

The Gospel of John (110): Jesus before Pilate (3)

Introduction:

This is the third Lord's Day on which we are giving our prayerful focus to the trial of our Lord Jesus before the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. We have addressed what is recorded of this event in John 18:28-40. There we read of Jesus having been led from the house of Caiaphas to the Praetorium, which was the Jerusalem residence of the Roman governor. Pilate at first seemed reluctant to try Jesus. After asking for a specific charge against Jesus, he told these Jewish leaders, "You take Him and judge Him according to your law." But they refused to do so, for they wanted Rome to find Him guilty and have Him executed. This action would not only shield them somewhat from an uproar of the citizens who had been sympathetic to Jesus, but it would also result in Jesus being executed by means of crucifixion. They believed that this would greatly serve their desire to have Jesus discredited in the eyes of the people of not only being viewed as a criminal by Rome, but it would suggest that God had disavowed and had forsaken Him.

The Jewish leaders before Pilate charged Jesus with claiming to be a king, which would have been a direct challenge and threat to Rome's power. But upon his inquiry of Jesus, Pilate determined that this was a false or empty charge, for Jesus made it quite clear that although He was indeed a king, His kingdom was spiritual not political. Pilate concluded, therefore, that He was no direct threat to Pilate or Rome. Pilate declared publicly that he had found no fault at all in Jesus. Jesus was not guilty and did not warrant execution. After Pilate had proposed to release Jesus, "the king of the Jews", according to the common practice of the Roman authority at the time of the Passover, the Jewish leaders demanded that he not do so. They demanded that Pilate release Barabbas, for they wanted Jesus executed. We now come to John 19:1-16, in which we have the second portion of Jesus' trial before Pilate. We began to address this last Lord's Day. Let us read the entire passage to reaffirm the context before us. Here is **John 19:1-16**:

^{19:1}So then Pilate took Jesus and scourged Him. ²And the soldiers twisted a crown of thorns and put it on His head, and they put on Him a purple robe. ³Then they said, "Hail, King of the Jews!" And they struck Him with their hands.

⁴Pilate then went out again, and said to them, "Behold, I am bringing Him out to you, that you may know that I find no fault in Him."

⁵Then Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. And Pilate said to them, "Behold the Man!"

⁶Therefore, when the chief priests and officers saw Him, they cried out, saying, "Crucify Him, crucify Him!"

Pilate said to them, "You take Him and crucify Him, for I find no fault in Him."

⁷The Jews answered him, "We have a law, and according to our law He ought to die, because He made Himself the Son of God."

⁸Therefore, when Pilate heard that saying, he was the more afraid, ⁹and went again into the Praetorium, and said to Jesus, "Where are You from?" But Jesus gave him no answer.

¹⁰Then Pilate said to Him, "Are You not speaking to me? Do You not know that I have power to crucify You, and power to release You?"

¹¹Jesus answered, "You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above. Therefore the one who delivered Me to you has the greater sin."

¹²From then on Pilate sought to release Him, but the Jews cried out, saying, "If you let this Man go, you are not Caesar's friend. Whoever makes himself a king speaks against Caesar."

¹³When Pilate therefore heard that saying, he brought Jesus out and sat down in the judgment seat in a place that is called The Pavement, but in Hebrew, Gabbatha. ¹⁴Now it was the Preparation Day of the Passover, and about the sixth hour. And he said to the Jews, "Behold your King!"

¹⁵But 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!”
¹⁶Then he delivered Him to them to be crucified. Then they took Jesus and led Him away.

Last Lord’s Day we proposed an outline for these verses:

1. The treatment of the King (19:1-3)
2. The presentation of the King: “Behold the Man!” (19:4-7)
3. The authority “from Above” (19:8-11)
4. The Judgment Seat (19:12-16)

We have already addressed the...

I. Treatment of the King (19:1-3)

After Pilate had initially examined Jesus and then went out to speak with the Jewish leaders, he again entered his residence to prosecute Jesus further. Pilate had Him severely scourged. Though Pilate had found in Him no fault at all (18:38), he called for this great act of injustice perpetrated upon the Savior. This week I came across some further information on the Roman practice of flogging.

