

# The Trials of Pilate

John 18:28-40

The apostle John recorded much more about Jesus' trial before Pilate than did any of the other gospel writers. As you read John's account, you have to ask the questions: Who is really on trial? Jesus or Pilate? Who is courageous and who is compromising? Who has the courage of his convictions and who will give in to the pressure of the crowds?

The story forces us to face the penetrating question: **Am I willing to die for truth, or will I sacrifice truth on the altar of expediency?**

## **The Jews present their accusation against Jesus to Pilate (28-32)**

The Jewish leaders brought Jesus from Caiaphas into the Praetorium (28). Pilate's normal headquarters were in Caesarea on the Mediterranean coast. During the Jewish feasts, Pilate came to Jerusalem with Roman troops in order to discourage uprising of the Jews against Rome. He had headquarters in Jerusalem, either in Herod's former palace or in the Fortress of Antonia.

The appearance takes place in early morning, probably around 6AM.

Ironically, the Jewish leaders were concerned about becoming ceremonially unclean while plotting murder at the same time.

Pilate addressed the Jews who had assembled outside his headquarters, either in a courtyard or from a balcony (29). Pilate wanted to know their formal charge against Jesus.

The spokesman for the Jews avoided the question (30). They wanted Pilate simply to trust them that Jesus was criminal. Luke recorded that they initially charged Jesus with misleading Israel, with forbidding the Jews to pay taxes to Caesar, and with claiming to be Israel's king (Luke 23:2).

Since Pilate realized the Jews wanted to do away with Jesus, and since he saw no evidence he had done anything worthy of death, he told the Jews to deal with the matter themselves (31). This was unacceptable to the Jews because they did not have the authority to crucify anyone.

John noted that this admission was in harmony with the sovereign plan of God (32). Jesus had earlier predicted his death by crucifixion (John 12:32-33).

## **Pilate's interrogation and Jesus' defense about his kingship (33-38a)**

Having heard the charges, Pilate reenters his headquarters and asks Jesus directly, "Are *you* the King of the Jews?" (33).

Jesus asked Pilate his question in order to determine how he would answer him (34). If Pilate was sincere, Jesus would deal with him as he would an inquirer. If Pilate was merely echoing the Sanhedrin's charge, Jesus would answer differently.

Pilate indicated that he had no personal interest in Jesus' kingship (35). He viewed it as a purely Jewish matter.

Jesus replied that he was indeed a king (36). However, his kingdom was not an earthly one that would compete with Caesar's kingdom by waging war against it.

Pilate did not understand the distinction that Jesus was making (37).

Jesus explained that the main reason he came into the world was to bear witness to the truth, that is, to reveal God to the world. Jesus' words were an invitation to Pilate to listen to him and learn the truth.

Pilate was not one who truly sought the truth (38a). He turned away from Jesus' offer with a cynical comment.

### **Pilate's verdict and the Jews' request (38b-40)**

John omitted Jesus' appearance before Herod Antipas (Luke 23:6-12). There, Jesus was mistreated, mocked, falsely accused, and returned to Pilate without a decision made.

Pilate returns to the Jews and announces his verdict of "not guilty" (38b). He considered Jesus guiltless of any activity that constituted a threat to Rome.

Not only was Pilate not committed to truth, he also showed a lack of commitment to justice. He seemingly wanted to show his generosity to the Jews by releasing a prisoner (39). He offered to release Jesus. By referring to Jesus as the King of the Jews, he was further insulting the Jewish leaders.

About this time, Pilate's wife warned him to have nothing to do with Jesus, because he was a righteous man (Matthew 27:19).

The Jews chose Barabbas to be released (40). He was a rebel, terrorist, and guerilla fighter (Mark 15:7). Normally, the chief priests wanted nothing to do with Zealots, but they preferred Barabbas to Jesus.

**Don't sacrifice truth on the altar of expediency.**