

Before Pilate a Second Time

📖 Matthew 27:15-31

👤 Pastor Jeremy Thomas

📅 April 12, 2017

🌐 fbgbible.org

📍 Fredericksburg Bible Church

107 East Austin Street

Fredericksburg, Texas 78624

(830) 997-8834

Turn to Luke 23:13. Last time we saw the first two civil trials; the trial before Pilate and the trial before Antipas. Significantly, both of these Roman rulers found Jesus innocent of any charge demanding capital punishment. Pilate made several obvious attempts to extricate himself from involvement in the case. He encouraged them to judge Him themselves. He sent Him to Antipas. He really did not want to condemn Jesus. He should have closed the case and released Him. But he was trying to appease the Jewish leaders in order to remain in good standing with Caesar. Antipas mistreated Him but he too found Him innocent of any capital crime. He sent Him back to Pilate. Rather than start with Matthew, let's pick up with the case in Luke 23:13. "Pilate summoned the chief priests and the rulers and the people," note "the people," because this is now a representation of all Israel, not just the religious leaders. In verse 14 he "said to them, "You brought this man to me as one who incites the people to rebellion, and behold, having examined Him before you, I have found no guilt in this man regarding the charges which you make against Him." So Pilate declared Jesus innocent. Verse 15, "No, nor has Herod [Antipas], for he sent Him back to us; and behold, nothing deserving death has been done by Him." Antipas declared Jesus innocent. From the standpoint of Roman Law Jesus had done nothing deserving death.

There were two options before him. The first is Luke 23:16, "Therefore I will punish Him and release Him." A scourging, Pilate hoped, might placate them and the matter would be over. "The second was to release Jesus according to a custom the Romans practiced to foster good will among the people."¹ Matt 27:15 expresses it this way, **Now at the feast the governor was accustomed to release for the people any one prisoner whom they wanted.** This was a practice that had been in place from the former prefect, and reluctantly carried over by Pilate. Verse 16 notes that **At that time they were holding a notorious prisoner, called Barabbas.** There are three interesting things about this **Barabbas**. First, they both share a similar name meaning. Barabbas' actual name was "Bar Abba," which means "son of Abba," or "son of the father." Bar Abba was a false "son of the father" and Jesus the true "son of the Father."² Therefore, in one sense, the people would be deciding between two who share a similar name meaning. Second, they may both have shared the same first name of Jesus. In Matt 27:17 **Pilate said to them, "Who do you want me to release for you? Bar Abba, or Jesus who is called Christ?"** Why not simply say, **Bar Abba, or Jesus?** Why clarify **Jesus** by saying the **Jesus who is called Christ**. This led

many early scholars to conclude that both men had their first name as Jesus and so this distinction had to be made. One author said, "According to the early biblical scholar Origen and other commentators, the full name of Barabbas may have been Jesus Barabbas... Therefore, the crowd was presented with a choice between two persons with the same name."³ Third, they were accused of the same crime. In Mk 15:7 it says **Barabbas** "had been imprisoned with the insurrectionists who had committed murder in the insurrection." Luke 23:19 goes further, saying, "He was one who had been thrown into prison for an insurrection made in the city, and for murder." Jesus was also accused of raising an insurrection. So the choice put before the people was between two men who had the same name meaning "son of the father," possibly the same first name, "Jesus" and were accused of the same crime, "insurrection" against Rome. The situation has divine irony written all over it.

Even though Pilate could have released Him he decided to follow the custom of releasing one prisoner. He thought the people would choose to have **Jesus who is called Christ** released because the religious leaders had handed him over **because of envy** (Mk 15:10). They were envious because the people that once followed them were following Him. The people did not share this envy. Therefore, the people were not blinded to true justice. Surely if the people were given the choice between releasing this **notorious prisoner** Bar Abba, or **Jesus who is called Christ**, they would choose Jesus. The account in Luke 23:20 adds that "Pilate wanted to release Jesus." This was another attempt by Pilate to release Him. By doing it this way he could remove blame from himself and put it on the Jewish people.

