

JOHN — WEEK 26

TRIAL



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The cover image is *Ecce Homo* (Behold the Man) by Caravaggio

The mob brings Jesus to Pilate, who sees right through their nonsense and declares, “*I find no guilt in Him.*” But the mob won’t let it go at that, so Pilate has Jesus flogged and then brings Him out saying, “*Behold the man!*”

The spectacle of Jesus in this sorry state fails to inspire pity and Pilate caves to the mob’s demands.

We’re pleased to provide *the DEEP* studies in PDF format at no charge. We hope you will find them helpful and encouraging as you press on in your journey toward spiritual maturity in the Lord.

The Fellowship of Ailbe offers many opportunities for training, prayer, personal growth, and ministry. To subscribe to the daily DEEP email, visit our website at www.ailbe.org and click the sign-up button at the bottom.

There, you will also discover many other resources, including many email newsletters, such as our worldview study *ReVision*, our devotional newsletter *Crosfigell*, and *the DEEP*.

We are a spiritual fellowship patterned after the Celtic Revival. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

T. M. Moore, Principal
tmmoore@ailbe.org

Thank you.

All the individual weekly study guides are available for download here:

<https://www.ailbe.org/resources/itemlist/category/91-deep-studies>

John, Week 26 — Trial
Copyright 2021 F. Michael Slay
The Fellowship of Ailbe
www.ailbe.org

Except as indicated, Scripture taken from the New King James Version. © Copyright 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved. ESV stands for the English Standard Version. © Copyright 2001 by Crossway. Used by permission. All rights reserved. NIV stands for The Holy Bible, New International Version®. © Copyright 1973 by International Bible Society. Used by permission. All rights reserved. KJV stands for the King James Version.

1 John 18:28–32

Then they led Jesus from Caiaphas to the Praetorium, and it was early morning. But they themselves did not go into the Praetorium, lest they should be defiled, but that they might eat the Passover. Pilate then went out to them and said, “What accusation do you bring against this Man?”

They answered and said to him, “If He were not an evildoer, we would not have delivered Him up to you.”

Then Pilate said to them, “You take Him and judge Him according to your law.”

Therefore the Jews said to him, “It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death,” that the saying of Jesus might be fulfilled which He spoke, signifying by what death He would die.

In the US, only the government can punish people for crimes. No matter what someone has done, practicing vigilante justice will get you in big trouble. Apparently, the Roman system was similar. This appears to be what the Jews are referring to when they say, “*It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death.*”

But they flout that law plenty, usually by stoning, and the Romans let it slide.

Then the Jews took up stones again to stone Him. Jesus answered them, “Many good works I have shown you from My Father. For which of those works do you stone Me?” — John 10:31–32

So, some other agenda must be at work here. They don’t just want Jesus dead; they want Him crucified.

And so does Jesus! This is confirmed by verse 32 (which, by the way, is a purpose clause).

[for the purpose] *that the saying of Jesus might be fulfilled which He spoke, signifying by what death He would die.*

But why do they want Him crucified? What’s wrong with stoning? Are they just fans of torture?

They’re going to jump through all kinds of hoops to get the Romans to do their dirty work for them. Then, having ceded control of the details, they’ll end up furious with the writing Pilate puts on the cross.

They could have easily whacked Jesus right after Peter initiated swordplay. Instead, they patiently go the due-process route. How does that make sense?

It doesn’t. The actions of Jesus’s accusers won’t make any sense all the way through this process. It cannot be explained as simple human interaction. Something else is going on.

That’s the point of verse 32. The plan all along has been for Jesus to be the substitutionary sacrifice for sin.

Stoning just won’t do for that.

2 John 18:33–38 (ESV)

So Pilate entered his headquarters again and called Jesus and said to him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus answered, “Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?” Pilate answered, “Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done?” Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world.” Then Pilate said to him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.” Pilate said to him, “What is truth?”

After he had said this, he went back outside to the Jews and told them, “I find no guilt in him.”

