

# The Trial That Rewrote History

## Introduction

The drama of criminal trials fascinates us. Douglas Linder, a University of Missouri law professor, teaches a course called Famous Trials in history. On his website he gives details on 70 trials from Socrates to O.J. Simpson. He includes the trial of Jesus because he writes, *“I believe the trial of Jesus merits analysis for the simple reason that no other trial in human history has so significantly affected the course of human events.”*

That is why I call this message, “The Trial That Rewrote History.” As we piece together what happened from the four gospels, we discover there were six parts of this trial before the religious leaders Annas, and Caiaphas, the Sanhedrin, Pilate, Herod, and then again before Pilate. In the religious trial before the Sanhedrin he was accused of blasphemy and in the civil trial before Pilate he was accused of political sedition. Neither of these accusations had any basis of fact. He was a totally innocent man.

To understand the horrifying nature of this crime committed against Jesus we must understand that **Jesus was on trial not for anything he had done, but rather for what we have done.** The text naturally falls into four sections: the accusations, the interrogation, the flogging, and the sentence.

## First, the Accusation (18:28-32)

It is hard to fathom hating someone so much that for three years the constant mindset is how can we get rid of this guy? Ron Brown, the father of Nicole Brown Simpson said of O.J. Simpson: “I hate him. I will not forgive him, and if I see him I will kill him.” That was the mindset of the religious leaders.

Pilate understood what was motivating these leaders. Mark 15:10 records, *“Pilate perceived it was out of envy that the chief priests had delivered him up.”* The definition of envy is interesting: *“a feeling of discontent and resentment aroused by contemplating another person’s qualities that you don’t have but want.”* Jesus was all that these religious leaders were not. In Matthew 23 Jesus called them *“whited sepulchers full of dead men’s bones”* and *“making converts twice sons of hell.”* People avoided the religious leaders. People thronged to Jesus who backed up his claim to be God with words and actions. To the broken and needy he loved, forgave, and healed.

Jesus once sent a message to his cousin John the Baptist who was wasting away in a jail and began to have doubts about Jesus. Phillip Buechner with vivid word pictures describes the message Jesus sent this way: *“You go tell John what you’ve seen around here. Tell him there are people who have sold their Seeing Eye dogs and*

*taken up bird watching. Tell him there are people who have traded in aluminum walkers for hiking boots. Tell him the down-and-out have turned into the up-and-coming and a lot of dead beats are living it up for the first time in their lives.”*

Jesus was all that these religious leaders were not in his integrity, boldness, and authority. He broke their pet religious ‘rules’, exposed their hollowness, threatened their jobs and stirred up an enormous amount of trouble for them. And they hated him for it!

### **Second, the Interrogation (18:33-40)**

Pilate was a shrewd politician who for ten years had served as an appointed governor of this province of Judea. Twice there were riots over his actions by the Jews and thus, there was a ‘wary dance’ of mutual contempt whenever the religious leaders and Pilate had to deal with an issue. One secular writer of this time describes Pilate as “a man of very inflexible disposition, very merciless and very obstinate.”

Luke 23:2 records three accusations against Jesus by the religious leaders to Pilate: *“We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ, a king.”* The very mention of a possible rival to Caesar grabbed Pilate’s attention so he wants to know if Jesus is ‘a king.’ This conversation reveals the true condition of Pilate’s heart. He was a political animal and wanted to survive at all costs.

Jesus admits he is a king and has a kingdom but it has no relation to the kind of King and Kingdom that Pilate is familiar with. It is a kingdom of the heart and a King who is the revelation of truth – truth about God, truth about the desperate condition of the human heart, and the extreme means by which God will remedy our deepest need. At the last meal with his disciples Jesus revealed his kingdom when he took a towel and washed their feet. It is a baffling kingdom to the secular mind where the *“one who rules will be like the one who serves.”*

Pilate, secular to the core and hardened in heart, had no idea what Jesus was talking about and with a flippant dismissal spat out, “what is truth” and left the room to face the mob one more time.

### **Third, The Flogging (19:1-5)**

*“Then Pilate took Jesus and flogged him.”* It is a simple statement that belies the horrible next hour that Jesus would endure. It is insightful that none of the four gospel writers go into any detail of what was happening. They mention the mockery, abuse, and blasphemy of the crown of thorns and royal robe, but not a word that indicate the savagery of the Roman flogging of a prisoner by two or three strong soldiers with metal tipped leather whips until they were exhausted. Prisoners died from it.

I did something this week I did not want to do. I watched the movie, *The Passion*, again. Ancient secular sources tell us about what occurred at a flogging in great detail and Mel Gibson's movie appears to be an accurate account of what Jesus endured. I had to avert my eyes the first time I watched it. I don't think if I watched it a hundred times I could become jaded and unmoved. The words of Isaiah's prophecy are depicted vividly in The Message paraphrase:

*"Here was one who suffered, who knew pain firsthand. One look at him and people turned away. We looked down on him, thought he was scum. But the fact is, it was our pains he carried – our disfigurements, all the things wrong with us. We thought he brought it on himself, that God was punishing him for his own failures. But it was our sins that did that to him, that ripped and tore and crushed him – our sins!"*

"They flogged him." So the soldiers, calloused to suffering and human indignity, and bored with assignment to a little dusty province a long way from home, carried out their orders, oblivious to the eternal plan of God they were helping carry out.