While the people were discussing among themselves, Matthew records something totally unique in verse 19. **While he was sitting on the judgment seat.** This was outside the Praetorium, and archaeology has uncovered what appears to be a *βημα* or **judgment seat** outside the modern Citadel of David. Which is another reason I think the Praetorium is not the Antonia Fortress but the modern Citadel of David. **While he was sitting on the βημα**, waiting for the people to make a decision, **his wife sent him a message, saying, "Have nothing to do with that righteous Man; for last night I suffered greatly in a dream because of Him."** There has been great speculation as to what dream she might have had. But to pursue that line of thought is a worthless pursuit. We may say that she **suffered greatly in a dream** means that she was in her own dream and in the dream she suffered greatly, not in reality. We may say that she saw Jesus in her dream so that she connected the Jesus under trial with the Jesus she saw in her dream. We may also say that in the dream she concluded this Jesus was a **righteous Man**. And we may say that she interpreted the dream as having some bearing on future reality. All this adds up to being able to infer that the dream was given to her by God and it was given to be a warning to Pilate. **Have nothing to do with that righteous Man**, she said. Her claim that He is **righteous** is another indication of Jesus' innocence.⁴ Pilate now had many reasons to declare Him innocent and release Him. First, he knew the religious leaders turned Him over because of envy. Second, he had investigated the accusations and found nothing valid. Third, he had sent him to Antipas who also found Him innocent. Fourth, he had this extraordinary revelation given to him by his wife who received it by way of a dream.

While his wife was sharing the dream with him and warning him, verse 20 says **the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to put Jesus to death.** The word translated **persuaded** means “mislead” “cajole.” They deceptively mislead them into asking for **Barabbas.** The account in Mark 15:11 says “the chief priests had stirred up the crowd to ask him to release Bar Abba for them instead.” In other words, the crowds were getting riled up. We know from Bible doctrine that when the Spirit is present there is peace, harmony and order, but when Satan is present there is chaos and confusion. The people are being drawn into confusion. While this is the work of Satan, Toussaint said, “...now he shows how the fickle and blind people actively turn against their King at the behest of their hypocritical leaders (Matthew 27:20, 22, 23).”⁵ It was the blind leading the blind, just as Jesus had warned. If a blind man leads a blind man, will they not both fall into a pit? In verse 21 **But the governor said to them, “Which of the two do you want me to release for you?** In other words, make a decision, **And they said, “Bar Abba.”** Now at this point, Pilate was truly astonished. He was certain they would say **Jesus who is called Christ.** But they had not. This put Pilate in a pickle. So in verse 22, **Pilate said to them, “Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?”** In other words, Pilate was put in the situation of committing an injustice. Jesus was innocent but he could only release one man without punishment. Walvoord said, “Pilate was now occupied not only with the justice in the case but how he could reasonably sentence a man who had not been convicted of any real crime.”⁶ Therefore, what punishment could Pilate mete out that would not be an injustice? It got worse because **all** the people **said, “Crucify Him!”** The word **all** is significant. This is not just the religious leaders. This is **all** the Jewish people. We see again how the Jewish people are so prone to follow the decisions of the religious leaders. We also see how the guilt of crucifying **Him** fell not just on the religious leaders but on all the people. They all wanted to **Crucify Him.** Elsewhere the NT teaches that the only way for a Jew to escape the guilt of that generation was to believe in Jesus for eternal life and separate from Judaism by being baptized in the name of Jesus.

