

John: Truth or Fiction?

John 18:28-40

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Turn with me now please to John 18:28. Jesus has been brought out of the Garden of Gethsemane. He has been betrayed by Judas, brought first of all, to Annas, the high priest. Peter, you will recall, has denied Him three times. The rooster has crowed in fulfillment of Jesus' prediction, and now we begin at verse 28:

So Annas sent Him bound to Caiaphas the high priest. Now Simon Peter was standing and warming himself. So they said to him, "You are not also one of His disciples, are you?" He denied it, and said, "I am not." One of the slaves of the high priest, being a relative of the one whose ear Peter cut off, said, "Did I not see you in the garden with Him?" Peter then denied it again, and immediately a rooster crowed. 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.

Now let me pause and make a reference here to the Passover that causes some difficulties. Jesus, you recall, and the disciples, have already eaten the Passover, so what is John then referring to at the end of verse 28? Perhaps he means that these Jewish leaders, so intent have they been on the arrest of Jesus, so intent have they been to have Jesus killed, they haven't as yet eaten the Passover. Forgetting that the Passover was to be eaten at sundown, the night before when Jesus and the disciples had eaten it, perhaps that's what it means. Perhaps, as Leon Morris thinks, there are two different calendars at work here, the calendar that Jesus and the disciples were operating with and a different calendar that the Jewish temple leaders were operating with, or perhaps as I personally think, the word Passover can have a wide ranging meaning, and Passover could well refer not just to the specific Passover meal but to the entire seven days of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Maybe that's what John means here.

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. 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?" And when he 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. 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. 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; 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." 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.

Amen. May God bless to us the reading of His holy and inerrant word. Let's pray together.

Our Father in heaven, we pray now for the help of Your Spirit, that these very solemn words and this very solemn event might have its course in our hearts, for Jesus' sake, Amen.

Perhaps you've seen the triple Oscar winning movie, *The Pianist*. It's about a Jewish pianist, whose name is Wladyslaw Szpilman, caught up in the overthrow of Warsaw, overrun as it was by Nazi Germany. He witnesses his mother, his father, his brother, and sister, and 300,000 others being taken in trains to death camps and gas chambers. And he escapes. And there's a point in the movie where he is hiding in a bombed out, disheveled home, in the attic, trying to open a tin of fruit, at the point of near starvation. And just as he's trying to open this tin of fruit, the camera suddenly focuses on the presence of another, a Nazi German officer. He asks him who he is. He asks him whether he's a Jew. He says, "Yes." He asks him what he does. And he says, "I am," and then he corrects himself and says, "I was a pianist." "Play me something," the German says. And Wladyslaw Szpilman sits at this dusty piano and begins to play Chopin's *Ballade No. 1 in G Minor*. It's a most moving, sublime seven or eight minutes, in which, in the horror and ugliness and inhumanity of that moment, there shines something of exquisite beauty. Even if you don't know who Chopin is, I dare you to watch that scene and it not move you.

There is another Jew here, in this passage. And He, too, is standing in the midst of man's inhumanity. He's standing in the midst of sheer, unadulterated godlessness and hatred. And in this chapter there shines something of exquisite beauty. Jesus is on trial, He's on trial before the Roman authorities, and before the Roman governor of Judea, in particular, Pontius Pilate. John describes the scene for us, and it's a scene that occurs in two acts, with a kind of intermission, a dark, somber, grizzly intermezzo. Two different acts, follow through the same scenes, but in reverse order. In verses 28-32, Jesus is handed over to Pilate for execution. In verses 33-38, Jesus is cross-examined by Pilate. In the verses that end chapter 18, Jesus is defended by Pilate, and then, in the first three verses of chapter 19, there's this intermezzo, where Jesus is spat upon and beaten and mocked by these cruel thugs and soldiers. And then the same scenes, but now in reverse order, play out in the second act of chapter 19, where Jesus is defended by Pilate and cross examined by Pilate, and now handed over by Pilate for crufixion. Two great acts that meet together in this sinister, mocking of Jesus. Jesus intends for us to catch several strands of thought, of teaching. On the stage are Jesus and Pontius Pilate. In the background are Roman soldiers and Caiaphas, the high priest.