Three forms of corporal punishment were employed by the Romans, in increasing degree of severity: (1) *fustigatio* (beating), (2) *flagellatio* (flogging), and (3) *verberatio* (severe flogging, scourging). The first could be on occasion a punishment in itself, but the more severe forms were part of the capital sentence as a prelude to crucifixion. The most severe, *verberatio*, is what is indicated here by the Greek verb translated *flogged severely* (*μαστιγίου, mastigoo*). People died on occasion while being flogged this way; frequently it was severe enough to rip a person’s body open or cut muscle and sinew to the bone. It was carried out with a whip that had fragments of bone or pieces of metal bound into the tips.¹

It was after this took place that Pilate’s soldiers mocked Him. Verses 2 and 3 read, “And the soldiers twisted a crown of thorns and put it on His head, and they put on Him a purple robe. ³Then they said, ‘Hail, King of the Jews!’ And they struck Him with their hands.” Then Pilate brought Him out before the gathered Jewish crowd (vs. 4-7).

II. The presentation of the King: “Behold the Man!” (19:4-7)

Pilate again went out to the Jews, who were waiting for his sentence upon Jesus. But Pilate purposed to prepare them in advance for His appearance, then Jesus would come forth before them. Here are verses 4 through 7:

⁴Pilate then went out again, and said to them, “Behold, I am bringing Him out to you, that you may know that I find no fault in Him.”

⁵Then Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. And Pilate said to them, “Behold the Man!”

⁶Therefore, when the chief priests and officers saw Him, they cried out, saying, “Crucify Him, crucify Him!”

Pilate said to them, “You take Him and crucify Him, for I find no fault in Him.”

⁷The Jews answered him, “We have a law, and according to our law He ought to die, because He made Himself the Son of God.”

¹ NET Bible, Full Notes Edition (Thomas Nelson, 1996, 2019), p. 2059.

Now it may be that Pilate had abused Jesus in this fashion hoping to placate the Jews, and in so doing spare Jesus from dying. One might conclude this from Pilate's presentation of Jesus after He had endured this treatment. Pilate said before them, "Behold, I am bringing Him out to you, that you may know that I find no fault in Him" (v. 4). Matthew had added a detail that we might cite here. While Pilate had been examining Jesus, his wife had come to him in order to warn him. Matthew 27:19 reads,

While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent to him, saying, "Have nothing to do with that just Man, for I have suffered many things today in a dream because of Him."

Pilate announced for this second time before the Jewish leaders, "I find no fault in Him" (cf. 18:38, 19:4). But they would not listen. Pilate then presented Jesus to them, declaring, "Behold the Man!" The other Gospel writers do not record these words of Pilate.

This presentation of Jesus by Pilate also is a setting forth of John's literary irony in the manner that it is recorded.

Once more Pilate steps out of the *Praetorium* (cf. 18:28) to address the Jews. He delivers his verdict (cf. 18:38), and then dramatically presents Jesus—a sorry sight, swollen, bruised, bleeding from those cruel and ridiculous thorns. Aware as he is that *the people* who must choose the man who will receive the governor's amnesty, he presents Jesus as a beaten, harmless, and rather pathetic figure to make their choice of Him as easy as possible. In his dramatic utterance *Here is the man!* (in Latin, *Ecce homo!*) Pilate is speaking with dripping irony: here is the man you find so dangerous and threatening: can you not see He is harmless and somewhat ridiculous? If the governor is thereby mocking Jesus, He is ridiculing the Jewish authorities with no less venom. But the Evangelist records the event with still deeper irony: here indeed is the Man, the Word made flesh (1:14). All the witnesses were too blind to see it at the time, but this Man was displaying His glory, the glory of the one and only Son, in the very disgrace, pain, weakness and brutalization that Pilate advanced as suitable evidence that he was a judicial irrelevance.²