Hold your place in Matthew and turn to the parallel in John 19:1-5. 19:1 adds that “Pilate then took Jesus [into the Praetorium] and scourged Him.” Pentecost said, “Jesus no doubt received the traditional forty stripes save one.”⁷ Stalker said, “The instrument of torture was a...cat-o’-nine tails, with bits of iron or bone attached to the ends of the thongs. Not only did the blows cut the skin and draw blood, but not infrequently the victim died in the midst of the operation. Some have supposed that Pilate, out of consideration for Jesus, may have moderated either the number or the severity of the strokes; but, on the other hand, his plan of releasing Him depended on his being able to show the Jews that He had suffered severely. The inability of Jesus to bear His own cross to the place of execution was no doubt chiefly due to the exhaustion produced by this infliction; and this is a better indication of the degree of severity than mere conjecture.” Furthermore, verse 2, “the soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on His head, and put a purple robe on Him; ³and they *began* to come up to Him and say, “Hail, King of the Jews!” and to give Him slaps *in the face.*” Then “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.” ⁵Jesus then came out [of the Praetorium], wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. *Pilate* said to them, “Behold, the Man!” He

undoubtedly hoped that the scourging and mocking would assuage their desire to **Crucify Him!** But as Matthew 27:23 reports, **they kept shouting all the more, saying, "Crucify Him!"** Even then Pilate did not want to crucify Him. In John 19:6 we are told that he said, "Take Him yourselves and crucify Him, for I find no guilt in Him." It was at that time that "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;" As a Roman Pilate may have thought there was something to this claim to be the Son of God, especially since his wife had alerted him to her dream. Perhaps Jesus really was a son of the ancient gods. At that time Pilate went back in the Praetorium and had his last conversation with Jesus, this side of eternity. "and he entered into the Praetorium again and said to Jesus, "Where are You from?" But Jesus gave him no answer. ¹⁰So 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?" ¹¹Jesus answered, "You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given you from above;" Jesus basically affirmed our understanding of Rom 13:1, that "there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God." Pilate only had his power because God gave it to him. Then Jesus said, "for this reason he who delivered Me to you has *the* greater sin." Pilate no doubt thought the statement meant he could be relieved of responsibility by turning it over to the people. Verse 12, "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." ¹³Therefore when Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus out." Now he is about to pass judgment. It's important to note that it was because of these words that Pilate passed judgment, "If you release this Man, you are no friend of Caesar; everyone who makes himself out to be a king opposes Caesar." Overstreet said, "This must have had a special effect on Pilate since only a year before Christ's crucifixion, which took place in A.D. 33, Pilate had been rebuked by the Emperor Tiberius concerning the shields he had set up in Herod's palace which has offended the Jews. Pilate was in no frame of mind at this early time to risk another confrontation with the emperor, if he thought it could be avoided."⁸ In verse 13, Pilate "sat down on the judgment seat at a place called The Pavement, but in Hebrew, Gabbatha." This is the *lithostratos* in the Greek, and this place has been found by archaeology at the Citadel of David and not at the Antonia Fortress, another reason for making a new route for the Via Dolorosa. Verse 14, "Now it was the day of preparation for the Passover; it was about the sixth hour," which is about 9am. So this had been going on for a few hours now. "And he said to the Jews, "Behold, your King!" Pilate repeated their original accusation. "¹⁵So they cried out, "Away with *Him*, away with *Him*, crucify Him!" Pilate said to them, "Shall I crucify your King?" This was Pilate's last attempt to release Jesus. Pentecost said, "Pilate and Herod five times had declared Christ innocent of the charges brought against Him and seemed determined to release Jesus."⁹ To this attempt, the chief priests answered, "We have no king but Caesar." With this one statement they flung "to the winds every national impulse and every Messianic hope."¹⁰ Pilate realized he could not convince them otherwise. Matt 27:24 says **Pilate saw that he was accomplishing nothing, but rather a riot was starting.** A riot was not permissible under **Pilate's** governorship. If he allowed a **riot** to break out he would be reported to the Emperor Tiberius and likely lose his position. At this point he did something that only Matthew records, **he took water and washed his hands in**