I. Jesus is rejected by the world.

And the first thing that John wants us to see is that Jesus is subjected to the world's rejection. This is what John has been telling us from the very beginning, from the opening prologue of the gospel, that He came into the world, and the world did not recognize Him, and that He came to His own and His own received Him not. The blindness of the world, and the rejection of the Jews, meeting together here in this passage in some kind of climatic malvolent conspiracy. And in this trial there is exposed the hypocrisy of the church and the weakness of the world. The hypocrisy of the church, did you notice how John records, how John underlines in the telling of this story, in the drama. Pilate has to move from within the Praetorium to outside of the Praetorium. The Jewish leaders cannot enter the Praetorium because it is a Gentile palace and they are obsessed with external, ceremonial cleanliness. Lest they be defiled, for the Passover ritual, they dare not enter the Praetorium.

These men, think of it, these men who have murder in their hearts, their sole intent is to kill Jesus, but they are externally concerned that they do not enter the Praetorium, the palace of Pontius Pilate. It would be hard to give a greater illustration of hypocrisy than that. They are concerned about outward cleanliness, but they are altogether unconcerned about the righteousness of God. They plead with the Roman authorities to set free a terrorist, a man who John describes as a robber, but had committed crimes worthy of capital punishment, and they would have him released rather than Jesus. The hypocrisy of the church, and the weakness of the world. Three times Pilate says, "I find no fault in this Man, I find no basis for a charge in this Man." It's lawyer speech, you understand. You lawyers, you understand what Pilate is saying here. There is no basis for a charge here. That's what he's saying. Three times he says it, and weak, man pleasing, vacillating Pilate has Jesus scourged, anyway. Scourging inflicted terrible, terrible wounds. The bible doesn't describe the crucifixion. It doesn't describe the scourging, because perhaps there may lie within us some Sado-Masochist tendency, but at the same time when John is writing this, his readers knew what scourging was, and his readers knew what crucifixion was. They saw it on a daily basis.

We are uncertain about the manner in which this scourging was inflicted. The Romans had made scourging a punishment for numerous breaches of the law, and it was so gruesome an act that the Roman citizen, except in extreme circumstances, was exempt from scourging. The Jewish manner of scourging was to lay a man down on the ground, with his face to the dust, and to beat his back. That is unlikely to have been what happened to Jesus here. This was a Roman scourging, where He would have been tied to a post of some kind, his back bare, clothing removed, his back bent in some way to tighten the skin, so that the first infliction of those cords, those whips, often having bits of bone or

metal tied into them, would inflict the severest damage possible. Perhaps 39 lashes, according to the Roman ritual. Sometimes the whip tore into the flesh so badly that a man would become almost a human skeleton in his appearance. Before we get to the cross, and crucifixion, there occurs here, outside the palace of Pontius Pilate, something degrading and dehumanizing. And what should pain us the most is not that we are capable of this, but that we are capable of doing this to Jesus.

II. Jesus fulfills God's plan and purpose.

Jesus is exposed to the rejection of the world, but John wants us to see something else here, another strand of thought. As these two acts play themselves out, he wants us to see also that Jesus is fulfilling the purposes of God. He says in verse 5 and again in verse 14, that there is an aspect in which, what is happening to Jesus here is only fulfilling what God had intended for Jesus from the very start. John is interested in happenstance, words that Pilate utters, words that Caiaphas had uttered, about "one man dying for the people." And behind it there lies such an extraordinary truth. Pilate is saying in verse 5, "Behold the Man," *Ecce homo*. And again in verse 14, "Behold the king." Isn't it extraordinary that Pilate should say, more than once, "Behold the king." And John is saying to you and me, "Do you understand that this ungodly man actually got it right! That He was the King! That He was the Lord of Glory!" Behold the Man, this broken Man, this bent Man, this bleeding Man, this lacerated torn Man, this Man for all seasons, this Man for other men, this true Man, the best Man that ever was. And behold Him, behold Him as He bleeds, behold Him as He undergoes such rigor and punishment and pain, and behold your King.

