

# John 18:28-19:16

This long passage details the events of Jesus' trial before Pilate. This passage comes on the heels of Jesus' mock trial before Annas. That passage ended with Jesus being led away to Caiaphas (the high priest that year) for a trial. However, John has nothing to say about Jesus' trial before Caiaphas. Strange. But we're not here to talk about what isn't in the text, but what is. So let's get to it...

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## 18:28

A lot is said in this verse. Notice, first of all, that nothing is said about the trial that went on at Caiaphas' house. This could be for a number of reasons. It could be because John knows that the other evangelists have covered that trial in sufficient detail. It could be because what happened in Caiaphas' residence does not add to the story John is telling. Or it could be because John did not have access to information detailing what happened at Caiaphas' house. Regardless, John does not include what happened with Caiaphas; we won't lose any sleep wondering about this.

Next, John lets us know that "it was early morning." This is important because the sun has yet to rise; it is still dark. And we all know what darkness means...

Lastly, John lets us know why the trial before Pilate happened outside. Ironically, the Jews are willing to shed innocent blood but are scared about being ceremonially unclean. Their hypocrisy is obvious.

## 18:29

Pilate is cordial to his hypocritical subjects; he comes out to them and asks why Jesus has been brought before him as a criminal.

## 18:30

The Greek highlights in the on-going nature of the practice of evil the Jews allege Jesus has engaged in. A more accurate translation might be: "If this man were not continually doing evil..." They view Jesus' entire life as distasteful.

## 18:31

Pilate had a history of letting Jews judge matters that were of a local or tribal concern. At this point it seems as though Pilate does not view Jesus as having committed any crimes worthy of his attention. He also recognizes that he is in no place to judge a man based on the laws of the Jews. The Jews reply to him indicates that they believe that Jesus has done evil sufficient to deserve the death penalty. While this might have taken Pilate by surprise, it should not the reader of the gospel, who already knows Jesus has to die.

## 18:32

Notice that Jesus' words are regarded as Scripture: they need to be fulfilled. The Jews want Pilate to hear the case because only the Roman prefect can impose the death penalty.

## 18:33

Pilate's main concern throughout his time with Jesus is to ascertain whether or not Jesus is some kind of royalty. He is not interested in whether or not Jesus is starting a riot, claims to be God, or is a threat to the political leaders in Judea. He wants to know if Jesus is a king. His reasons for doing this are not given, but we can hazard a guess that Pilate wants to know if Jesus is a threat to Caesar and, by extension, himself. He might also want to know what Jesus thinks about himself: could it really be true that this man, who has no one defending him and no signs of wealth or power REALLY believe himself to be a king? Pilate might see irony in a poor, powerless man claiming to be the king of a people Rome had subjugated.

### **18:34**

Jesus wants to know if Pilate, observing Jesus, saw signs of royalty, or if someone else had told Pilate that either Jesus was the king of the Jews or that he believed himself to be the king of the Jews. The NICNT says that if the idea was Pilate's, then he would have had in mind a political king (and the answer would be "no"). If the idea was given to him by the high priest and his cadre, then he would have had in mind a messianic king (and the answer would be "yes"). I'm not sure I agree with the distinction made by the NICNT; either a political or messianic king would have been a threat to Rome and Pilate; there is functionally nothing different between the two when it comes to the Romans who were in control of Judea.

### **18:35**

Pilate's response is a curious one: "Am I a Jew?" The answer is, of course, "no." However, in John's gospel, it is not a good thing to be linked with the group he refers to as the "Jews." And so, in drawing attention to the fact that he is not a Jew, Pilate actually scores some points with the careful reader of John's gospel. (And as you will see, John paints Pilate in a more favorable light than he did the ruling Jews.)

It seems as though Pilate were shooting straight with Jesus, even trusting what he has to say more than his captors. Pilate is saying, in a sense, "Look, this isn't my fault... your people arrested you and dumped you on my doorstep. So what's up?"

