



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

John 18: 28-40

Summer 2023

"Christ Before Pilate"

TRANSCRIPT

Thank you Seth. That is a very appropriate passage for our text this morning, which is John 18, verses 28 through 40,

²⁸ Then they led Jesus from Caiaphas into the Praetorium, and it was early; and they themselves did not enter into the Praetorium so that they would not be defiled, but might eat the Passover. ²⁹ Therefore Pilate went out to them and said, "What accusation do you bring against this Man?" ³⁰ They answered and said to him, "If this Man were not an evildoer, we would not have delivered Him to you." ³¹ So Pilate said to them, "Take Him yourselves, and judge Him according to your law." The Jews said to him, "We are not permitted to put anyone to death," ³² to fulfill the word of Jesus which He spoke, signifying by what kind of death He was about to die.

³³ Therefore Pilate entered again into the Praetorium, and summoned Jesus and said to Him, "Are You the King of the Jews?" ³⁴ Jesus answered, "Are you saying this on your own initiative, or did others tell you about Me?" ³⁵ Pilate answered, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests delivered You to me; what have You done?" ³⁶ Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm." ³⁷ Therefore Pilate said to Him, "So You are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say *correctly* that I am a king. For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who is of

the truth hears My voice." ³⁸ Pilate said to Him, "What is truth?" And when he had said this, he went out again to the Jews and said to them, "I find no guilt in Him. ³⁹ But you have a custom that I release someone for you at the Passover; do you wish then that I release for you the King of the Jews?" ⁴⁰ So they cried out again, saying, "Not this Man, but Barabbas." Now Barabbas was a robber.

John 18: 28-40

Let me conclude with the verse that Alan read this morning in Sunday School,
1 Corinthians 5, verse 7,

"Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are
in fact unleavened. For Christ our Passover also has been crucified"

May the LORD bless this reading of His Word, and bless our time of study in it
together. Let's bow together in a word of prayer.

Father, thank You for this hour. Thank You for this day when we gather together
as Your people, and we do so to fellowship with one another in the true sense of
fellowship. We come together to visit, to spend time with each other at the end of the
week, (or the beginning of the week), having not seen each other for a while—and that's
good and that's important, but the main aspect and essence of fellowship is this very
thing, fellowshiping in Your truth, sitting under the teaching of the Word of God. And
so LORD, we look to You to bless us because no man can do justice to the things we read
in this Book. It's Your Word, and we handle it with care; but only You really bless us
through it. You make it effective, the Spirit of God does, in our hearts; and so we pray for
that effect, that that would be the result, that You would bless Your Word as we think
about it and that we would be nourished spiritually through it.

Build us up in the faith, Father. Equip us for the week ahead. We don't know
what's coming: We don't know what's coming tomorrow, what's coming this afternoon.

We need to be equipped for that and pray You would bless us in that way. This is how we're built up in the faith. This is why it's so important to study the Word, do it routinely, regularly, because this is Your truth, and through it our souls are nourished, we're given wisdom, we're given knowledge of You, and we enter into a deeper and more personal relationship with You. So we look to You to bless spiritually.

And LORD, as priests, we all have the great privilege of interceding for one another and praying for the saints, and praying that Your blessings would be upon them spiritually and materially. You know their needs and You know their circumstances in life, and we pray that You would bless them; and encourage and strengthen all who are going through the difficulties of life. Ultimately LORD, it all comes from Your hand, and for a good purpose. We often can't see that purpose, but it's there, and it will have its good result as we yield to it and follow You.

So LORD, bless us to that end. That's why we're here; again Father, we seek Your help, Your mercy through Your Word to strengthen us and bless us with maturity in the faith.

So, bless us, LORD, as we sing our next hymn, and bless us as we study the Scriptures. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.

(Message) You never know what you're going to wake up to each morning. Usually it's the same old routine. That's what we expect, but sometimes it's the unexpected. Benjamin Disraeli, Queen Victoria's favorite prime minister said, "What we anticipate seldom occurs. What we least expect generally happens." I don't know that it 'generally happens'—but it does happen. We've all had a routine day turn into a crisis.

Pontius Pilate did. He woke up one morning to begin a normal day, when unexpectedly the King of the Jews was in his court. Suddenly he faced the greatest decision of his life—and he was unprepared for it. His wife sent a message to him. "Have nothing to do with that righteous Man." (Mat 27:19). But he was like a man caught in the undertow; he wasn't strong enough to overcome the forces swirling around him, or rise above his own indecisiveness.

