



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

John 19: 1-16

Summer 2023

"Christ Or Caesar"

TRANSCRIPT

Thank you Josh, and good morning. We are continuing our studies in the Gospel of John. We are at the beginning of chapter 19, and at the end of our Lord's trial.

John 19, beginning with verse 1,

19 Pilate then took Jesus and scourged Him. ² And the soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on His head, and put a purple robe on Him; ³ and they *began* to come up to Him and say, "Hail, King of the Jews!" and to give Him slaps *in the face*. ⁴ Pilate came out again and said to them, "Behold, I am bringing Him out to you so that you may know that I find no guilt in Him." ⁵ Jesus then came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. *Pilate* said to them, "Behold, the Man!" ⁶ So when the chief priests and the officers saw Him, they cried out saying, "Crucify, crucify!" Pilate said to them, "Take Him yourselves and crucify Him, for I find no guilt in Him." ⁷ The Jews answered him, "We have a law, and by that law He ought to die because He made Himself out *to be* the Son of God."

⁸ Therefore when Pilate heard this statement, he was *even* more afraid; ⁹ and he entered into the Praetorium again and said to Jesus, "Where are You from?" But Jesus gave him no answer. ¹⁰ So Pilate said to Him, "You do not speak to me? Do You not know that I have authority to release You, and I have authority to crucify You?" ¹¹ Jesus answered, "You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been

given you from above; for this reason he who delivered Me to you has *the* greater sin." ¹² As a result of this Pilate made efforts to release Him, but the Jews cried out saying, "If you release this Man, you are no friend of Caesar; everyone who makes himself out *to be* a king opposes Caesar."

¹³ Therefore when Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus out, and sat down on the judgment seat at a place called The Pavement, but in Hebrew, Gabbatha. ¹⁴ Now it was the day of preparation for the Passover; it was about the sixth hour. And he said to the Jews, "Behold, your King!" ¹⁵ So 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."

¹⁶ So he then handed Him over to them to be crucified.

John 19: 1-16

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

Father, this is a solemn text that we have read, all leading up to the greatest event of history, the sacrifice that would be made to save Your people from their sins—the sacrifice that would remove the curse that has been placed upon this world, and this universe. And so we thank You, Father, that we can be together reading it and considering this greatest of all events; and so we pray that You would bless us as we do so. Help us to understand what took place; things that took place at that trial that were better than any of those involved knew, except for of course, Your Son; events that ultimately were orchestrated by You and that resulted in the great blessing of salvation for us.

So we thank You, Father, that we can come together, we can read this together, and we can consider the meaning of this event together.—And pray that as we do so, You would teach us through the Spirit of God, and You would enlighten our minds to

help us to understand the proper application of all this text to ourselves. So we commit this time to You of instruction and worship and we thank You for it.

Thank You most of all for the work of Christ, a work that is the fulfillment of Your eternal plan of salvation. And we thank You that we, as believer priests who have that great privilege of priestly service for one another, can do that service at this moment as we enter into prayer, as we express to You our gratitude and also our need—because we can understand nothing and we cannot do anything as pleasing to You apart from Your sovereign grace—and we appeal for that. We appeal for, as I have prayed, the teaching ministry of the Spirit, and that He would enlighten our minds, and make our prayers effective—because we also pray for those who have material needs and those who have struggles in life; and we all are there one way or another.

And now we look to You, as the good and great God to teach us and bless us and build us up in the faith. And we pray these things in Christ's name. Amen.

(Message) Shakespeare had keen insight on human nature and life, so he's often quoted in sermons, in speeches, in articles. One example of that is a line given to Brutus, the Roman senator in the play Julius Caesar. Brutus said,

There is a tide in the affairs of men.
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and miseries.
(Julius Caesar, Act-IV, Scene-III)

Sometimes people are given great opportunities that call for courageous decisions. If taken, the opportunity leads on to fortune. If missed, the result is misery.

When we come to John chapter 19, the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, was “at the flood” —at the crossroads. He was faced with the greatest decision of his life, which would determine a future of “fortune” or “miseries”.

Jesus had been brought to his court accused of treason, of claiming to be a king and a threat to Caesar—and Pilate had to decide what to do with Him. According to Matthew, (27:22), he asked the question of the Jewish people, "What shall I do with Jesus?" It's a question everyone must ask themselves... 'What shall I do with Him?'

But at that moment of history, that was the wrong question. Pilate was the judge. It was his responsibility to condemn Jesus or acquit Him, not the crowds. And the right decision was obvious to him. He had told the Jewish leaders, "I find no guilt in Him." —but to release Christ at that moment, when an excited mob was crying out for His death, would take courage Pilate lacked. So to escape responsibility he tried to pass it off to the people by giving them a choice between Jesus the Savior—or Barabbas the robber. They chose Barabbas.

