

The Trial of Jesus

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One of the odd things about the Bible is the fact that it contains four gospels. On an intuitive level, this doesn't make much sense. If we were running things, we would probably have the Holy Spirit inspire one apostle or one prophet to write a comprehensive record of the life and death of Jesus. No detail would be excluded.

Of course, that's not what we have. None of the four gospels are comprehensive, and only one of them, the gospel of Luke, claims to be written in chronological order. Even the three so-called Synoptic gospels differ from each other in some ways, and the gospel of John is massively different from any other gospel. Why would God do that?

When we consider this seemingly confused situation, we must remember that the gospels were written at different times, from different perspectives, and for different reasons. The apostle John was one of the three closest earthly friends of our Lord, and he selected stories from his immense body of personal experience that would tell others what they needed to know to believe in Jesus. John explicitly says, in fact, that his purpose is not to reveal everything he knows about Jesus. Luke, on the other hand, wasn't one of the original followers of Jesus, and he wasn't even a follower of one of the original followers. He was a companion of the late-appearing apostle Paul, and his gospel is based on research and interviews that he conducted some thirty years after the crucifixion, probably during the time in which Paul was imprisoned in Caesarea. Luke's purpose is to provide an orderly, certain account of Christ's life.

It's important for us to keep the different gospels distinct in our minds, but there are also times when it's valuable to combine everything they say about a particular subject. When we are able to weave together details from all four narratives, the result is a fuller portrait of Jesus and His life than any single gospel is able to provide by itself. This morning, we're going to spend all our time looking at one such subject. We're going to consider the trial of Jesus.

Jesus and the Jews

The events of the trial of Jesus are much more complex than we realize, unless we take the time to sit down and piece the accounts of all four gospels together. Once we do that, though, we see that we can divide this body of material into three main sections. The first of these three sections concerns Jesus and the Jews. It begins immediately after Jesus has been arrested in the garden of Gethsemane and taken back into Jerusalem.

We naturally tend to believe that Jesus is brought before the Jewish high council immediately, but that's not actually what happened. First, he is brought to **ANNAS**. We read about Jesus' encounter with Annas in John 18:12-15, 19-24. First of all, let's notice why John knows and tells the story and none of the Synoptic gospels do. John knows about Jesus' interview with Annas because he was present for the interview. Unlike most of the other apostles, John and his brother James came from a wealthy, well connected family, and John's connections get him through the door in v. 15.

At first glance, John's account here is confusing. He calls Annas "the high priest", but a few verses earlier, says that Caiaphas was high priest that year. John isn't contradicting himself. Instead, he's pointing to a peculiarity of the Jewish political world at this time. Under the Law of Moses, the high priest was supposed to serve until he died. However, when the Romans took over Judea, they decided that it wouldn't be a good idea for one Jew to hold that much power for that long, so during the Roman occupation, the high priests served at the pleasure of their occupiers.

Annas was one of these multiple high priests, and at this point in time, he had been removed from the high-priestly office about fifteen years before. However, even though he no longer held the title, he certainly still held the power. The Romans were so anxious not to offend him that the next four appointees were his sons, and the fifth was Caiaphas, his son-in-law. Annas was as wealthy as he was powerful, too. Among other things, he was the guy who owned the booths that sold the animals for the temple sacrifices, so when Jesus came in and cleansed the temple, it was Annas's property that He was wrecking. This is the most powerful man in the Jewish nation, and he is no friend of Jesus'.

As soon as Jesus is presented to Annas, the high priest begins to interrogate him. Like many of Jesus' enemies, Annas is almost certainly a very intelligent man, and he hopes to use the words of Jesus here to incriminate him and his followers. Jesus isn't having any of this. He refuses to tell Annas anything, noting that all of His teaching is a matter of public record. One of the temple guardsmen there thinks this is an insolent thing for Jesus to say, and so he strikes Jesus, sadly, not for the last time, and demands that he respect the high priest. This produces no change in Jesus' attitude. Annas quickly realizes that his private interrogation isn't going anywhere, and he sends Jesus off to the Sanhedrin.

This meeting of the council, which is the formal trial of Jesus, takes place at the house of **CAIAPHAS**, the nominal high priest. At the beginning of this part of the story, it is about 4 o'clock on Friday morning. We read what happens next in Mark 14:53-59. This judicial body is made up of 70 of the most reputable elders of the Jewish nation. They are supposed to be experts in the Law, which they are, and they are supposed to judge justly, which they certainly will not. Jesus has a couple of supporters on the Sanhedrin, such as Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, but they are vastly outnumbered by the council members who have agreed with Caiaphas and decided that Jesus must die.

There's a problem, though. Even the Sanhedrin can't arbitrarily sentence Jesus to death. The Law requires that Jesus' misdeeds be confirmed by the testimony of two or three witnesses. This kangaroo court needs some witnesses. The good news for the Sanhedrin is that they have plenty of witnesses, plenty of people who are willing to speak against Jesus. The problem is that because Jesus hasn't actually violated the Law, the stories that the witnesses tell don't agree with each other. They don't meet the fact-confirmation standard of Deuteronomy 19. Some of them heard Jesus claim that He would rebuild the temple in three days, but even there, their stories don't line up. At this point, although the Jews have Jesus in custody, there's nothing they can do with Him. The trial has stalled out.

This takes us to the direct exchange between **CAIAPHAS AND JESUS**. It appears in Mark 14:60-65. At this point, Caiaphas gives up on the witness charade and starts questioning Jesus directly. Caiaphas is taking a huge risk here. After all, Jesus has made a career out of humiliating Jewish leaders who tried to trap Him with clever questions. However, this is a risk that Caiaphas has to take. He knows that right now, there is not a shred of evidence that could lead to Jesus being condemned. All of his witnesses are useless, so the only One who can provide that evidence is Jesus himself.

At first, Jesus does what He did during the false-witness parade. He says nothing. Caiaphas is hoping to snow Jesus here, to panic Him into an admission by acting like there's some ironclad case against Him. However, Jesus knows that there is actually no case, so He says nothing. Finally, Caiaphas is down to his last trick. He asks Jesus whether He is the Christ. If Jesus says nothing here, the whole trial ends in a fizzle, and Jesus must go free.

However, Jesus tells Caiaphas the truth, not because Caiaphas has tricked Him, but because He knows that His hour has come. He gives Caiaphas the rope he needs to hang Him by confessing that He is the Messiah. Caiaphas knows exactly what to do with this gift from Jesus. With a show of pious outrage, he dispenses with the two-or-three-witnesses requirement, because, after all, now the entire Sanhedrin has witnessed Jesus' "blasphemy". All along, this trial hasn't been about finding the truth. If it were, they would have had to investigate whether Jesus actually was the Messiah. Instead, it's about finding an excuse to find Jesus guilty. They have their excuse, and they condemn Him to death.

Will Jesus Die?

Now, it's time to turn our attention to the second phase of the trial of Jesus, in which the Jews and some other actors we haven't met yet determine whether Jesus will die or not. The first event in this section of the trial is the conversation between **THE JEWS AND PILATE**. The best Scriptural take on this conversation appears in John 18:28-32. Here for the first time, we meet Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea. As far as we can tell, from sources both in and outside of Scripture, Pilate was not a bad guy. He had been given responsibility for governing the Jews, who were a notoriously unruly subject people, and he remained in that office for about ten years. He was prone to causing the occasional massacre, but by and large, he did a fair-minded job of governing an ungovernable population.

It is to this man, with a reputation for decency, that the Jews bring the falsely-condemned Jesus, probably about six in the morning on Friday. Notice first of all how slimy the chief priests are here. They are so unconcerned about justice that they are willing to execute an innocent man, but they are so concerned about ceremony that they aren't willing to go into the residence of a Gentile just in case they inadvertently defile themselves so that they can't eat the Passover. Remember, the Jews reckoned days from sundown to sundown. Jesus and His disciples ate the Passover on our Thursday night after sunset, but the chief priests haven't eaten theirs yet, and they want to keep themselves ritually pure.

The Jewish leaders likely don't want to involve Pilate at all, but they have to. Only the Roman governor of the province had the right to execute criminals. What is going on here is not so much a trial as it is a sentencing hearing. The Jews need Pilate's help, but they don't want Pilate to find out how shaky the evidence against Jesus is. As a result, when Pilate asks them a straightforward question about what Jesus has done, they give Pilate a cagey answer.

This certainly awakens Pilate's suspicions, so he calls Jesus to him for **A PRIVATE CONVERSATION**. We read about this in John 18:33-38. Pilate would have been indifferent to the Jews' conviction of Jesus for blasphemy, so the way the Jews frame Jesus' wrongdoing to Pilate is by claiming that Jesus has made Himself out to be a king and encouraged rebellion against the Roman government. Pilate is very concerned about rebellion, so he cross-examines Jesus about His kingship. However, Jesus explains that even though He is a king, He is not King of some earthly kingdom. He isn't even encouraging His followers to take up arms to save His life, much less overthrow the Roman government. Jesus' only subjects consist of those who are willing to hear the truth of His word. To this, Pilate asks rhetorically, "What is truth?" This is one of the most revealing statements in Scripture. It shows Pilate's overall world-weariness and his cynicism at the disconnect between what the Jews have claimed about Jesus and what Jesus has actually said. Whatever kind of king Jesus is, He clearly poses no threat of rebellion, so Pilate informs the Jews that to him, Jesus is innocent.

This determination leads to Jesus being sent to **HEROD**. This plays out in Luke 23:4-16. Naturally, the Jews don't want to let Jesus go free, so they protest that Jesus has been stirring up trouble from Judea to Galilee. When Pilate hears the word "Galilee", his ears perk up, because he can tell that this Jesus situation is going to be a mess, and he wants an out. Galilee is under the rulership of Herod Antipas, not Pilate, and Herod happens to be in town, so Pilate ships Jesus and his gaggle of accusers off to Herod. Pilate clearly hopes that Herod will deal with this.

Herod probably isn't a bad guy either, but he suffers from Ahab disease. He's a weak man under the thumb of a strong woman. The woman in this case is his wife Herodias, whom Herod stole from his brother. Herodias is the reason why Herod executed John the Baptist. Other than that, Herod seems to have found John to be an entertaining diversion, and this is his attitude toward Jesus too. He isn't taking the trial seriously. Instead, he wants Jesus to perform a miracle for his entertainment. Jesus refuses to oblige. Then, the chief priests accuse Jesus once again of being a rebel, still without any witnesses to establish Jesus' guilt. Herod asks Jesus about that, but Jesus doesn't say anything interesting there either. Finally, for lack of anything else amusing to do, Herod has his soldiers dress Jesus up in fancy clothing and mock him. Clearly, nothing has been brought out that would condemn Jesus, so Herod ships him back to Pilate.

Pilate draws the correct conclusion from this—that Herod doesn't think Jesus has done anything worthy of death either. There's been a lot of talk about how Jesus claims to be a king, et cetera, but no actual evidence of treasonous activity. Pilate is willing to flog Jesus to placate the Jews, but he's not willing to kill him, and he tells them so.

This leads us to our meeting with the final new character of the trial of Jesus—**BARABBAS**. We learn why Barabbas becomes relevant from Matthew 27:15-23. This is the story of Pilate's third attempt to save Jesus' life. First, he tried to have the charges against Jesus dismissed. Then, he sent Jesus to Herod. Pilate hasn't heard a scrap of evidence that Jesus is guilty, but he has heard from his wife, who tells him that a dream has told her not to allow Jesus to be executed. Romans were superstitious folk, and Pilate probably took this dream very seriously. He knows that the Jewish leaders have it in for Jesus, but he hasn't heard the reason why yet, and he doesn't want to kill Jesus on their say-so.