Jesus is fulfilling prophecy. Look at verse 32, "Pilate says 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.' That the word of Jesus might be fulfilled which he spoke, signifying by what kind of death He was about to die." Why is that so important? Why is it so important that Jesus should die this way, by crucifixion rather than by heart failure or cancer or drowning? Why is that important? I sat next to a man on a plane on Friday, coming back from somewhere, and that's what we talked about. He just couldn't see why it was important that Jesus should die, and that He should die this way. And it had to be, it had to be, because Jesus is being hung upon a cross because He will bear the curse that is associated with that, spoken in the book of Deuteronomy, that in order to take our place, in order to be the Man for us, it had to be this way. All the gospel writers make note of the crown of thorns, pushed down upon Jesus' head. Why? What's the significance? What's the significance of a crown of thorns? And ask yourself, "Where else in the Bible do you read about thorns?" And it's in Genesis, it's at the fall, that as a consequence of the fall, thorns and thistles would make mankind's life a curse, that the expression of God's curse in labor, were thorns. And Jesus is becoming the second man, the last Adam, and He's

taking those thorns and He's crowned them upon His head, because as Pilate is saying, "Behold your King." And He's taking this curse and He's nailing it to that cross. He's walking into the flames of Hell for me.

Do you notice in verses 39-40, Pilate unwittingly plays a part in this extraordinary custom, that at Passover a man condemned to death, a criminal, guilty of capital crimes, would be let free. As a kind of symbol of Passover, perhaps, that when the lamb had been slain and the blood had been sprinkled on the lintels of the doorposts, the angel of death would Passover that house, and death would not visit. And somehow, it's not a biblical thing, it's a custom that had grown, and you'd think they would say, "Release Jesus." You'd think, you'd want to say that's what you would say, that's what I would say, had you been there in Jerusalem that day. And it still shocks, doesn't it, that they say, "Barabbas," the thief and possibly murderer, instead of Jesus. Jesus or Barabbas? Which one? And they choose Barabbas. Do you remember that day when Jesus had come into Jerusalem, Palm Sunday, just days before. It was the day when shepherds would bring the Passover lambs into the city. It would be an extraordinary sight. Thousands, perhaps tens of thousands of lambs, in every street and nook and cranny of Jerusalem. You could hardly move for these lambs. And walking in their midst is the Passover Lamb, Himself, who has come to lay down His life in order that the curse due to our sin be removed.

And then, there's something else, because John makes an allusion in verse 19, to a moment when Jesus is in this trial with Pontius Pilate, that He says nothing. "Jesus gave Him no answer." Why? Why did Jesus give no answer? Don't you think John is saying to you and me, "Do you remember Isaiah 53? 'That as a lamb before its shearers is dumb, so He opened not His mouth. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, and as one from whom men hide their faces, He was despised and we esteemed Him not. Surely He has born our griefs and carried our sorrows, yet we did esteem Him stricken, smitten by God and afflicted, but He was wounded for our transgressions. He was bruised for our iniquities. The chastisement due to our peace was laid upon Him, and with His stripes, ' yes the stripes upon His back, 'we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray. We have turned everyone to his own way, and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth.'" And not only I think, is John saying, do you remember those words, he's saying in the self consciousness of Jesus, he remembered those words. He is now identifying Himself as the suffering servant of the Lord, come into this world for the redemption of His people. Jesus is exposed to the rejection of the world, and yet, at the same time, Jesus is fulfilling every word of prophecy that God had ever laid down with regard to Him, and in the chaos of this event, and the tragedy of this event, God is at work.

III. Jesus is crucified.

And then there's the final thing that John wants us to see, that Jesus is condemned. We've seen Him rejected, we've seen Him fulfilling the purposes of God, and at last, we see Him handed over for crucifixion. Jesus dies and Barabbas lives. It's often asked, isn't it, that if you'd met Barabbas the next day, the next week, the next month, you'd met him in the streets in Jerusalem and you went up to him and you asked him the question, "How come, Barabbas, you're alive?" And the only answer he could give was that Jesus had died in his place. That's the only answer he could give. Jesus died in my place. It's like an acted out parable, isn't it. John is saying to us, "Do you hear the gospel here? This is the gospel. This is what it's all about. It doesn't get better than this." Three times in John, Luke has it five times, three times the verdict is passed, "Not guilty, not guilty, not guilty." It's like a ringing bell. How come, then, He's condemned? What are the charges? Two.

In verse 32, it's treason against Caesar. In verse 7 of chapter 19, it's blasphemy, in that He made Himself God. Those are the two charges. Treason and blasphemy. And what's the significance? It's that these are precisely the charges that are leveled by God against you and me. Treason because we have refused to have Him as King, and blasphemy because we have made ourselves to be God. In a way what's happening here is what Luther called, "The great exchange." The accusations leveled against us are being leveled against Christ. He who was not guilty, not guilty, not guilty, is being reckoned guilty for me, guilty for me, guilty for me. "Behold your king," Pilate says, "Behold Him." "Did ere such love and sorrow meet or thorns compose so rich a crown." Did they?