Still not willing to condemn an innocent man to death, he tried another strategy to set Him free: He ordered Jesus to be flogged—and that's how chapter 19 begins, “Pilate then took Jesus and scourged Him”, (vs1), hoping that might satisfy the crowd's lust for blood with a ‘lighter’ form of punishment.

It was not light punishment—scourging was done with a whip, fitted with pieces of metal. F. F. Bruce called it "a murderous form of torture", because it turned a victim's flesh into a bloody pulp—and was often fatal.

Ancient Rome is famous for giving law to the western world—to western civilization. This is an example of Roman law: whipping an innocent man. But Pilate wanted to appease the crowd; ‘the end, (for him), justifies the means.’ So he handed Jesus over to the soldiers, who made a sport out of their treatment of Him.

These were tough, battle hardened legionnaires who had a coarse sense of humor. Jesus was accused of claiming to be ‘the King of the Jews’ and a rival of Caesar.

So after the scourging, the soldiers gave Him a mock coronation. They wove a crown out of thorns, probably thorns that were from the date palm which can have spikes that are as long as 12 inches. They put it on His head and they threw a robe over His lacerated shoulders, (probably an old army cloak that was lying there), then paid mock homage to Him by hailing Him as king, and slapping Him in the face.

These soldiers were ingenious in their cruelty—but also they were profound beyond anything they intended or understood because, ‘He is a King’, and the crown they gave Him was a perfect emblem of His mission.

He came to remove sin's curse on this world. In the garden of Eden, God said to Adam, "...Cursed is the ground because of you...Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you." (Gen 3:17-18). And now He was wearing the thorns, signifying that He was bearing the curse for us, and that by Him it would be taken away, and we, His people, would be free, along with all nature, and ultimately the universe.

Now the soldiers knew nothing of this; they intended to hurt and humiliate Him. But by doing that, they fulfilled the prophecy of scourging found in Isaiah 53, verse 5, by “His stripes we are healed.” He patiently endured that for us.

Now, Pilate did it to save himself from a difficult situation, thinking that the bloodied and bruised sight of Jesus would move the crowd to pity Him. He first announced to the crowd, "I find no guilt in Him." (vs 4b). Then he brought Jesus out, dressed in the purple robe and the thorns on His head, and he said to them, "Behold the Man!" (vs5b).

What did he mean by “Behold the Man!”? A famous statement; was it that Jesus conducted Himself with such dignity that Pilate was compelled to recognize something majestic about Him? It's possible. If Pilate had watched the scourging, he could not have helped but be moved by the Lord's courage and composure as He submitted Himself to that whip and humiliation.

But Pilate probably meant something different. He was a callous stoic—a cynic. And the intent of his statement was more like a ridicule of Christ—and the crowd. The

idea is, 'Here is the man you think is so dangerous: Pitiful, harmless, humiliated, and hardly a threat to Caesar.' F. F. Bruce interpreted his statement as, "Here He is, poor fellow."

Even so, John intended for us to see the deeper meaning, what Pilate and the crowd could not see, that Jesus is 'The Man', the Word made flesh, and that in Him is seen perfection, strength, and honor. And His glory is witnessed in the disgrace He suffered—the pain and humiliation He voluntarily endured for us.

Whatever Pilate's meaning, he made a great statement, "Behold the Man!": The greatest Man, the unique Man, the last Adam, our representative, and the Savior of the world.

But that was not Pilate's meaning. He didn't present Him to the crowd to be admired, but to shame *them*—and assuage their blood lust. However he did neither. The chief priests would be satisfied with nothing less than death, on the cross. They cried out, "Crucify, crucify." (vs6).

Realizing his strategy failed, Pilate was disgusted and showed it. He said, "Take Him yourselves and crucify Him, for I find no guilt in Him." (vs 6b). He knew they couldn't do that, so it was a way of saying, 'I want nothing to do with this.' Three times now, he has pronounced Jesus innocent, and he was exasperated. He's fundamentally frustrated by all of this.

But the priests wouldn't let him off the horns of his dilemma, so now they come to the real issue. They knew that the Roman governor not only had the responsibility of enforcing Roman law in the region, but that it was his responsibility to show respect and even enforce Jewish religious Law. And seeing that they were in danger of losing their case on the charge of treason, they now accuse Him of blasphemy, hoping that would be convincing.

Verse 7, "The Jews answered him, 'We have a law, and by that law He ought to die because He made Himself out *to be* the Son of God.' " Leviticus 24, verse 16: It requires death for blasphemy; and they thought the claim to be God's Son fit that crime,

because it's a claim to deity. They had accused Him of that in chapters 5 and 10. Of course, it is only blasphemy if He were only a man. But He had witnesses; He had evidence to prove that He was far more than a man, far more than human. His miracles were proof of that; the people He healed and raised from the dead were proof of that.