Pilate comes back from his attempt to herd cats and tries to puzzle through all the nonsense by talking to Jesus, who could have made sense of everything by saying, “They’re consumed by hatred.”

Unfortunately for Pilate, Jesus’s agenda isn’t to help Pilate make sense of things. Pilate starts out with an excellent question, “*Are you the King of the Jews?*” This cuts right to the issue, but Jesus answers his question with a question about where he got that idea.

Pilate fires back that since he’s not a Jew, the answer is obvious. Then he asks, “*What have You done?*”

So, Jesus chooses this moment to answer Pilate’s original question, “*My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world.*”

Aha! Now we’re getting somewhere. “*So you are a king?*” Note that Pilate’s words, “*So you are a king?*” are correctly translated with a question mark at the end. He meant it as a question, though the word order is like a statement.

Jesus takes it as a statement. “*You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.*”

Pilate blurts out, “*What is truth?*” and then, without waiting for an answer, marches out to declare, “*I find no guilt in him.*”

“*What is truth?*” was just a rhetorical question. He’s being cynical.

That makes it all the more curious that what Pilate says to the crowd is carefully worded truth. He doesn’t make a broad statement about Jesus being innocent; he says precisely what he can authoritatively say.

The cold truth is that Pilate’s patience with this whole thing has run out. He’s a very high-level officer in a structured bureaucracy, and his professionalism shows. His job is hard to get—even hard to keep.

This feels like he resents having this circus land on his desk. He’s plenty busy with important things.

3 John 18:38b–9:6 (ESV)

After he had said this, he went back outside to the Jews and told them, “I find no guilt in him. But you have a custom that I should release one man for you at the Passover. So do you want me to release to you the King of the Jews?” They cried out again, “Not this man, but Barabbas!” Now Barabbas was a robber.

Then Pilate took Jesus and flogged him. And the soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head and arrayed him in a purple robe. They came up to him, saying, “Hail, King of the Jews!” and struck him with their hands. Pilate went out again and said to them, “See, I am bringing him out to you that you may know that I find no guilt in him.” So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, “Behold the man!” When the chief priests and the officers saw him, they cried out, “Crucify him, crucify him!” Pilate said to them, “Take him yourselves and crucify him, for I find no guilt in him.”

The flogging is standard practice in Roman crucifixion cases. Jesus is being tortured by soldiers whose day job is to execute people who have been judged guilty of serious crimes by a structured bureaucracy.

Pause and consider what doing that job, day-after-day, would do to a soldier’s soul. Mercy is completely out of place. The purpose of the brutality is to suppress crime. They want people to be willing to do anything they can to avoid having this horror visited upon themselves. These guys need to be monsters.

Those monsters are now toying with Jesus. After flogging, they play dress-up with Him and mockingly say, “*Hail, King of the Jews!*”

They love their job.

But why would Pilate let these monsters do this to Jesus, then still want to get Him off?

He doesn’t seem to care a whit about Jesus, but he may also think this could help Him.

Pilate had initially said, “*I find no guilt in him.*” Then he tried to release Jesus based on a custom, but the people wanted Barabbas instead. So, he has Jesus beaten and announces to the crowd, “*See, I am bringing him out to you that you may know that I find no guilt in him.*”

Then he brings out the beaten and comically dressed Jesus, crown, robe and all, and famously says, “*Behold the man.*”

Pilate could be thinking that the spectacle of seeing Jesus in the hands of sadistic monsters would inspire sympathy from the crowd. If so, he’s sadly mistaken. The sight inspires them to clamor for Him to be crucified.

Pilate, now clearly annoyed, fires back, “*Take him yourselves and crucify him, for I find no guilt in him.*”

He’s not loving his job.

4 John 19:7–12a (ESV)

The Jews answered him, “We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has made himself the Son of God.” When Pilate heard this statement, he was even more afraid. He entered his headquarters again and said to Jesus, “Where are you from?” But Jesus gave him no answer. So Pilate said to him, “You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?” Jesus answered him, “You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin.”