This is the Lord's second trial. He had a religious trial in a Jewish court. And here He has a civil trial in a Roman court. Most of what is known of the Roman trial is found here in John's Gospel. He's the only one to give the account of Pilate's private interview with Jesus. John recorded little about the Jewish trial, a sketchy account of the Lord's interrogation by Annas, and nothing about the trial before Caiaphas.

We know from the other Gospels that the Sanhedrin, the high court of the Jews, condemned Jesus for blasphemy, when He acknowledged that 'He is the Christ, the Son of God'. Caiaphas tore his robes and said, 'He has blasphemed', and he called for a verdict. And the court answered, 'He deserves death.' (Mat 26:63f).

But the Jews didn't have the authority to put Him to death, not at least in the way they wanted to—only Rome had that authority. So to get that, John wrote in verse 28, "They led Jesus from Caiaphas into the Praetorium...", which is the residence of the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate.

Pilate's life was recorded in secular history as well as Scripture. The Roman historian Tacitus wrote of him, as did the Jewish writers, Josephus and Philo. Pilate was from Spain. He fought with the Roman legions in Germany; then he went to Rome to make his fortune. There he married a woman of nobility; we even know her name, Claudia Procula. He 'married up' because that connection helped him gain the post of Governor of Judea in the year AD 26.

Historians describe him as morally weak, reckless, and cruel. And that's how he governed; harshly, and with very little care for, or sensitivity toward, the Jews and their religious scruples. Still, they came to him for help in carrying out their plot.

They arrived early in the morning, because Roman officials began work at dawn and finished as early as possible. So, sometime between 6:00 and 7:00 AM, they arrived at Pilate's headquarters.

John tells us that they would not enter, "...so that they would not be defiled, but might eat the Passover." (vs28b). And that raises a question about when the Lord and His disciples ate the Passover meal: Did they actually eat it the day before Passover?

That's been suggested, and that is possible—but all of the Gospel accounts state that the Last Supper occurred the day that the Passover lamb was sacrificed, and that it was eaten on the day of the Passover. (See Mat 26: 17-21; Mark 14: 12-17; Luke 22: 13-16; John 13: 1-2).

So a better explanation is that the reference here to "the Passover" is actually a reference to the combination of the Passover with the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which followed the very next day. So there was no gap between them. Luke, in chapter 22, verse 1 of his Gospel states, "Now the Feast of Unleavened Bread, called the Passover, was approaching." They were two feasts, celebrated together, as one continuous feast. This reference then, to 'eating the Passover', (Jn 18:28b), refers not to the Passover meal itself, but to the Feast of Unleavened Bread which continued for the rest of the week and was considered the entire Passover festival.

Now, the Jewish leaders believed that if they entered the home of a pagan they would become unclean and unfit to participate in the rest of the celebration. So they remained outside. The irony and the hypocrisy of all this is impossible to miss: They were so careful to avoid ritual contamination, while at the same time acquiring infinitely greater moral defilement by committing judicial murder.

I think Dr. Johnson said that, "It was the supreme example of straining at a gnat and swallowing a camel." And it is. But the irony goes even deeper: These men of the Law, who were so concerned about eating the Passover, were ignorant that the One that they were killing was the true Passover.

But they were determined to do it. And to get it done, they forced Pilate to come out to them. When he did, and saw that they had a prisoner, he asked, "What accusation do you bring against this man?" (vs29).

The question seems to have taken the Jewish leaders by surprise, for they had expected Pilate to endorse their verdict without question. So, his question put them on the spot. They knew that no Roman would condemn a man because of blasphemy—and by asking for the charge against Jesus, Pilate was opening the case for a formal hearing. So in a moment they would change the charge to high treason, arguing that Jesus claimed to be a king, which made Him a rival to Caesar and therefore a threat to the state and political order, (political stability).

But first they tried to evade the question by answering in a generality. They said, "If this Man were not an evildoer, we would not have delivered Him to you." (vs30). The implication was that, 'Pilate should trust them. They wouldn't hand over anyone to him who wasn't guilty and they expected him to carry out the execution they were seeking.'

Well, Pilate wasn't their pawn; and if no crime had been committed against the Roman state, he didn't want to be involved, for the Jews had their own court. And so he answered them: " 'Take Him yourselves, and judge Him according to your law.' The Jews said to him, 'We are not permitted to put anyone to death.' " (vs31). Now that statement was an admission of their intention. They had not come to Pilate for a trial and justice, but for the purpose of having their prisoner, Christ, executed—because they didn't have the authority to do it.