In **verse 5** we read of the presentation of Jesus by Pilate: "***Then Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe.***" But notice how John set forward Jesus by making Him the subject of the verb. He did not say, "Then Pilate brought Jesus out, who was wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe", although that was mentioned in verse 4. But in verse 5 it reads, "Then ***Jesus came out...***" Jesus is the subject of the verb. Jesus presented Himself before the gathered Jewish crowd. It is but another subtle way that conveys the dignity and the superior standing and authority of Jesus, who is not one who is being led about as a defeated prisoner, but He comes forth as a dignified and resilient sufferer. Jesus is the Man who is in front and center, displayed before the world, "wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe." Here are the words of **J. C. Ryle**:

A mock royal robe was thrown over our Lord's shoulders, in order to show how ridiculous and contemptible was the idea of His kingdom. The colour, "purple," was doubtless meant to be a derisive imitation of the well-known imperial purple, the colour worn by Emperors and Kings. Some have thought that this robe was only an old soldier's cape, such as a guard-house would easily furnish. Some, with more show of probability, have thought that this "robe" must be the "gorgeous robe" which Herod put on our Lord, mentioned by St. Luke, when he sent Him back to Pilate (Luke 23:11), a circumstance which John has not recorded. In any case we need not doubt that the "robe" was some shabby, cast-off garment. It is worth remembering that this brilliant colour, scarlet or purple, would make our blessed Lord a most conspicuous object to every eye, when He was led through the streets from Herod, or brought forth from Pilate's house to the assembled multitude of Jews. – Once more we should call to mind the symbolical nature of this transaction also. Our Lord was clothed with a robe of shame and contempt, that we might be clothed with a spotless garment of righteousness, and stand in white robes before the throne of God.³

² Carson, p. 598.

³ J. C. Ryle, **Expository Thoughts on John**, vol. 3 (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987, orig. 1869), p. 305.

John then wrote, “*And Pilate said to them, ‘Behold the Man!’*” The Greek word translated “Behold” (Ἴδού) before “the Man” serves to draw great attention to the declaration.⁴ John the Baptist did the same when he had called out, “*Behold, the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world!*” (John 1:29). When John recorded that Pilate presented Jesus, saying, “Behold the Man!”, John was conveying to his readers through Pilate’s words more than what Pilate himself intended. Where Pilate was simply presenting a rather pitiful and pathetic man before the crowd, “Behold the man!”, John, or rather the Holy Spirit, was setting before the readers of this Gospel a much greater presentation. Here is a rather extended but a very good setting forth of the truth of this declaration:

Whatever the political (or simply cruel) intentions of Pilate regarding the introduction of Jesus, in the cosmological (broader scope) context of the Fourth Gospel this title provides for the reader rich insight into the person and work of Jesus Christ. A brief explanation of the use of the title in Genesis 3:22 is necessary in order to make the connection to its use here. Although the LXX (OT Greek Septuagint) uses a different noun for “the man” (Ἄδὰμ) than the Gospel (ἄνθρωπος), the noun not only means “man/humanity,” but the Hebrew term can be translated as “the man,” which is how most English translations render it.⁵ Even the article “the” in “the man” (ὁ ἄνθρωπος) is significant in the title, suggesting that the allusion is in reference to a particular man, Adam. The title is spoken by God in Genesis 3:22⁶ in the context of God’s announcement of the guilty verdict to be placed on all creation (Adam, Eve, and the serpent). In Genesis 3, then, the title declares the mortality of Adam and assumes an ironic reality, for “Behold, the man” announces Adam’s alienation from God and his existence in a state of death. The title announces to the first human life that it now exists in a state of depravity and impending death.

In the Gospel of John, however, a reversal of this state of death has begun with the coming of Jesus. Jesus is the life (1:4; 14:6) who has entered into the depraved condition of the world, into the depraved flesh condition of “man” (1:14), in order to recreate. This is why the Genesis motif is so central to the Gospel. What started “in the beginning”⁷ in the first week of creation (ch. 1) will be finalized by a renewal of “Adam” in a “garden” (chs. 18-20). The “exaltation” of Jesus and His “glory” has continually been directed at the cross, the place of death and humiliation that most clearly expresses the nature of His kingship. By this declaration Pilate’s words make the point explicit to the reader. Rather than garnering sympathy for Jesus, as is often assumed, Pilate is extending publicly the application of shame to Jesus performed by the soldiers inside the Praetorium, serving to expose before the same public his own prideful ignorance. But to the reader Pilate is an “unconscious witness to Christian truth.”⁸

We should frequently contemplate the shame and contempt, the pain and the torment, that our Lord endured in order to save us from our sin and to enable God to justly forgive our egregious sin and to confer upon us unspeakable glory. Jesus Christ endured what we should have suffered, so that through His sufferings we would be secure in our everlasting presence before Him and His Father in glory. He was the only Man who could bear God’s wrath in our place and thereby bring us life. Just as Adam as the head of the human race brought eternal death upon us, so, “Behold this Man” has brought eternal life to us.