From then on Pilate sought to release him,

How can Pilate be *even more afraid*? More than what? There’s no mention of him being afraid before.

This appears to be a Greek idiom. Pilate was afraid more than he was interested in complying with the wishes of the mob. However, the word afraid still stands. The phrase, “*Son of God*,” has shaken Pilate.

Previously, the charge was that Jesus claimed to be a king. Now that has shifted to something that scares Pilate. We don’t know his religion, but something about the title *Son of God* bothers him. Given Jesus’s extraordinarily fearless behavior, Pilate’s imagination now seems to be running wild. He doesn’t know what he’s dealing with.

So, Pilate asks, “*Where are you from?*” If Jesus had said something like, “Olympus,” Pilate might have fled. (The Roman gods were little more than a rebranding of the Greek gods.)

Jesus’s silence is just as scary. Pilate sounds like he is trying to convince someone (himself?) when he explains his authority. Jesus is supposed to be afraid—everyone in His situation is afraid—but not Jesus.

Jesus confirms that Pilate does have authority, but it comes from a higher authority. Then He delivers the punchline, “*Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin.*”

This absolutely takes Pilate down. Jesus doesn’t care about life and death; He cares about sin. He’s saying that Pilate doesn’t have *the greater sin*, but he still has sin. In the context of Jesus’s incredible bravery, this shakes Pilate to the core. *From then on Pilate sought to release him.*

Pilate has tried to release Jesus already, multiple times. This sentence elevates that to the next level.

Now it’s his focus.

Pilate looks and sounds important, but he’s actually a bit player in this drama. That’s the point of, “*Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin.*” Pilate might wish to change the course of events, but that’s not what’s going to happen. Pilate will cave.

There’s a great lesson in this—history is often not driven by people with grand titles.

It’s driven by people with courage.

5 John 19:12–16

From then on Pilate sought to release Him, but the Jews cried out, saying, “If you let this Man go, you are not Caesar’s friend. Whoever makes himself a king speaks against Caesar.”

When Pilate therefore heard that saying, he brought Jesus out and sat down in the judgment seat in a place that is called The Pavement, but in Hebrew, Gabbatha. Now it was the Preparation Day of the Passover, and about the sixth hour. And he said to the Jews, “Behold your King!”

But they cried out, “Away with Him, away with Him! Crucify Him!”

Pilate said to them, “Shall I crucify your King?”

The chief priests answered, “We have no king but Caesar!”

Then he delivered Him to them to be crucified. Then they took Jesus and led Him away.

So, who’s more pathetic? Pilate or the chief priests?

I know, trick question. They’re all so pathetic there’s no way to compare them. The chief priests pledging fealty to Caesar is unimaginably cowardly—if not downright blasphemous. Yet doing that in the service of condemning an innocent man, especially the messiah, makes it “special.”

Then there’s Pilate caving to these clowns. He’d just finished explaining to Jesus how he’s so powerful. Plus, he *sought to release Him*.

That lasts about two minutes.

History has not been kind to Pilate. This incident is indicative of Pilate’s inability to command respect and allegiance. A strong prefect could have easily silenced the rabble by threatening to charge them. He had the soldiers, but he didn’t have the will.

Pilate will go on to have more trouble keeping his subjects in line. He only lasts about another seven years after crucifying Jesus. His end comes, from his harsh treatment of Samaritans. In a perfect irony, it was the charge of executing people without a trial that did him in.

Pilate’s problem isn’t a lack of spine; it’s a lack of compass. He doesn’t have the courage of his convictions because he doesn’t have convictions. He can be pushed around, so no one respects him.

People know they can manipulate him. That’s what happens in today’s passage. That leads to his using too much force on occasion, and that’s what ultimately brings him down.

Curiously, there are many Christian traditions that think Pilate became a believer. Some even consider him a saint.

Anything’s possible.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Could some other kind of death pay for our sins?
2. What is truth?
3. Do some kinds of work change people's personality?
4. Who has driven history in our time?
5. What's the most surprising conversion to Christianity you've personally seen?

Items for prayer: