

Exegetical Notes, John 18:28-40

“The Trials: Part # 3, Before Pilate”

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John 18:28-40

Verses 28-29

Then the Jewish leaders took Jesus from Caiaphas to the palace of the Roman governor. By now it was early morning, and to avoid ceremonial uncleanness they did not enter the palace, because they wanted to be able to eat the Passover. ²⁹ So Pilate came out to them and asked, “What charges are you bringing against this man?”

- Jesus has already endured two trials. The first was before Annas, the power man in Jewish circles at that time. (See exegetical notes of John 18:12-14, 19-24) After that trial Jesus was taken before Caiaphas, Israel’s High Priest. John holds Caiaphas in such contempt that no record of that trial is found in the Gospel of John.
- Jesus’ third trial was before Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea. Pilate was the fifth Roman Governor of Judea appointed by Tiberius in 26. He was recalled by the Emperor to give account for his bad behavior in office in 37 but the Emperor died before Pilate was brought to trial. Pilate was banished by the Roman government to the South of France and committed suicide.
- It was during the Festival of the Passover that this trial happened. This festival lasted seven days. If Jews entered the house of a Gentile during the seven days of the feast, that association would have made them ritually unclean and unable to participate in the rest of the celebration. Since Pilate was a Gentile, the delegation from Caiaphas would not have entered the governor’s palace. They waited for Pilate to come out to them.
- When Pilate came out into the courtyard of his palace to meet with the Jewish leaders, he demanded to know with what they charged Jesus.

Verses 30-32

“If he were not a criminal,” they replied, “we would not have handed him over to you.”

³¹ Pilate said, “Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law.”

“But we have no right to execute anyone,” they objected. ³² This took place to fulfill what Jesus had said about the kind of death he was going to die.

- Though Pilate had showed himself tolerant of Jewish customs by coming out into the courtyard for this meeting, the mutual dislike between the Jewish authorities and the governor is obvious.
- After Pilate asked to know the charges against Jesus, the Jewish leaders pointed out that unless it had been absolutely necessary for them to come to Pilate they would not have done so.
- Pilate then tells them to handle the matter according to their law and to leave him alone.
- They point out that their intention is to execute Jesus but that they cannot do so without his permission. There is no question as to their intention.
- The text says that this “took place to fulfill what Jesus had said about his death.” See John 12:32, “When I am lifted up.” Hebrew execution was by stoning. There was no lifting up. Roman execution was by crucifixion. Jesus’ body would be “lifted up” on the cross.

Verses 33-38

Pilate then went back inside the palace, summoned Jesus and asked him, “Are you the king of the Jews?”

³⁴ “Is that your own idea,” Jesus asked, “or did others talk to you about me?”

³⁵ “Am I a Jew?” Pilate replied. “Your own people and chief priests handed you over to me. What is it you have done?”

³⁶ Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place.”

³⁷ “You are a king, then!” said Pilate.

Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.”

³⁸ “What is truth?” retorted Pilate. With this he went out again to the Jews gathered there and said, “I find no basis for a charge against him.

- Pilate then left the Jewish leaders standing in the courtyard of his palace and went back into the house to personally examine Jesus.
- Apparently, Pilate was not entirely unaware of Jesus. His first question to Jesus when he first saw Jesus was, “Are **YOU** the king of the Jews?” He apparently knew that people were saying that Jesus was the Messiah. To him this translated as “King of the Jews.” But when he saw Jesus, the title was incredulous. There was nothing about Jesus’ appearance which confirmed that he was a threat to Rome.
- Jesus did not deny that he was the Messiah. He simply asked Pilate if Pilate had drawn this conclusion on his own or had been led to it by others. Pilate responded that he did not make up this claim, that it was being said by Jesus’ people, the Jews. Jesus responded by confirming to Pilate that he was a king but that his kingdom was not of this world. Pilate re-asked the question of Jesus. And Jesus responded that he was indeed a king and that those who sought truth acknowledged him as king.
- And then Pilate asked the question which rings through the ages, “What is truth?” He then left Jesus and went out to the Jewish leaders. He told them that he found no basis for their charges against Jesus. He acquitted Jesus of all the charges brought against him. The matter should have ended here. The governor declared that Jesus had done nothing wrong.

Verses 39-40

But it is your custom for me to release to you one prisoner at the time of the Passover. Do you want me to release ‘the king of the Jews’?”

⁴⁰ They shouted back, “No, not him! Give us Barabbas!” Now Barabbas had taken part in an uprising.

- But the governor took the matter one step too far. To appease the Jews, he offered to release Jesus to them in accordance with a custom related to the celebration of the Passover. He was seeking some further insult or some form of political correctness. But they refused his offer demanding that he observe the custom by releasing Barabbas, a known convicted insurrectionist, rather than innocent Jesus.

(These exegetical notes are the foundational study for the sermon entitled *The Trials, Part 3 – Before Pilate*. They have been prepared by the Reverend Doctor Charles H. Jensen, Senior Pastor at Cornerstone Fellowship, Coatesville Pennsylvania. All rights are reserved by *Cornerstone Fellowship* & The Reverend Doctor Charles H. Jensen. They are used here by permission.)