Now there is evidence that there was one exception to that; that the Jews were allowed to execute people who violated the temple; and their method of execution was by stoning. Acts chapter 7, is the account of Stephen's stoning, (though that was probably a case of mob violence and the authorities simply overlooked it).

But Caiaphas didn't want Jesus stoned. He wanted Jesus legally condemned and executed in such a way that He would be publicly disgraced. And crucifixion would do that, because Deuteronomy 21, verse 23 states that, 'anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse.' That is what Caiaphas and the others were seeking, a shameful death that would discredit Jesus; and a judgment from Pilate would secure that. That was their plan.

But John saw the hand of God in all of this, and the fulfillment of Jesus' words which He spoke, John said, "...signifying by what kind of death He was about to die." (vs32). The saying that John is referring to is probably John chapter 12, verse 32; where Jesus said, "And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself." His being "lifted up" would be fulfilled on a Roman cross.

That's what Jesus prophesied; and Caiaphas' determination to have Him crucified fulfilled the divine purpose. His motive was one of malice; but by means of this injustice, he and the others unwittingly, unwillingly, fulfilled prophecy and carried out the will of God. God is sovereign—He uses even His enemies to praise Him. So it's true: 'Man proposes, God disposes.'

But they could not do that, I should say, on the charge of blasphemy. And so according to Luke 23, verse 2, they accused Him of being a threat to Rome and to Caesar, because He claimed to be a king. Hearing that, Pilate decided to investigate the charge more fully. He had Jesus brought in to the praetorium and interrogated Him, and asked, "Are You the King of the Jews?" (vs33).

The question is worded in such a way that the pronoun "You" is in the emphatic position: "You are the King of the Jews?", which suggests both surprise and disbelief. From the charge that had been made, Pilate expected a belligerent, proud revolutionary. There was nothing of that in Jesus' appearance or in His bearing. Just the opposite; Christ stood before the judge, the governor, in simple clothing—that of a peasant. And He was in chains; He'd been beaten; but He stood there with great majesty.

Pilate could see from all of this that there was nothing to the charge that was brought against Him. But the question had been put to Jesus, 'Are You the King of the Jews?' And it was a type of question that could not be responded to with a simple 'yes' or 'no' answer. Had he asked this out of a sincere interest in knowing about Him? —or was Pilate simply addressing Him according to what had been told him, and what he was told to say? Because if the question was merely repeating the charge that the Sanhedrin had rendered, then the answer to that was 'No', because He was not a political threat.

But if Pilate was really seeking to know for his own understanding, then the answer is 'Yes'—but Jesus would need to explain the kind of king that He is. So, Jesus responded, "Are you saying this on your own initiative, or did others tell you about Me?" (vs34).

Pilate responded with an indignant, "I am not a Jew, am I?" (vs35). In other words, he was a Roman; he cared about matters of state and administration, not Jewish religious questions. The only reason they were talking, as he explains, was because, "Your own nation and the chief priest delivered You to me;" (vs35b).

Still, he wasn't satisfied with the charge they brought against Jesus. He felt there must be more to it—that Jesus had done something to provoke their hatred, so he asked, "...what have You done?" (vs35c).

Now Jesus could have told Pilate of His miracles, about His teachings, and how He corrected the leaders and provoked them to jealousy. He could have told him many things—but He didn't. Instead He responded to the charge against Him, that He claimed to be a king. He is a king; but to explain the kind of king He is, He first defined His kingdom. "My kingdom," He said, "is not of this world." (vs36). Meaning it did not have its origin in this world. It isn't governed by the principles of this world—kingdoms that preserve themselves by force.

His kingdom is different. He proved that in the garden when Peter tried to defend Him with violence, and He stopped him and told him to put away his sword. His kingdom is not political power in the sense that Pilate thought of kingdoms. It "is not of this world".

Now that doesn't mean that it has nothing to do with this world, or that it won't be in this world, materially. Revelation 19 gives the vision of Him returning on a war horse with a sword, "His eyes a flame of fire". (vs12). But in the present time, He's gathering the citizens of His kingdom by His grace, and governing them in peace in the midst of the kingdoms of this world. His kingdom is different.