In this third attempt, he wants to force them into choosing to save Jesus themselves by presenting them with an unpalatable choice. Apparently, it was the custom of the Roman governor to release one Jewish prisoner on Passover as a way to show respect for the Jewish festival. Pilate is going to use that custom, he thinks, to save Jesus. He gives the Jewish multitude a choice between having him release Jesus and having him release Barabbas. Barabbas is a thug, plain and simple. He is everything that the Jews claimed Jesus was—a rebel, an insurrectionist, a murderer, with a sideline in highway robbery. If the Jews are really concerned with treason, they will ask for Jesus to be saved instead of Barabbas.

Sadly, Pilate doesn't reckon with the depths of the chief priests' hostility toward Jesus. They hate Jesus so much that they stir up the crowd to ask for Barabbas to be pardoned instead. Pilate is probably appalled that the people would ask for a monster like Barabbas to be unleashed on them, but the more he protests, the more they insist.

Who Will Kill Jesus?

At this point, Jesus' fate is basically sealed. The remaining negotiations between Pilate and the chief priests aren't primarily about whether Jesus will live. They're about who is going to have to kill Him. This act of the tragedy begins when **PILATE WASHES HIS HANDS**. Read with me from Matthew 27:24-26. We often think of this as one of the last things that happens before Jesus is led away to be crucified, but in reality, there's a lot of back-and-forth left. Pilate here isn't just issuing some kind of pro forma denial of guilt before he gives the orders to have Jesus crucified. The Jews think that's what he's doing, but that's not actually what's going on. Instead, when Pilate washes his hands, he means something similar to what we mean when we say, "I wash my hands of the matter." Pilate is saying, "If you are so determined that Jesus must die, fine. Kill Him yourselves. I, though, am going to have nothing to do with it."

All this becomes clearer when **JESUS IS MOCKED**. John tells this story in John 19:1-8. Before we move on, there are a couple of chronological issues that we have to clear up. When we put all four gospels together, we see that Jesus isn't mocked once. Instead, He is mocked twice. We've already seen the first time, when Herod's soldiers dressed Jesus up in a gorgeous robe and sent Him back to Pilate. This is the second time. Pilate's soldiers take the robe off of Jesus, flog Him brutally, then put the same robe back on Him, add the refinement of a crown of thorns, and parade Him out in front of the whole jeering crowd this time. Jesus is truly the King, but His people treat Him like an impostor.

Second, at first glance, the timing of the mocking appears to be different in Matthew and Mark than in John. Matthew and Mark have Jesus delivered to be crucified first, but John has Jesus mocked before He is delivered to be crucified. This contradiction, though, is more apparent than real. The Synoptics say that Jesus is delivered over to be crucified when Pilate acknowledges that he can't save Jesus' life. John, on the other hand, refers to the time when Pilate accepts the responsibility for the crucifixion himself. The mocking of Jesus occurs in between these two events.

At the time of the mocking, though, Pilate is not yet ready to give the orders, and we see this from what he says. The chief priests and officers are eager to see Pilate crucify Jesus himself. Pilate, on the other hand, is still trying to dodge. He tells the Jews to take Jesus and crucify Him themselves. In other words, he's saying to them that if they're so eager to see Jesus dead that they're willing to trample all over the law to do it, they might as well take Him and lynch Him. Why not? It's not like Jesus is getting due process anyway. The Jews, however, appear to be almost offended by Pilate's words here. They insist that they're not a lynch mob. However, in insisting that they are following the law, they slip up and acknowledge to Pilate for the first time that they want Jesus dead because He claims to be the Son of God.

This might be the first true thing that the Jewish leaders have said all morning, but it frightens Pilate to hear it. Pilate is probably frightened for two main reasons. First of all, the official policy of the Roman Empire is religious

tolerance. As long as people pay their taxes, the Romans don't care whom they worship, even if their religion is a weird religion like Judaism. Because of this, the Roman government refused to interfere in religious disputes. We see this a little bit later on in the book of Acts, when Gallio the proconsul of Achaia throws out a lawsuit against Paul because he perceives that it has a predominantly religious basis. The Romans did not consider that their business, so if Pilate passes judgment in this religious case against Jesus, he is going against official Roman policy, which could get him in trouble later.