front of the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this Man's blood; see to that yourselves." Pilate tried to excuse himself from responsibility by washing his hands with water. Shepard said, "There was a custom among the Greeks, Jews, and Romans of that time that when a man shed blood he would wash his hands, thus symbolically cleansing away the stain. Pilate felt that he was a murderer."¹¹ His own conscience condemned Him. His issuing of the command, **see to that yourselves**, gave the Jews the right to crucify Him. Apart from his decision they never could have done that. But Pilate was caught in dire straits. Farrar said, "Panic-stricken, the unjust judge, in obedience to his own terrors, consciously betrayed the innocent victim to the anguish of death. He who had so often prostituted justice, was now unable to achieve the one act of justice which he desired...He who had so often abused authority, was now rendered impotent to exercise it, for once, on the side of right."¹² His sin had entwined him and become the instrument of his own demise. However, the Jewish people gladly accepted responsibility themselves. **And all the people said, "His blood shall be on us and on our children!"** Toussaint said, "By replacing the word "multitudes" (οχλος) of verse twenty with the word "people" (λαος), the nation is seen as invoking this guilt upon itself."¹³ If they had known that they were writing their own death sentence with these words they may have thought twice about saying them. That generation was going to judgment. They pronounced His blood to be shed and their judgment would be that their blood would be shed. This took place in AD70 when Titus and the Roman armies invaded Jerusalem, burned the city, destroyed the Temple, killed the men, raped the women and bashed the little one's heads against the rocks! That was the judgment on that generation for their vile rejection. And they decided it themselves with these words. **"His blood shall be on us and on our children!"**

In verse 26 Pilate **then released Barabbas for them; but after having Jesus scourged, he handed Him over to be crucified.** What a turn of events. Pilate had wanted to release Jesus but he **scourged Him and handed Him over to be crucified.** The parallel in Luke 23:24 says "Pilate pronounced sentence that their demand be granted." So he changed his sentence and the reason was to please the Jews so he would not be accused of treason against Caesar.

In 27:27 **Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole Roman cohort around Him.** A Roman cohort was approximately 600 soldiers. **They stripped Him and put a scarlet robe on Him. And after twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on His head, and a reed or makeshift scepter, in His right hand; and they knelt down before Him and mocked Him, saying, "Hail King of the Jews!" They spat on Him, and took the makeshift scepter, and began to beat Him on the head.** In our day it is hard to imagine why 600 soldiers would want to mock a prisoner condemned to death. But it must be remembered that these were Romans, much allured by the sport and spilled blood of the coliseum. One author said, "To us it is incomprehensible how the whole band should have been called together merely to gloat over the sufferings of a fellow-creature and to turn His pain and shame into brutal mockery. This, however, was their purpose; and they enjoyed it as schoolboys enjoy the terror of a tortured animal....Their horseplay took the form of a mock coronation. They had caught the drift of the trial sufficiently to know that the charge against Jesus was

that HE pretended to be a king; and lofty pretensions on the part of one who appears to be mean and poor easily lead themselves to ridicule." He was clothed with a **scarlet robe** signifying royalty. Since they had no crown they fabricated one out **of thorns**. Since they had no true royal scepter they made one out of a **reed**, and shoved it into His right hand. Then they bowed before Him as if He were a King and said, "**Hail King of the Jews!**" They spit on Him and beat Him with the makeshift scepter they had placed in His right hand. After they had their fun, they defrocked Him and sent Him away to be crucified. J Vernon McGee said, "It is frightful what they did to Him—"14 All this was contempt for the One who is truly King and who would die for these very sins on the cross in but a few hours.