### **Last, The Sentence (19:5-16)**

Pilate ran out of options. He thought the flogging would illicit sympathy. Three times he had pronounced Jesus innocent. He pleaded with the crowd seeking to reason with them. Then the religious leaders then revealed the real reason they wanted Jesus out of the way: *"he made himself out to be the son of God (19:7).*

Pilate's response was fear. The Romans and Greeks had numerous myths about gods coming to earth to judge men and Pilate did not want to misjudge the situation but Jesus refused to answer. Isaiah speaking of Jesus wrote, *"He was oppressed and treated harshly yet he never said a word."* (53:7)

Pilate threatens Jesus with his authority. But Jesus reminds him he is not in control, God the Father is. This brings up the issue of who is responsible for Christ's death ...Judas, Caiaphas, the Sanhedrin, the Jewish mob, Pilate, the Romans? Octavius Winslow writes: *"Who delivered up Jesus to die? Not Judas for money; not Pilate for fear; not the Jews for envy; - but the Father for love."*

Again and again, as Pilate faced the crowd, their emotions whipped into a hateful frenzy, cried out, "crucify him, crucify him." In 1992 the Innocence Project was founded to assist prisoners that could be proven innocent through DNA testing. 292 people have been exonerated, 17 of them off death row. But no one protested this injustice! Not one. Not one witness was called for the defense. Not one religious leader stood to protest the injustice of that night. Even Jesus did not defend himself. And God the Father was silent during throughout these dark horrible hours. There was no Innocence Project to help Jesus. *"So he delivered him over to them to be crucified."*

## Conclusion:

In Tim Keller's book, *The Prodigal God*, he makes this provocative statement in the preface, "One of the signs that you may not grasp the unique, radical nature of the gospel is that you are certain you do. Sometimes longtime church members find themselves so struck and turned around by a fresh apprehension of the Christian message that they feel themselves to have been essentially 'reconverted.'"

Over the last few weeks as I have meditated and prayed over the four gospel accounts of this trial and had access to thoughtful observations by excellent Christian writers, I have found myself with a fresh sobering perspective of why Jesus went through this abuse and then be nailed to a cross. I have a sharper uncomfortable focus on my participation and contribution to Jesus death. It wasn't only the religious leaders, the Jewish mob, the soldiers, and Pilate – **I was there**. You were there. And that's not pretty.

In 1992 Mike Wallace did a documentary on Adolf Eichmann, the notorious SS officer responsible for thousands of Jewish deaths in Nazi concentration camps in WWII. He asked the question, "How is it possible for a man to act as Eichmann acted? Was he a monster? A madman? Or perhaps was he something even more terrifying: **was he normal?**"

During the 1961 trial, a film clip showed Yehiel Dinur, a former concentration prison camp survivor walking into the courtroom and stopping to look at Eichmann for the first time since the Nazi had sent him to Auschwitz 18 years earlier. Dinur began to sob uncontrollably, then fainted, collapsing in a heap on the floor. Why? It wasn't out of hatred, fear, or horrible memories but as Dinur explained, as he looked at Eichmann, he saw not a god-like army officer but **an ordinary man**. "I was afraid about myself. I saw I am capable of this. I am ... exactly like he." Wallace summed up Dinur's terrible discovery this way, "**Eichmann is in all of us.**"

I am deeply flawed. You are deeply flawed. I am not OK. You're not OK. We are at this trial. I am Caiaphas in my pride, envy, and hatred; I am Pilate in my compromise, self-preservation, and scheming; I am the bloodthirsty mob who demanded Jesus be turned over to be crucified because he was too radical, challenging and uncomfortable for them. We all were there.

It is my sin and yours that helped bring this injustice about. This is why we need to "preach the gospel to ourselves every day." We must fix it in our minds that "**Jesus was on trial, not for anything he had done, for what we have done.**"

Someone listening to this might say, "This is too dark, too depressing, too discouraging." I leave you with two thoughts to think about.

First, the more deeply I honestly face and understand the depths of my sin, the more deeply I live with daily gratitude and worship of what Christ did at the cross in taking my sin upon Himself and forgiving me. Second, the more deeply I understand and accept how God sees me, the more deeply I hate sin in my life and pursue a life pleasing to God.

The gospel is this: “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21)

Years later Mike Wallace did a documentary about Eichmann and asked this question, *“How is it possible for a man to act as Eichmann acted? Was he a monster? A madman? Or was he perhaps something even more terrifying: was he normal?”*

During the program, a clip from Eichmann’s 1961 trial showed Yehiel Dinur (A concentration camp survivor) enter the courtroom to take the witness stand. As he paused before Eichmann, he fainted. Mike Wallace asked Dinur if he was overcome by fear... hatred... or the memories of what he endured. Mr. Dinur’s response is chilling...

“No,” he responded... explaining that he realized Eichmann was not the godlike army officer who sent millions to their deaths. Much worse, he was an ordinary man. *“I was afraid about myself. I saw that I am capable to do this. I am... exactly like he.”* Dinur concluded by saying, **“Eichmann is in all of us...”**