What was the response of the Jews to Pilate’s proclamation and introduction of Jesus, “Behold the Man”? We read in **verse 6**, “*Therefore, when the chief priests and officers saw Him, they cried out, saying, ‘Crucify Him, crucify Him!’*” They would have Pilate crucify Jesus, to put Him to death in the manner that would bring most contempt upon Him from those who witnessed the spectacle, and would cause the most

⁴ “Although the particle of exclamation, ‘Behold’ (Ἴδού), serves as a “prompter of attention” before a verb, when it is used before a noun, as in this case, it serves as a ‘marker of great emphasis.’” Edward W. Klink, III, **John**. Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Zondervan, 2016), p. 777.

⁵ Cf. NRSV, NIV, ESV, NKJV, NASV, NJB, NEB.

⁶ Genesis 3:22 reads, “Then the LORD God said, ‘*Behold, the man* has become like one of Us, to know good and evil. And now, lest he put out his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever...’”

⁷ Both Genesis 1:1 and John 1:1 open with the words, “In the beginning.”

⁸ Edward W. Klink, III, **John**. Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Zondervan, 2016), pp. 778f.

agony that they could have devised to be heaped upon Him. All would have looked upon Jesus hanging upon His cross as having been forsaken by God as a great sinner, for God to have permitted Him to undergo such a tormenting and humiliating death in such a public manner.

What was Pilate's reaction to them? Asserting the third time that he had found no basis of guilt in Jesus, we read, "***Pilate said to them, 'You take Him and crucify Him, for I find no fault in Him.'***"

But the Jews always to had a response to object to Pilate's desires and efforts to release Jesus. **Verse 7** records their appeal to Pilate: "***The Jews answered him, 'We have a law, and according to our law He ought to die, because He made Himself the Son of God.'***" John records no answer from Pilate to this new charge. But John does recount what Pilate then did—he once again turned to enter his Praetorium to speak with Jesus once again. But he did so with a greater degree of fear than he had already.

III. Authority "from Above" (19:8-11)

⁸Therefore, when Pilate heard that saying, he was the more afraid, ⁹and went again into the Praetorium, and said to Jesus, "Where are You from?" But Jesus gave him no answer.

¹⁰Then Pilate said to Him, "Are You not speaking to me? Do You not know that I have power to crucify You, and power to release You?"

¹¹Jesus answered, "You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above. Therefore the one who delivered Me to you has the greater sin."

On the first occasion that the Jews accused Jesus before Pilate, they said that Jesus had claimed to be the King of the Jews.⁹ There is no suggestion that the Jews had told Pilate before 19:7 that Jesus claimed to be the Son of God. But upon hearing this charge, we read that Pilate was "more afraid." He was already afraid; now he was "more afraid." We read of Pilate's reaction in **verses 8f**, "***Therefore, when Pilate heard that saying, he was the more afraid, ⁹and went again into the Praetorium, and said to Jesus, 'Where are You from?'***"

This is suggestive that Pilate thought that there might be some credibility to this assertion. Of course the Jews had dismissed this out of hand. It was flagrant blasphemy that Jesus would claim to be the Son of God. We saw this back in John 10. Here was the interchange between Jesus and the Jewish leaders: Jesus said,

"I and My Father are one."

³¹Then the Jews took up stones again to stone Him. ³²Jesus answered them, "Many good works I have shown you from My Father. For which of those works do you stone Me?"

³³The Jews answered Him, saying, "For a good work we do not stone You, but for blasphemy, and because You, being a Man, make Yourself God."