Napoleon is reported to have seen the difference and said, "I have founded an empire by force, and it has melted away. Jesus Christ established His kingdom by love,

and it stands to this day, and will stand." He is a king, but also the Prince of Peace whose purpose was not to spread violence and topple governments, but to save His people and reveal truth. And that's what He said in verse 37.

Pilate said, "So you are a king?" And Jesus answered, "You say *correctly* that I am a king. For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth." (vs37b). Jesus Christ is not only a king, He is the King of kings. And the kind of king He is, the kind of person He is, is indicated in His statement that He was "born", and He "came". He was *born* of a woman, as we all are. He entered the world naturally. He was a real man with a true body and a reasonable soul.

But He also *came* into the world, which is to say, 'He was *sent*'. And that indicates an existence prior to His entering the world. It speaks of His heavenly origin, His eternal existence with the Father—all that is set forth at the very beginning of this Gospel in the first five verses. He is both God and man. Born of a woman, but conceived by the Holy Spirit. And because He is, he's able to reveal God to man. That's what He came to do, "to testify to the truth", (vs37b), the truth about Himself as God's Son, the truth about salvation that is only in Him, and the truth about the judgment to come.

And that's the nature of His kingdom—it's the kingdom of truth. And the subjects of His kingdom are those who love truth; "Everyone who is of the truth," He said, "hears my voice." (vs37b). That's how His influence spreads throughout the world, through His voice which is heard in the proclamation of the Gospel.

Now that's how His influence spreads throughout the world. It's different from other religions. Mohammad, for example, spread his religion by the sword; people could convert or die. Christ gathers His citizens by His grace and the effective power of His Word—the Gospel, Scripture—which is God's Word. "Everyone who is of the truth", He told Pilate, "hears My voice." (vs37). And in that there was, perhaps, an invitation to Pilate to 'hear Him', to believe in Him, to follow Him who is "the way, the truth, and the life." (Jn 14:6).

But Pilate was a skeptic—and dismissed it with, "What is truth?" (vs38). Words that would haunt him for eternity.

But maybe the conversation was making him uneasy, and so he ended it. And with that he turned away from Christ the King, and returned to the priests and Pharisees outside the praetorium. He knew Jesus was no threat to Caesar. And he said to them, "I find no fault in him." (vs38b).

Now, at this point, Pilate should have dismissed the case. He had rendered his verdict of innocent; there was nothing to their charge. He acknowledged that, stated that, and so Jesus should have been released. He knew, though, that the Jewish leaders would be displeased, and he didn't want to provoke them. Nor did he want to condemn an innocent man. So Pilate, at this point, is on the horns of a dilemma.

By now, a crowd had gathered. And then he remembered that they had a tradition, and thought that that might be the card that he could play that would deliver him. So he reminded them of it, verse 39; "But you have a custom that I release someone for you at the Passover; do you wish then that I release for you the King of the Jews?" It was a choice between the very best and the very worst—a man named Barabbas. (And he thought he could win sympathy for Jesus by calling Him 'their king'.)

He misjudged the crowd. They supported the priests and they cried out, "Not this Man, but Barabbas." (vs40a). Barabbas means, 'son of the father'; so some have taken that to indicate that he was the son of a rabbi. Maybe, but if so he was one of those 'wild preacher kids' because, as John adds, "Now Barabbas was a robber." (vs40b). According to Mark, he was more than that: He was an 'insurrectionist', (a revolutionary), and a 'murderer.' He was a zealot, and not the kind of man that the Sadducees supported; in fact, he was the very kind of man that they feared.

But again, the irony in this is obvious: The priests persuaded the people to seek the release of a man who was guilty of the very crime that they falsely accused the Lord

of committing. And as a result, Barabbas would go free, and Jesus would die; a great injustice—(the greatest injustice!)

It's the death of "the just for the unjust", (1Pe 3:18), which exposes all the more the sin that was behind it. What had Jesus done that the priests and the crowd would prefer Barabbas, a thief and a killer, over Him? He'd never stolen from them. He'd never taken money from them. He did nothing out of selfish motive. He lived at the poverty level. He'd never killed them or urged revolt. Just the opposite: He preached peace. He had healed their sick. He had raised the dead. He went about, (as Peter put it in Acts 10, verse 38), "doing good."

That's a great summary of the Lord's life: 'He did good in every way'. He never did anything that would bring disgrace upon Him or others; never told lies, only truth; and revealed to them the glory of God the Father. In Him they had seen only goodness. In Him they had seen what John and the apostles had seen, "grace and truth." (Jn 1:17).