### **18:36**

Jesus begins to explain to Pilate how it is that he could have been arrested and dumped on Pilate's doorstep. His answer is simple: those who would defend me are somewhere else. I'm a "big deal" in some other realm.

### **18:37a**

Pilate knows what Jesus is saying and assumes Jesus means to say: "I left my country, where I am a king, and have traveled to Judea, where I was falsely arrested." If this is the case, then Pilate has issues because a foreign dignity has suffered the indignity of being arrested by a rouge band of Jewish religious radicals. Imagine what will happen when word makes it back to Jesus' kingdom that he was mistreated in Judea! His people will mount an attack on Jerusalem, seeking revenge for the dishonor shown to their king. Imagine how bad the conflict will, then, if the Roman Prefect puts their king to death!

### **18:37b**

Jesus tells Pilate that he is a king. It would be strange, but not unheard of, for a king to travel to a foreign land. Usually he would send ambassadors and caravans to foreign lands to conduct whatever business needed conducting. Treaties, trade deals, threats of

war or peace... these were the usual reasons why one government would communicate with another. And so Pilate would have wanted to know why this king thought it so important to communicate with another country HIMSELF, and to come without guards or armies... what business did this king have in Judea?

Jesus' business is to tell the truth.

This assumes that, apart from him, there is no truth. And that, if truth is to be had it will come only from him and those who he sends in his name.

## **18:38**

Many people are puzzled by Pilate's words. I think, in context, his words are relatively easy to understand. Theologians and teachers who take Pilate's words to mean this man is not concerned with the truth or is some sort of proto-post-modern are off-base. Given the context, Pilate sees Jesus being a messenger of the truth as something that is not worthy of punishment. "Look," he says to the Jews, "this man claims to be a king whose business here is to proclaim (even BE) the truth. That's not illegal."

## **18:39**

Pilate has two reasons why Jesus should be released:

1. He has done nothing worthy of punishment.
2. Pilate was going to release a prisoner who had done something worthy of punishment anyway.

What's interesting is that there is no extra-biblical evidence that the practice of releasing a guilty man once a year took place. It could be that Pilate had advertised this prisoner release in advance and it just happened to fall on the day when Jesus was in custody, or that this was a spontaneous decision of Pilate.

## **18:40**

The Jews would rather have a robber (someone who would take from them to benefit himself) than Jesus (someone who would give to them at great cost to himself) live among them. Darkness. And yet, we do the same thing when we choose to behave according to the pattern of this age instead of according to the command of Christ. Our actions show that we would rather have Barabbas live with us (in our hearts) than Jesus. We cry: "not this man, but Barabbas" every time we sin.

## **19:1**

John does not provide the details of the flogging, or even why Pilate had it done. It is enough to say that the flogging was a punishment so severe that many men died from it. In fact, if the Roman soldier administering the flogging used more than 40 lashes, he would be subject to the death penalty for the crime of murder. Some speculate that Pilate flogged Jesus to appease the Jews, who he reasoned would want Jesus released after such a harsh punishment.

## **19:2**

The soldiers' treatment of Jesus is anything but kind. The thorns in this area of the world are not like they are here. Growing anywhere from 3-6" long, they would not have supported the weight of the vine "crown", but rather be pressed into the skull of Jesus. John pays extra attention to the robe. As purple was the color for royalty, it was a fittingly ironic choice by the guards. Dressing the now bloody body of Jesus like a king,

the guards have no idea how right they are! This is where Jesus reigns... when he makes atonement for the sins of the world!

### **19:3**

The abuses of Jesus continue. Paying mock tribute to the one who has taken their sin on himself to save them from eternal death, the guards make it personal, striking Jesus with their own hands. There can be no doubt as to their guilt.

### **19:4**

If it is the case that Pilate finds no guilt in him, why did he allow Jesus to suffer so much? I believe John wants to paint an inconsistent picture. The innocent Jesus SHOULD NOT HAVE TO SUFFER! If you're thinking that an injustice is being done, that it's not fair, and that this doesn't make sense... then I think you're right where John wants you. The innocent Jesus should not have had to suffer. But that's what it takes for sin to be atoned for... and he did it because he loves you!