³⁴Jesus answered them, "Is it not written in your law, 'I said, "You are gods" '? ³⁵If He called them gods, to whom the word of God came (and the Scripture cannot be broken), ³⁶***do you say of Him whom the Father sanctified and sent into the world, 'You are blaspheming,' because I said, 'I am the Son of God'?*** ³⁷If I do not do the works of My Father, do not believe Me; ³⁸but if I do, though you do not believe Me, believe the works, that you may know and believe that the Father is in Me, and I in Him." ³⁹Therefore they sought again to seize Him, but He escaped out of their hand. (John 10:30-39)

But though the Jews rejected Jesus' claim fully without hesitation, it would seem that Pilate was pondering if this claim of Jesus were true. Pilate's belief in this possibility resulted in him becoming very afraid.

The narrator explains that Pilate was "afraid", with the addition of an adverb making the fear even greater: "He was very afraid." This may be Pilate's first response in regard to Jesus that was religiously (or at least

⁹ Although John did not overtly give this detail, it is clear that they did so from Pilate's question to Jesus recorded in 18:33, "Are You the King of the Jews?"

superstitiously) motivated, denoted by the questions he is about to present to Jesus. It is possible that a polytheistic Roman was more open to claims of divine sonship than a monotheist, which facilitates further the irony of the Gospel, for a Roman outsider proves to be more ready to believe something of divine about the Son of God than His own people.¹⁰

We read that upon Pilate hearing this claim of Jesus from the Jews, that he reentered his residence to speak again with Jesus. **Verse 8b** says of Pilate that he “*went again into the Praetorium, and said to Jesus, ‘Where are You from?’*” It was a common belief among the pagans of the Roman Empire that the gods would occasionally come down and appear as men to other men. The people of Galatia thought this of Paul and Barnabas. After Paul had brought healing to a crippled man, we read of the people’s reaction toward them.

Now when the people saw what Paul had done, they raised their voices, saying in the Lycaonian language, “The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!”¹² And Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker.¹³ Then the priest of Zeus, whose temple was in front of their city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates, intending to sacrifice with the multitudes. (Acts 14:11-13)

Pilate was “very afraid”, thinking, “Perhaps this Jesus was indeed to Son of God?” And so Pilate asked Him, “*Where are You from?*” But our Lord did not answer him. John wrote, “*But Jesus gave him no answer.*” Why did Jesus did not answer Pilate? John does not say. Jesus had answered Pilate when he had asked Jesus if He were a king. Perhaps Jesus thought that by this question of His origin Pilate had gone beyond his authority and responsibility to determine His guilt or innocence. One commentator proposed this thought:

Since Pilate had already shown himself incapable of perceiving truth, and since he had no apprehension of the kingdom which is not of this world, it was impossible that any answer could be given to his question.¹¹

Interestingly, both **Augustine** (AD 354-430) and **Chrysostom** (AD 347-407) viewed Jesus’ silence recorded here as a fulfillment of the prophecy of **Isaiah 53:7**, which states,

He was oppressed and He was afflicted,
Yet He opened not His mouth;
He was led as a lamb to the slaughter,
And as a sheep before its shearers is silent,
So He opened not His mouth.

These earlier church fathers were right in their understanding.

Pilate must have thought that by the silence of Jesus that He was not showing due regard to his authority. Of Pilate it was said, “He is very conscious of his dignity and power. It is incredible that Jesus will not speak with *him* of all people.”¹² “A proud man is quick to imagine insults”, wrote Charles Spurgeon.

Pilate reminded Jesus who it was that He refused to give an answer. **Verse 10** records, “*Then Pilate said to Him, ‘Are You not speaking to me? Do You not know that I have power to crucify You, and power to release You?’*”

Pilate then attempts to force Jesus to speak, probably irritated or offended at the silence of Jesus. Pilate’s first question, with the emphatic pronoun “to me” is probably to be understood as an expression of astonishment: “You do not speak *to me*?” The implicit rebuke is this: “a bound, beaten, bloodied, and soon-to-be-crucified prisoner will not speak to me, the Roman prefect!” By this Pilate establishes the

¹⁰ Edward W. Klink, III, **John**. Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Zondervan, 2016), p. 780.