Second, this frightens Pilate because he believes that Jesus very well may be at least the son of a god. Greek and Roman mythology is filled with stories of human beings who had mortal mothers but divine fathers. Hercules, for instance, was supposedly the son of Zeus and an ordinary woman. Because this is Pilate's religious background, he finds nothing outlandish about the idea that Jesus could have divine parentage. He's certainly readier to accept that than the Jews are. If Jesus is in fact the son of a god and Pilate kills Him, then the god will take his revenge on Pilate.

Pilate is very unhappy, then, about the way that things are shaping up. To try to avert disaster, he has one last frantic **CONVERSATION WITH JESUS**. This is recorded in John 19:9-11. He wants to see if Jesus will acknowledge that He is the Son of God. Jesus knows that such an admission might push Pilate to release Him, so He says nothing. This frustrates Pilate. Here he is, trying to save the life of an innocent man, and the innocent man won't cooperate. He tries to get Jesus to understand the gravity of the situation by emphasizing his own authority. Jesus, of course, understands the situation perfectly well, and He tells Pilate that he is nothing more than a cog in a much larger machine.

Jesus hasn't given Pilate the backing that he needs, but Pilate tries one last time to have Him released. However, this leads to **JESUS' CONDEMNATION**. John recounts what happens here in John 19:12-16. The Jews are predictably outraged. From their perspective, Pilate has already agreed that Jesus will be crucified, but when he finds out that he's going to have to give the orders, he backslides. The chief priests block this one last desperate maneuver by threatening Pilate's safety. They cling to the one admission that Jesus has made that the Romans would care about—that He is a king. The Jewish leaders know, and they know that Pilate knows, that Jesus isn't the kind of king that is a threat to the Romans. However, they know, and Pilate knows too, that if they write a letter to Caesar telling him that his governor let a self-proclaimed king go, Caesar isn't going to investigate all of the extenuating circumstances. That one fact alone will be enough to get Pilate executed. The Jews are telling Pilate that if he lets Jesus go, that's what they will do.

Under this kind of pressure, Pilate caves. He knows that if he wants to save his own skin, he has no choice but to condemn an innocent man. However, Pilate is going to score what points he can. First of all, both here and at the cross, he presents Jesus to the Jews as their actual King, not a pretend king. Second, Pilate makes the Jewish leaders proclaim their loyalty to Caesar, even though everybody knows that the chief priests actually hate the Romans and will rebel at the first opportunity. They are collaborators, yes, but they are not willing collaborators. As a result, the Jewish leaders reject their real King in favor of a tyrant they hate, a tyrant whose successors will destroy them in less than 40 years. In response, Pilate gives the orders for Jesus to be crucified. It's about noon on Friday. The show trial has taken six hours.

Conclusion

As we lay this whole tragic story out from beginning to end, one of the things that jumps out at us is how small a role Jesus plays. From beginning to end of the trial, He is silent 95 percent of the time. Jesus could have talked His way out of trouble at so many points—during the meeting of the Sanhedrin, at His first interview with Pilate, before Herod, or even during His second interview with Pilate. He has all kinds of opportunities to save Himself but uses none of them.

In fact, Jesus only speaks out when speaking out will do Him the most harm. At His trial before the Jews, the only words out of Jesus' mouth are His claim to be the Son of God--the evidence that Caiaphas uses to convict Him. During Jesus' interview with Pilate, Jesus' acknowledgment that He is the King is the very statement that the Jews will soon use to blackmail the governor. If Jesus had simply said nothing, His enemies would have had to let Him go free.

Jesus doesn't help His enemies out like this by accident. Instead, there is a very clear purpose behind His decisions. Jesus is determined to be killed, and He's giving the Jewish leaders everything they need to kill Him. I can't imagine the courage and the love that led Jesus to do this, to actively seek to be tortured and murdered, but it's clear that He did it, and it's clear that He did it for us. Let's think about this as we partake of the Lord's Supper.