### **19:5**

Compare this to John the Baptist's identification of Christ: "behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." It's no accident that these are the two times Jesus is identified with "behold."

### **19:6**

One more time, Pilate professes the innocence of Jesus. John's point is clear: the Lamb of God is without blemish or defect; he should not have been put to death. The first part of this verse serves as a foil to get Pilate to profess the innocence of Jesus.

### **19:7**

The comment in the Lutheran Study Bible says it well: "The real issue now comes out—blasphemy, which from Pilate's point of view was no crime."

### **19:8**

Why is Pilate afraid? Several possibilities:

- He realizes he is going to put to death someone who might be a king from a foreign land... and so start a war.
- As an innocent man, maybe Jesus is really who the Jews say he is. If putting a dignitary to death is bad, putting a deity to death is even worse.
- Pilate will have put an innocent man to death in order to stave off a possible riot.

From the context (what Pilate does next), I think Pilate is less concerned with the immediate consequences of his actions than the long-term possibility of killing either a king or a deity.

### **19:9**

Jesus has already told Pilate where he is from in 18:36—"Not from the world." Pilate, I think, is wondering of what kingdom Jesus is the king. This is the first, and only time Jesus will not respond to Pilate. His silence at this point is noteworthy.

### **19:10**

If Jesus were a king he might not know what it is like to be under the authority of another. Pilate reassures Jesus that he is in control and that real harm can befall him if he doesn't do what Pilate asks.

### **19:11**

Jesus tells Pilate that it is he and not the Roman Prefect who is in control. The kingdom from whence he came has allowed for all of this to happen; everything is proceeding according to plan.

The one who handed Jesus over to Pilate is the high priest. Jesus is, in a sense saying: "You have maintained my innocence throughout. I have come into the world to bear witness to the truth, and the truth is that those who desire my death are in the wrong and they will be punished... maybe not by you, Pilate, but by the one who sent me."

### **19:12**

Pilate does not want to put Jesus to death. Pilate knows and Jesus has told him the following:

- He is a king.
- He is innocent.
- Jesus has servants to fight for him.
- The ruling Jews will be held responsible for handing him over to Pilate.

From this line of thinking, it would make sense for Pilate to believe that if Jesus is executed, the country of which he is a king will launch an attack on the ones responsible for his death... and he wants no part in this conflict. The only move he has is to set Jesus free.

The Jews know what Pilate is doing and say, more or less: "You are trying to set this Jesus free because you believe he is a king! This makes you disloyal to Caesar... for only Caesar is king!" They've got him...

### **19:13**

If Pilate continues to defend Jesus, he will be seen as defending a king who has not pledged allegiance to Caesar. Defending Jesus would make Pilate disloyal to Rome. And we all know what happens when you're disloyal to Rome!

### **19:14a**

Not on accident, John reminds us that the Passover is about to take place. The sacrificial lamb is being ready for sacrifice. Jesus is being prepared for crucifixion. John interrupts the scene between Pilate, Jesus, and the Jews to remind us what is happening theologically.

### **19:14b**

Pilate says to the Jews: "This Jesus claims to be a king. And, for the last time, I will try to convince you that he is YOUR king! He is innocent!"

Many believe Pilate is taunting the Jews, saying more or less: "See this! We Romans are your true masters. This is what we can do to any of you... even your king... if you had one." But this does not fit the context.

### **19:15**

Pilate speaks the truth.  
So do the Jews.

## **19:16**

Pilate has exhausted all of his tools to get Jesus to be freed.

He has tried to avoid the case entirely (18:31).

He has listened to Jesus away from the Jews and determined him to be innocent (18:38).

He tried to release him (18:39).

He flogged Jesus to appease the bloodlust of the Jews (19:1).

He professed Jesus' innocence again (19:6).

He continued to try to have Jesus released (19:12).

He tried to convince the Jews that Jesus was their king (19:14-15).

Having no other options at his disposal, Pilate gives in and delivers Jesus over to be crucified.