And there was also the prophets. Isaiah spoke of Him and recorded the Lord's words in Isaiah, chapter 50, verse 6, "I gave My back to those who strike *Me*, and My cheeks to those who pluck out the beard; I did not cover My face from humiliation and spitting." Wow! Now that prophecy had just been observed by all of them—fulfilled before their eyes. But they were blind to it, (maybe even ignorant of it), and still called "blasphemy" to His claim to being "the Son of God." (vs7).

But that statement caught Pilate by surprise. He was a skeptic; but he was also a superstitious pagan. And when he heard that Jesus claimed to be "the Son of God", he became afraid. Why is that? Well, it could be because from the time of Augustus Caesar, the Roman emperor was called 'the son of God'; and this might be interpreted, he perhaps felt, as a claim to be Tiberias' political rival. —And so he *feared* that label for political reasons.

But from the questions that follow, it seems like something quite different from that, and more like *superstition* in Pilate. Some commentators explain that it was not unusual for Romans to believe that some men were '*Special*', that they had, 'a spark of divinity in them', that they were 'divine men'. So even though Pilate was a skeptic, he's still human. And the older theologians have made the statement, and the point, that all of us have within us what's called, 'the seed of religion', or 'a sense of the divine' within us. —We have 'a sense of God about us.'

And that's true of this man, that's true of Pilate. Being created in the image of God, we all have that.—But men suppress it, (and we know that from Romans chapter 1) —and they cannot eliminate it, and it's within Pilate. And this charge that Jesus claimed to be God's Son alarmed him; for he has this 'sense of the divine'.

So Jesus is now this new threat to Pilate—and he's very concerned about this. He's alarmed. 'Who is he dealing with here?', he's wondering; 'Who is this that he has been beating?'

So, back inside the praetorium, he again questioned the Lord and said, "Where are You from?" (vs9). But this question was met with silence. Jesus had already revealed much to the governor: He'd already told Pilate that He was a King but that His kingdom "was not of this world", (Jn 18:36), and that, "Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice". (Jn 18:37). Pilate, (you'll remember), dismissed that with, "What is truth?" (Jn 18:38).

Well there's really nothing to say to such a person who is not interested in the truth—and who deliberately turns away from the offer of the truth. That is a dangerous place to be; for it is omitting the greatest opportunity, that of receiving and knowing God's Word. —And ultimately it results in God's silence and a life, "bound in shallows and miseries." John wrote, "Jesus gave him no answer." (vs9c).

Now that amazed Pilate. —That amazed him and it agitated him. He was the governor: He was a man of great authority, the greatest authority in the region. And he reminded Jesus that he was the power in Judea: "You do not speak to me?" he said. "Do You not know that I have authority to release You, and I have authority to crucify You?" (vs10). Jesus responded to that: Yes, Pilate did have power, not from the emperor, but from God; "You would have no authority over Me," He said, "unless it has been given you from above." (vs11).

Now that's a remarkable statement coming from a Jewish carpenter to a proud Roman governor. But He didn't speak as a carpenter—He spoke as God's Son, to inform Pilate of who He really is and who is really in control. Every governor and government has been 'given from above'. Daniel said of God, "He changes the times and the epochs; He removes kings and establishes kings." (Dan 2:21). He had established Rome and Tiberias—and Pilate as governor. God is sovereign!—not man.

Now that didn't free Pilate from responsibility. He was a free moral agent, accountable to God. And some day he will give an account of how he governed to the One who gave him that great authority.

But Jesus added, "...he who delivered Me to you has the greater sin." (vs11b). There are degrees of guilt depending on one's exposure to the truth. The more Light one has, the more guilt one has if he or she rejects it. The more responsibility one has with the greater amount of Light that one is given. And Caiaphas, who gave Jesus to Pilate, had rejected greater Light than Pilate had. —His guilt was greater.

Still, Pilate's guilt was real; and Pilate's guilt was great. And that warning was one last opportunity for him who was still "at the flood", still 'at the crossroads' as it were. But that was it—that was the end of the Lord's communication with Pontius Pilate. And His words made an impression on him because verse 12 states, "...Pilate made efforts to release Him."

But as he did he heard the crowd say, "If you release this Man, you are no friend of Caesar; everyone who makes himself out *to be* king opposes Caesar." (vs12b), —and that made his knees go weak. The thought of being out of favor with Caesar put fear into Pilate; Tiberias was paranoid and cruel and for entertainment he had guests at his villa on the Island of Capri tossed off a high cliff into the sea. The Jews had complained to Tiberias about Pilate at an earlier date; and he knew they would do it again: They would accuse Pilate of letting a rival to Caesar, one who claimed to be the Son of God, walk free. So he had to choose, Christ or Caesar? It was a choice between obedience to conscience—or obedience to fear and self-preservation.

