he has no right to claim exemption from any tribunal.

As the one who is the substitute, he is under the law because that is where God has placed him as the one who answers for His people.

Jesus has voluntarily undertaken this mission and the Son of God as Messiah, as substitute, as Redeemer cannot claim exemption from the law.

He must endure all that is brought upon him if he would redeem this flock from the condemnation of sin and usher them into the kingdom of light.

[31 : 53] So here we see Jesus conscious in the hour of ignominy, the hour of mockery, of cruel scourging, of imminent death, conscious of his Father's control and of his Father's demands.

He's submissive not to the vagaries of human justice. He sees his life not controlled by the blind hand of fate. He's not carried along by the pressure of events that overwhelm him.

All is from above. All is from the Father. And with that he sustains himself. That is what gives meaning and purpose into what seems to be the utmost travesty of justice, into what seems to be the most pointless of experience.

It has light and it has meaning because of the Father's will being worked out. And it is that gospel portrait of Jesus that challenges each one of us right now.

What do we see in him? How do we respond to his claims? Do we accept him or reject him? Are we left baffled? Perhaps a little bit afraid?

[33 : 21] Perhaps a little bit inwardly perplexed the way Pilate was and not prepared to submit to the demands that Jesus makes? Do we see, do we live as those who have the same view about how the universe is structured as he had?

That it is structured from above? Is it the ultimate source of authority, the ultimate source of power and control is God himself? The trial of Jesus is not about the malignity of the Jewish authorities.

It's not about the injustices perpetrated by Pilate. It's a spiritual conflict between the forces of light and darkness. A conflict that focuses on the identity of Jesus and his mission.

And we each one of us have to come to our own verdict regarding him. Who he is, where he comes from, what claim he has on me and on my life.

And just like Pilate that day so many years ago, the testimony is before us and our culpability is the greater if we walk away saying no thanks.

[34 : 42] If we walk away saying I'll think about it a bit more some other time. we have to answer now. We have to see him now. We have to respond.

Otherwise, like Pilate, we're drawn more and more off into the complexities of our own wrongdoing. Let us pray. Amen. Amen. Amen.

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