¹¹ Edwyn Clement Hoskyns, **The Fourth Gospel** (Faber and Faber Limited, 1947), p. 524.

¹² Leon Morris, **The Gospel According to John** (William B. Eerdmans, 1971), p. 796.

ground for his next question, which he bases on his authority either to release or crucify Jesus, with the twice-stated “I have authority” making a strong claim to the power he has over Jesus.

From a (fallen) human perspective, Pilate did indeed have great authority. Here are the comments of **F. Bruce** (1910-1990):

Pilate is annoyed by Jesus’ silence. It borders on contempt of court; moreover, it is foolish, for Pilate is the one man who can be of any use to Him in His present situation. ‘No one who has power to condemn is without power to acquit’, says a maxim of Roman law; and it may be that by mentioning acquittal before condemnation Pilate implies that acquittal, if it is possible, is still his intention. Pilate’s authority (Gk. *exousia*) was indeed delegated to him by the emperor, but so long as he retained the imperial commission it was, within the limits of his province, a very far-reaching authority indeed – *imperium*, as the Romans called it – which gave its holder great discretionary power.¹³

But then Jesus made it quite clear to Pilate that Pilate’s authority is derived from God, which implies that Pilate is not the ultimate authority, but that he is responsible to God for how he executes his authority as the governor of Judea. I can imagine Jesus standing there, perhaps looking down, having just been scourged by whips and beat in the face by Roman soldiers, standing there quite bloodied, having just been ravaged unjustly by Pilate even though Pilate had formally and publicly declared of Jesus, “I find no fault in Him.” And then He had to listen to Pilate make claims that he had absolute and uncontested authority to do whatever he wanted to do with no responsibility or accountability. Jesus would set him straight on this matter. We read in **verse 11**, “*Jesus answered, ‘You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above.’*”

Pilate must have concluded the implications of the statement of Jesus to Him. Pilate seemed to be flaunting his authority, warning Jesus that he and he alone had the power to crucify Jesus or set Him free. But Jesus in His weakened and suffering condition tells him, “You could have no authority except what God in heaven has granted you.”

Now there are those who believe that when Jesus told Pilate that God had given him the authority to execute Jesus that this is *not* to be understood as true of all people in authority, but that it was specifically (and some, only) applicable to Pilate in this particular trial of Jesus to have him crucified.

Commentators both ancient and modern have understood this statement to refer to the divine institution of government as it is spoken of in Romans 13. But in more recent exegesis this has been replaced, correctly we think, by the view that it relates to the concrete situation, that is, to Pilate’s power to release Jesus or to crucify Him. For that reason the divine background of Pilate’s power is described as “given from above.” Jesus’ kingdom has just been described as “not from this world” (18:36), and Jesus has repeatedly described the origin of His own coming and work as “from above.” It is “from above” that Pilate also has received his power and in that context that he plays his divinely given role. By saying this Jesus not only explains Pilate’s position but also His own. IN that providential arrangement, “given from above,” Pilate’s interrogation of Jesus is a stage in the process in which Pilate himself must fulfill the will of God. Therefore, Jesus is in God’s hands and not Pilate’s. He keeps silent because He must drink the cup that the Father has given Him to drink. Part of that cup is the necessity of submitting to Pilate’s arbitrary use of power and letting Himself be crucified as a criminal, thus bearing “the sin of the world” (1:29), being “made to be sin” by God (2 Cor. 5:21).¹⁴

In other words, when Jesus told Pilate he only had authority because God in heaven had given it to him, He was speaking of only that occasion in which he was trying Jesus. God would use Pilate to complete His purpose in crucifying His Son. Now of course we would agree that God was controlling the immediate decisions of Pilate to affect this end, and this may have been John’s specific intention of recording Jesus’ words to Pilate. It is consistent with the flow of the story of this Gospel. But one need not say that this does

¹³ F. F. Bruce, **The Gospel of John** (William B. Eerdmans, 1983), pp. 360f.