In summary, in 27:15 we come to the third civil trial, the second before Pilate. He had before him two options, scourge and release Jesus or give the Jewish people the choice which prisoner to release at the annual custom. He chose the latter. In 27:16 Rome held a notorious Jewish prisoner named Bar Abba, which means "son of the father," one whose first name was possibly Jesus and who was accused of the same crime as Jesus, insurrection against Rome. So in 27:17 when the people gathered Pilate asked them, "Whom do you want me to release? Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?" He felt certain the people would choose Jesus because he knew, verse 18, that the religious leaders had turned them over because of envy. Surely the people's sense of justice would prevail. In 27:19, while he waited for their decision on the judgment seat, his wife revealed to him a dream warning him to have nothing to do with Jesus because He was a righteous Man. This guy had more than sufficient warning to get out of the situation. During the same time 27:20 says the chief priests convinced the crowds by deception to ask for the release of Barabbas and to put Jesus to death. In 27:21 Pilate was astonished at their decision to release Barabbas. In 27:22 Pilate found himself in a predicament. On one hand, he had no just cause for condemning Jesus. On the other hand, he did not want to get sideways with the Jews and be accused of treason against Rome. So in 27:23 he asked, "Why, what evil has He done?" But their screams only got louder, saying "Crucify Him!" In 27:24 Pilate saw that he could not convince them and that a riot was forming. If he did not go along with their desires he would be accused of treason against Rome and lose his position, his home, his possessions and perhaps be executed himself. He was already out of favor with Emperor Tiberius. He decided to wash his hands with water in front of the crowd in order to declare himself innocent of murder, but by doing so he admits murder. He then turned the responsibility over to the Jews. In 27:25 they pronounce their willingness to accept responsibility. All the people, not just the religious leaders, but all of them said, "His blood shall be on us and on our children." And it did come upon them in AD70, in what has been described as "horrors unparalleled in history." In 27:26 Pilate released Barabbas, a murderer, and scourged Jesus, an innocent man, and handed Him over to be crucified. In 27:27-30 the Roman soldiers were allowed to make sport of Him, imitating a mock coronation complete with royal robe, scepter and crown of thorns, they bowed and mocked His claim to be King of the Jews. Spitting upon Him and beating Him with the mock scepter on the head until at last they had had enough fun with the Lord of glory, and led Him away to be crucified.

This is a remarkable chapter for several reasons. First, the chapter records the most unlikely villains pronouncing Jesus innocent; Judas Iscariot, who regretted betraying Him, Pilate, who tried numerous times to release Him, Antipas, who found no evil in Him and Pilate's wife who feared her husband's having anything to do with Him. This testimony to Jesus' innocence is unpredictable but marvelous. Second, despite Pilate's knowledge that Jesus was innocent, and his desire to release Him, in the end his desire to keep peace with the Jews and favor with Emperor Tiberius won out. He released an insurrectionist and a murderer and condemned an innocent Man. Because of that he would be written down by name in Acts 4:27 as one who was gathered against Jesus. Toussaint said, "As the trial before Caiaphas was distinguished by its illegality, so this examination before Pilate is characterized by its injustice. Pilate knew why Christ had been taken (verse eighteen), but he acted as a weak and vacillating politician and not as a representative of the justice of the Roman government."¹⁵ Third, not just the religious leadership, but all the Jewish people, that generation, vilely rejected their Messiah and flung aside the Messianic hope. Their diligence in screaming "Crucify! Crucify!" is perhaps the most horrible screams ever heard in the history of the world. They crucified the Lord of glory. What they wanted was King Caesar. What they got in AD 70 was more of Caesar than they bargained for. Fourth, note the brutality of man against the true King. The heart of man is a wicked thing. When it is released to do as it pleases it hates God and wants to get rid of Him.

¹ J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ*, 473.

² John F. Walvoord, *Thy Kingdom Come*, 229.

³ Encyclopædia Britannica, *Encyclopedia Britannica* (Chicago, IL: Encyclopædia Britannica, 2016).

⁴ Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Mt 27:19.

⁵ Stanley Toussaint, *Behold the King*, 310.

⁶ John F. Walvoord, *Thy Kingdom Come*, 230.

⁷ J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ*, 473.

⁸ Overstreet, quoted by J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ*, 467.

⁹ J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ*, 476.

¹⁰ Farrar, cited by J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ*, 475.

¹¹ Shepard, quoted by J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ*, 476.

¹² Farrar, cited by J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ*, 476.

¹³ Stanley Toussaint, *Behold the King*, 310.

¹⁴ J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible Commentary: The Gospels (Matthew 14-28)*, electronic ed., vol. 35 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1991), 184.

¹⁵ Stanley Toussaint, *Behold the King*, 311.