Let me ask you, what's your instinct now, this very minute, now. Because it says something about your heart. Is your instinct to sing, "Crown Him with many crowns, the Lamb upon His throne." Or is it your instinct to say, "Away with Him, and crucify Him." In the middle of this discourse, Pilate says the most extraordinary thing, "What is truth?" he says. He may well have been the ultimate postmodernist. What is truth? And Jesus is saying, "I am truth. The One who makes sense of everything. The One who integrates the mess and the nihilism of what we hear in Ecclesiastes, where life on earth under the sun, without Jesus, you understand, is vanity and meaningless and empty. And the only thing that makes sense of it all, and integrates it all together, is Jesus. What's your instinct? Because on it, my friends, on it hangs your eternal destiny, your eternal destiny hangs on that instinct, whether to cry, "Crown Him, crown Him with many crowns, the Lamb upon His throne."

Let's pray together.

A Guide to the Evening Service

The Psalm, Hymns and Spiritual Songs

Hallelujah, Praise Jehovah (Psalm 148)

A famous Bible song by the composer who gave us “A Wonderful Savior is Jesus My Lord,” “Away in a Manger,” “We Have Heard the Joyful Sound (Jesus Saves!),” “My Faith Has Found a Resting Place,” and “’Tis So Sweet to Trust in Jesus.” This song, set to a Gospel tune, puts into meter and chorus the words of Psalm 148:1-13 – “Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD from the heavens; Praise Him in the heights! Praise Him, all His angels; Praise Him, all His hosts! Praise Him, sun and moon; Praise Him, all stars of light! Praise Him, highest heavens, And the waters that are above the heavens! Let them praise the name of the LORD, For He commanded and they were created. He has also established them forever and ever; He has made a decree which will not pass away. Praise the LORD from the earth, Sea monsters and all deeps; Fire and hail, snow and clouds; Stormy wind, fulfilling His word; Mountains and all hills; Fruit trees and all cedars; Beasts and all cattle; Creeping things and winged fowl; Kings of the earth and all peoples; Princes and all judges of the earth; Both young men and virgins; Old men and children. Let them praise the name of the LORD, For His name alone is exalted; His glory is above earth and heaven.

O Day of Rest and Gladness (RUF Tune)

This is a song of thanksgiving to God for the blessings of his special day: the Lord's Day, the Christian Sabbath. Wordsworth's lyrics personify the Sabbath and address it directly in the first three stanzas. We sing it to the RUF tune, which is now well known to us.

Away in a Manger

We sing the third stanza of this song tonight in preparation for the children's devotional. A couple of weeks ago, we considered (during our Wednesday evening exposition of Exodus 40) just how appropriate the prayer of this carol is.

I Hear Thy Welcome Voice

Hartsough wrote this song at a revival meeting in Epworth, Iowa. Says Ira Sankey: “The words and music of this beautiful hymn were first published in a monthly, entitled, Guide to Holiness, a copy of which was sent to me in England. I immediately adopted it, and had it published in Sacred Songs and Solos. It proved to be one of the most helpful of the revival hymns, and was often used as an invitation hymn in England and America.”

The Sermon

Our text this evening is a word to our postmodern era: that there is such a thing as truth (True truth to use Francis Schaeffer's phrase) – and that Jesus is *that*

truth. When Jesus was on trial for His life, He said, "For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Every one who is of the truth hears my voice" (John 18:37).

Today this simple affirmation is a stunning and controversial revelation. It meets with widespread disbelief. If you try to claim today that there is absolute truth – truth that everyone should believe and follow – you will very likely be considered misguided and immoral. At the very least you will come across as intolerant and bigoted. People will say you are misguided. One person's idea of what he is like is as good as any other person's.

But worse: many will think you immoral. Why? Because to claim that there is absolute truth leads to intolerance and prejudice against what others think.

Relativism: that's the fashion right now. If you insist the truth as you see it is binding on others then the modern world will think you arrogant and intolerant and immoral.

This is the 20th century world to which Jesus says, "For this purpose I was born and came into the world, to bear witness to THE TRUTH." It's a world in which His message has been nullified even before it is spoken, because TRUTH is seen as the rotten root of bigotry and intolerance and prejudice. But relativism on the other hand is seen as the wholesome mother of mutual respect and tolerance and peace.

And in all this relativism: Jesus is crucified all over again.

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