

The Church of the Servant King

Survey of the Bible Series – The Gospel of John

(SB_JN19_Jesus' Crucifixion and Death(s))

Roman authorities had declared Jesus innocent on at least five separate occasions during the mock trials that Jesus endured (see Jn 18.38; Lk 23.14-15; Jn 19.4, 6). Through a series of poor judgments on previous occasions, Pilate was in a position where he could no longer afford any attention from Rome being drawn to his provincial rule and governance.¹ Furthermore, the decisions and actions of Rome toward the region of Judea reflected a policy of compromise and greater sensitivity toward the Jewish religion and people than perhaps elsewhere in the Roman Empire. While purely speculation on my part at this time, I believe that this was an informal policy of Rome dictated by several variables in play at each given point. At the onset of his rule, Pilate's governmental style was most likely consistent with how Rome ruled its other provinces. Initially, Pilate either ignored or blatantly disregarded the peculiar dynamic between Rome and her Judean subject, i.e. religious toleration. Most likely, Pilate interpreted these prior actions as indicative of the manner in which Rome desired him to rule and set the stage for Pilate's several compromises leading to his acquiescence to the demands of the Jewish authorities. Instead of the outcome being determined by a conscience shaped by principle, Pilate allowed whatever conscience he had to be overridden by what was politically expedient toward the preservation and advancement of his career.

As the Jews cried for crucifixion (Jn 19.6-7), they argued that Jesus had "made Himself" the Son of God, thus He was guilty of blasphemy – a sin worthy of death according to their law. John records that this made Pilate all the more fearful (19.8). Why? Pilate had already been impressed with Jesus' poise and calm command of Himself. Pilate had heard Jesus indicate that He was a king of a kingdom not of this world (Jn 18.36). Roman and Greek mythology contained stories of humanlike gods who had visited men and judged them. (This mythology was a derivative of an actual segment of early human history during which fallen angels cohabitated with the daughters of men prior to the Flood and produced a half-human, half-angelic creature per Genesis 6). This prompted Pilate to ask Jesus from whence He came (Jn 19.9) and Jesus did not reply. In addition, Pilate's wife had a dream which troubled her greatly about the "just man" Jesus (Matt 27:19). As Pilate assimilated all of these things, he became fearful that he was on the verge of becoming involved in a realm over which he had little power. This made Pilate defensive about the power he did possess (Jn 19.11).

¹ Pilate had been appointed governor of Judea by Tiberius in A.D. 26. He immediately offended the Jews by moving the headquarters of his army from Caesarea on the Mediterranean coast to Jerusalem. As the army moved into Jerusalem, the soldiers carried standards that bore the image of the emperor. As the standards were placed within sight of the Temple, the Jews were enraged at this action that smacked of idolatry and they declared themselves ready to submit to death rather than endure such humiliation. No doubt, it reminded them of the oppression and defilement of the Temple by Antiochus Epiphanes during the 2nd Century B.C. that led to the Maccabaean wars. Pilate yielded and had the standards returned to Caesarea. This compromise revealed a crack in the armor of Pilate that the Jews would later exploit at opportune times. This first compromise was later followed by two other occasions where Pilate nearly drove the Jews to insurrection. First, he hung golden shields inscribed with the names of deities in his palace on Mt. Zion and the shields were removed on order of the emperor. This would have definitely caused Pilate to lose stature in the sight of his subjects. Second, he appropriated the revenue of the Temple in order to build an aqueduct. In the process, some Galileans were slain as they offered sacrifices in the Temple. This resulted in a rebuke from the emperor. See David Smith, *The Days of His Flesh* (New York: Hodder and Stoughton, 1911), 477-480 quoted in J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1981), 469-70 and see Merrill F. Unger, *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1988), 1009.

Pilate's determination to set Jesus free was overcome by a threat from the Jewish religious leaders. They accused Pilate of not being a friend of Caesars if he let a man go free who had claimed to be king. Pilate's respect for Jesus was no match for his fear of what Rome would do should there be yet another offense of the Jews by Pilate, especially when there was a charge of treason against the man Pilate would have freed. Pilate could have been removed from office, had his property confiscated, tortured and even killed for siding with One who was charged with revolt against Tiberias, the emperor. Pilate's anger with the Jews manifest itself as he tried one last time to find an out for Jesus. Pilate asked the Jews whether he should crucify "their king."