¹⁴ Herman Ridderbos, **The Gospel of John; A Theological Commentary** (William B. Eerdmans, 1997), p. 603.

not reinforce the biblical teaching that God in His sovereignty imparts to every person in authority that authority that he enjoys and exercises, for it does just that. Everywhere in Scripture God has taught His sovereign control over all who are in authority. Here are a few verses that underscore this biblical understanding of God's sovereignty:

Proverbs 21:1. The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD, like the rivers of water; He turns it wherever He wishes.

Proverbs 16:1. The preparations of the heart belong to man, but the answer of the tongue is from the LORD.

Proverbs 16:9. A man's heart plans his way, but the LORD directs his steps.

Proverbs 19:21. There are many plans in a man's heart, nevertheless the LORD'S counsel-- that will stand.

Jeremiah 10:23. O LORD, I know the way of man is not in himself; it is not in man who walks to direct his own steps.

And then, of course, there is the forthright statement of the apostle Paul:

Romans 13:1-4. Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. ²Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. ³For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, ⁴for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer.

God's sovereignty extends to Pilate's words and decisions, as His sovereignty extends to your words and my words, and the decisions we make. This does not remove human responsibility, but rather, it accentuates it. For if God has placed you in the position of your authority, it means that you are responsible and accountable to Him as a steward of your authority. You will give an account before the Lord one day on how you exercised your authority. Do you view your authority as a privilege or a right that entitles you to have those "under" as your servants, in submission to your wishes and whims? Did you use your authority to be self-serving or abusive of those under you? Or did you use your authority as God intended and as our Lord Jesus has modeled for us, not only during His earthly ministry but also as He is now serving in His heavenly ministry as Lord? God's gives authority to people so that they may serve others under them, not to be served by them. All authoritarian abuse will be requited by King Jesus on the Day of Judgment.

But then even though Jesus declared Pilate's responsibility and implying his culpability for his unjust actions, Jesus declared that there were worse offenders than Pilate. Jesus said to him in **verse 11**, ***"Therefore the one who delivered Me to you has the greater sin."***

Jesus is not absolving Pilate, for although he is not his own source of authority he does bear responsibility for the authority given to him "from above." For "greater sin" clearly implies that Pilate too has sinned.¹⁵

Some have thought "the one" that Jesus was referring was Judas Iscariot. But Judas, although having committed a great sin, did not turn Jesus over to Pilate. It is best to understand this to have been Jesus referring to the high priest—Caiaphas, but of course he was but the leader of all those Jewish leaders who had conspired and stood with him in his decision to have Jesus crucified through Pilate's authority.

¹⁵ Klink, p. 781.

It is a very sad and unfortunate thing, even a sinful thing, that anti-Semites have often taken our Lord's words to justify their hatred and persecution of the Jewish people. The Scriptures certainly speak of the great guilt of the Jews in their having crucified their Messiah (cf. Acts 2:22f). But in Peter's prayer to God the Father he stated forthrightly that both Gentiles and Jews were complicit in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. "For truly against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together" (Acts 4:27).

IV. The Judgment Seat (19:12-16)

We read that Caesar seemed to settle himself in his desire and resolve to exonerate Jesus. Pressing upon people in authority their responsibility before God may move them to act justly and responsibility in their position of authority. We read in **verse 12a**, "*From then on Pilate sought to release Him.*"¹⁶ But then the Jews introduce a new wrinkle in their protestation before Pilate for Jesus' release. When Pilate had again sought to release Jesus, the Jews reacted and confronted him. **Verse 12b** reads, "*But the Jews cried out, saying, 'If you let this Man go, you are not Caesar's friend. Whoever makes himself a king speaks against Caesar.'*" Apparently the Caesar at the time, the Emperor Tiberius, was known to be "naturally distrustful and morbidly suspicious."¹⁷ Suppose word were to get back to him in Rome that his governor had released a man accused of sedition against Rome? "Pilate got the message; his mind was effectively made up for him. Sentence must be passed, and passed on the original charge of sedition."¹⁸ It is interesting that sometime later, according to Josephus, Pilate had angered the Jews to such an extent that an appeal to Caesar was made against Pilate, resulting in Caesar recalling him to Rome in disgrace and humiliation.

But let us understand yet again the irony of John's account. The Jews would have Pilate choose Caesar over Jesus. In their appeal for Pilate to take this action, they, too, are choosing Rome over Jesus, their messiah.