And that's the problem, because grace and truth are a witness against sin, a witness that produces shame. And that is what they hated Him for—He exposed their fallen condition. Men love the darkness rather than the light; so they chose a man like themselves. They chose a man that was like them over one who is like God, who in fact is the God-man.

And Pilate went along with it. He knew Jesus was innocent; he knew what justice required—but he failed to do it. What began as a routine day, and another trial, (that he expected to deal with and dismiss quickly), became a crisis—a storm that he could not control.

And none of us is adequate for the challenges that come unexpectedly in life. It may come later today, it may come tomorrow; only Christ is adequate for that. He proved that in His trial with His calm control of everything. He's always prepared; He is perfect and powerful. And He is what will make us adequate for the unexpected events of life—events that we can't foresee or plan for, His life within us and our close

relationship with Him, that's what's necessary. And it is as we grow in that relationship, (which we only do through the knowledge of His Word, and the fellowship with the saints, only through that and the obedience that we show to His Word), then we become increasingly adequate and prepared for the unseen. There our relationship grows and we become more and more like Him—more and more with His mind and His understanding.

Well of course, Pilate had none of that and so he was completely unprepared and unequipped for what happened. These priests were powerful, clever, and determined men who steamrolled over him.

But if there was one other person who awoke that day to what he least expected, even more than Pilate did, it was Barabbas. When he woke up, he was fully expecting to spend the day on a cross. When he heard the crowd shouting his name, he must have thought the mob was calling for his head—eager for his death. Then the jail door opened and the Roman guard said, "You're free." He must have sat there stunned, unable to take it in. Perhaps he even followed the crowd to Golgotha and watched the nails go into Christ's hands that he knew should have gone into his. The Son of God died in the place of the 'son of the father'; whose father is Adam who passed on his sin to Barabbas—and to all of us.

We don't know what happened to him, what his response was. But we know what happened to us. And the experience of Barabbas gives us a picture of the grace and of what Christ did for His people, for each of us, when He died in our place—"the just for the unjust." Barabbas is a picture of us all. We're sinners. We're lawbreakers. And, "The wages of sin is death", (Rom 6:23), ...we all deserve that. But Christ took our place on the cross, in judgment, so that we would go free.

Pilate asked, "What is truth?", when the truth was standing right in front of him—and he turned away from it. What that showed is, "Jesus wasn't the only one on

trial", as James Boice put it. It proves that Pilate himself was on trial—and proved himself to be guilty.

The most important moment in Pilate's life came unexpectedly. It did for Saul of Tarsus as well on the Damascus road: But he saw Jesus in a blinding light and he believed; he called Him "Lord". (Acts 9:5).

Maybe there is someone here, a visitor; you've been to church before but not heard this about Jesus—that He is King; He is the Son of God who died for sinners, and there is salvation in Him—and only in Him. What are you going to do with Christ?

Or someone who's been here all along, but suddenly you are seeing Christ in a way that you haven't seen Him before. What are you going to do? Don't turn away from Him. Don't delay. Know that He is innocent, perfect, and you are guilty. And because He is innocent, and because He is both God and man, He is the solution to your guilt. He was able to take it all onto Himself and be punished for the sins of others, for the sins of all who believe in Him. He's done that; "It is finished", (Jn 19:30), that's what He declared. There's nothing more for you to do but receive what He's done and to do that through faith, and faith alone.

So turn to Christ. Trust in Him. He receives all who do. He equips you for life, and more importantly, makes you fit for eternity. Listen, we're all *fit* for eternity one way or another: Without Christ, your fit for an eternity of darkness; an eternity of hell. Christ is the solution who *fits* us for heaven, and for the world to come.

God help you to come to Him and trust in Him—and help all of us to live as Lights in this world, representatives of Christ.

(Closing prayer) Father, Your great servant, Augustin, wrote that, "You have made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in You." And that is so true. And we thank You that we, who were separated from You and in that condition and

would slip into an eternity of darkness, an eternity of death, of hell, that You sent Your Son to redeem us so that we would find rest in You. And we have done that through faith and faith alone. We thank You for Your goodness and Your grace that's brought us to an understanding of our lost condition, and brought us into Your family through the sacrifice of Your Son, the shed blood of the God-man. Thank You for that work, Father. May we live as Lights in a dark world.

The LORD bless you and keep you. The LORD make His face shine on you and be gracious to you. The LORD lift up His countenance on you and give you peace. In Christ's name, Amen.

(End of Audio)