What irony! The Jewish religious leadership's reply to Pilate to the effect that "we have no king but Caesar" displayed a willingness on their part to cast aside every nationalistic desire and Messianic hope they should have possessed had they been true to their God. Even when Pilate washed his hands in a symbolic gesture (Matt 27.24), the Jews were willing for the responsibility for the death of Jesus to be upon them and their children (Matt 27.25).

The Servant King Placed on a Cross (Jn 19.17-37)

John doesn't provide us with some of the details that the other Gospel writers do. Matthew and Mark record the mockery and beating to which Jesus was subjected (Matt 27.27-31; Mk 15.16-20). Tradition indicates that Jesus fell under the weight of the heavy cross beam that Jesus bore on His shoulders which had been lacerated by the scourging. As Jesus made His way toward Golgotha, a man from Cyrene, a city of north Africa where there was a large colony of Jews, met the procession (Matt 27.32-33). His name was Simon and he was most likely on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the Passover. He was compelled to bear the cross for Jesus. Simon had two sons, Alexander and Rufus who are most likely the Alexander and Rufus mentioned by Paul in Romans 16.13. Therefore, it is very possible that through this experience, Simon came to faith in Jesus as the Christ.²

Jesus' care for His mother is mentioned by John (Jn 19.25-27) even while Jesus hung on the Cross in tremendous pain. Even though Jesus' brothers normally would have been responsible to care for their mother, they were most likely unbelievers at this point. Therefore, Jesus entrusted His mother's care to the disciple John.

While Jesus hung on the Cross, the last three hours of His suffering bore special significance. It was during those final three hours that the sky became dark (Lk 23.44). By interpretation, this three hour period represented Jesus' spiritual death or separation from fellowship with God the Father. The agony of that spiritual separation caused Jesus to cry out "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" Translated, this means "My God, My God, Why have you forsaken Me?" (Matt 27.46).

The writers of the Gospels make it plain that Jesus 'had a baptism to be baptized with' and a 'cup to drink.' Paul and other writers of the epistles lay out clearly the same plan of redemption. Jesus had to pay the price alone and tasted death – spiritual death – for every man. Spiritual death is broken communion. Jesus had a taste of such a broken communion, the first and last He ever experienced – in those desolate hours when darkness lay upon the earth and upon His soul.³

Jesus refused any drink earlier during the Crucifixion event (Mk 15.23) probably because the drink He was offered earlier was a drugged intoxicant that was designed to dull His senses to the pain. He wanted the full use of His faculties as He fulfilled every last bit of prophecy. At the conclusion of this experience, Jesus finally accepted some other drink (sour wine – Jn 19.29) so

² See J.W. Shepard, *The Christ of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946), 594 quoted in Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ*, 478.

³ *Ibid.*, 602.

that He moisten His mouth enough to speak His final words. He cried "It is finished" (Jn 19.30) and then He bowed His head and died physically. This was in keeping with Jesus' earlier statements that He would lay down His life of His own authority (Jn 10.17-18).

It is important to note that Jesus did not die because He bled to death. His life was not taken from Him. Rather, He died by an act of His own will – an act of submission to the Father's plan and authority that was acknowledged in the Garden the prior night.

Signs That Accompanied Jesus' Death

The first sign – the tearing of the veil in the Temple (Matt 27.51). This veil was as thick as the palm of a man's hand and was 60' long by 30' wide. It separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies. It was torn from top to bottom. The veils were so heavy that it is said that 300 priests were required to manipulate the veil into position. Something other than an earthquake would be required to tear such a piece of fabric. The tearing of the veil symbolized the opening of access to God the Father brought by the death of Jesus.

The second sign – the earthquake (Matt 27.51). It was no coincidence that the timing of the earthquake coincided with Jesus' death. In 31 B.C., there was an earthquake in Judea that resulted in several thousands of people being buried under the rubble. The earthquake symbolized that Jesus had paid the price required to redeem the earth from the bondage since the curse of Adam's sin had been pronounced (Gen 3.17 cf. Rom 8.21).

Tombs were opened and the bodies of many who had died were raised (Matt 27.52-53). These believing saints did not appear until three days later after Jesus' resurrection. This event served to demonstrate that Jesus was the first fruits of the victory over death and that Jesus' resurrection paved the way for all believers to be resurrected. These saints were probably resuscitated in similar fashion to Lazarus only to die again and be subject to the resurrection to occur at the 2nd Advent.