By forcing Pilate to choose Caesar over Jesus, the Jews have ironically forced themselves into the same corner and have chosen Caesar the Roman over a fellow Jew, Jesus. The Jewish authorities have now secured the upper hand in the political gerrymandering between Jerusalem and Rome, but at a very great cost. They have become one with Rome.¹⁹ The Gospel's use of irony is overtly clear when the Jews suggest that an alliance with Jesus "opposes Caesar," for the reverse is also true. In this moment (and even more clearly in v. 15), the Jews have become Roman, rejecting their God-given right to be God's people and their God-given King for a pagan existence under a pagan ruler. Blinzler explains the irony: "The highest Roman official in Judea has to endure being accused of lack of loyalty to the emperor by the representatives of a nation more passionately seething with hatred for the Roman yoke than almost any other empire—and all these at Passover, the celebration of the God-given liberation! As the reader fully understands, this decision was only political at the surface; deep down this was a spiritual issue, symptomatic of the sin of "the world" (both Jew and Gentile) that had been separated from God (1:5)."²⁰

We read in **verse 13** Pilate's subsequent action. "*When Pilate therefore heard that saying, he brought Jesus out and sat down in the judgment seat in a place that is called The Pavement, but in Hebrew, Gabbatha.*" He had brought Jesus out once before, but this is the final occasion when an official verdict would be pronounced from his judgment seat.

Notice the somewhat ambiguity of this sentence in our New King James Version. Who was seated on the judgment seat, Pilate or Jesus? Actually, the Greek grammar can go either way, depending on if one

¹⁶ This is said of Pilate even as he had been speaking to Jesus about his authority. Does this suggest that Pilate once again went out to the Jews on this occasion to make a plea for Jesus' release and then returned to escort Jesus out before the mob?

¹⁷ Bruce, p. 363.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Also indicated by John saying that Pilate (Roman) and Herod (Jewish) became friends that day in their united trying of Jesus.

²⁰ Klink, p. 782.

understands the verb to be either a transitive or intransitive verb (he who has ears to hear...). Now we would say that it is pretty obvious that it was Pilate who sat down on the judgment seat, but that is not what John says clearly and directly. The Holy Spirit may have intentionally had John pen these words in this way for a subtle, but important purpose. Here is an explanation:

We must remember that we are not interpreting the historical event itself but the account recorded in a text. This is not to deny or even minimize the reality of the event but to suggest that the inspired account may intend to communicate truths beyond what was seen by those present (e.g. Jesus the man is also “the Lamb,” 1:29). IN fact, the narrative’s nondescript account may be entirely the point. That is, the narrative wanted to present two coexisting (and competing) realities simultaneously, namely the “authority” of both Pilate and Jesus, which vs. 10-11 made clear was the central issue between them. From the narrative’s perspective, both were sitting on the judgment seat. The historical strand of the Gospel’s plot would suggest Pilate was the one seated, for the seat did belong to his Roman office; yet the cosmological (bigger picture) strand of the Gospel’s plot just as strongly suggests that Jesus was the one seated, for the seat also belonged to the divine office. In order to communicate this, the narrative intentionally makes the sitting of the “judge” explicitly *implicit* so that the scene is presented in the fullness of its historical and cosmological content. If Pilate placed Jesus on the judgment seat, then he was certainly making a mockery of the Jews, as he would do again when Jesus was placed upon the cross (see 19:19-22). But if Pilate himself was sitting on the judgment seat, then the joke was on him, for the place where he sat was given to him by a much higher authority, the very man he was (supposedly) about to judge.²¹

The bottom line is this: though Pilate was passing judgment, actually Jesus Christ was in ultimate control, for He is the true King of the Jews, and not of the Jews only, but of the whole world (cf. John 4:42; 16:33; 17:1).

We have more to say of these last few verses of this episode of Jesus’ trial before Pontius Pilate, but we will need to do so next time.

Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling,
And to present you faultless
Before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy,
To God our Savior,
Who alone is wise,
Be glory and majesty,
Dominion and power,
Both now and forever. Amen. (Jude 24f)