The choice between Christ and Caesar is one that we all must make because in one sense the Jews were right; we cannot be a friend of Christ and a friend of Caesar. There's no middle ground. And for Pilate, the pressure of those words, "no friend of Caesar", was too difficult; it was too hard on him. He could not endure the pressure so he chose Caesar. He decided to condemn Christ on the charge of sedition.

It was late Friday morning, "the day of preparation for the Passover", (vs14), when verse 13 states, "...he brought Jesus out, and sat down on the judgment seat at the place called The Pavement...", (*Gabbatha* in Hebrew). "And then he said to the Jews, 'Behold your King!' " (vs14b). It was a way of taunting the priests and the people saying, 'This helpless prisoner of Rome is the only king you will ever have!' And again, while his meaning was wrong, his words were right: Jesus is the Messiah; Jesus is the anointed One; Jesus is the King of the Jews; Jesus is the King of kings.

But Pilate's statement, though said to mock them, gave Israel a final opportunity to receive their King. But instead the people cried out, "Away with *Him*, away with *Him*, crucify Him!" (vs15).

When Pilate said to them, "Shall I crucify your King?", the priests answered, "We have no king but Caesar.", (vs15b), and in so doing swore allegiance to a pagan ruler who actually did blaspheme in calling himself 'God's son'. They genuinely preferred Caesar over Christ, preferred a corrupt man, who would tax them, oppress them, and kill them. The one they preferred was the flawed man over the perfect Man, the Son of God, who gives life and real freedom. Now that's the insanity of sin—and the consequence of unbelief. Someone said, "When men will not have Christ to rule over them, they will be ruled by a tyrant."

But the Jewish mob made its choice; so Pilate gave in to them. Verse 16 states, "So he then handed Him over to them to be crucified."

In verse 14 John wrote that this happened "about the sixth hour." There are different ways of calculating that, but probably this means, 'toward noon'. It was the time when, the day before, the Passover lambs were slain in the temple. Now, with the feast of Passover finished, the true Passover lamb would be led to the slaughter, which indicates that all of this fit a very definite plan.

It was a great injustice, the greatest injustice of history—this whole proceeding against Jesus was. But it was not a mistake. Everything that happened was the fulfillment

of God's eternal plan and purpose for our salvation. And everything that was said pointed to Christ as the perfect Savior, the only Savior: From the Jewish charges that 'He claimed to be the Son of God', to Pilate's protests, "I find no guilt in Him." Even his mocking statements, like, "Behold your King!" —all of it was true.

And so the words brought forth at His trial were an unintentional, unwitting witness to Him as the Savior of the world—that He came into this world to save it by becoming the sacrifice for it. And while Pilate handed Him over to be crucified, Jesus really went by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God... 'Oh, that sounds like John Calvin!' No, it's the apostle Peter; Acts 2, verse 23. And it's what the church later prayed in Acts chapter 4, verse 28; that 'Herod and Pilate, the Gentiles and Israel did', "...whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur."

Do you think that this most important event in all of history could have occurred outside of the purview, and plan, and purpose of God Almighty—could have been the product of chance? Of course not, thankfully, otherwise it never would have happened.

But it did happen, because God ordained it from all eternity and providentially guided it to its successful end. And that would come three days later when the Lord Jesus Christ triumphed over the grave in His bodily resurrection—the proof that He successfully put away sin and wrath for His people. He rose the glorified Man. The shame of the cross and the crown of thorns were replaced by a crown of splendor and the heavenly throne when He ascended to the Father's right hand. Through His death He swallowed up death.

Now that's been the hope of mankind from the beginning. It's the hope expressed by Isaiah in chapter 25 of his book, where he praised God and prophesied it;

25 O Lord, You are my God;
I will exalt You, I will give thanks to Your name;
For You have worked wonders,
Plans *formed* long ago, with perfect faithfulness.

⁸ He will swallow up death for all time,
And the Lord God will wipe tears away from all faces.

Isaiah 25: 1, 8

As Paul put it later in Romans, chapter 8, verse 37, "We overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us." Now, that's true of every believer in Jesus Christ. What began in shame on Good Friday ended in glory Sunday morning—as it will for everyone who trusts in Christ.

But what about those who don't? What about those in this passage who took the opposite path, who followed their own counsel rather than trust in the Lord and leave their safety to Him?

What about the Jewish leaders? You'll remember in chapter 11, after the Lord raised Lazarus they expressed their fear that, because of Christ, 'The Romans would take away their place and nation.' (Jn 11:48). And so they plotted the death of our Lord; and declared Caesar their only king. And that's just what they got! They got Caesar for king; they got a tyrant for their ruler.

Then 40 years later, the Romans came in force, sacked Jerusalem, razed the temple to the ground, and carried the people off into slavery. The priests, the party of the Sadducees, were erased from history. "There is a way *which seems* right to a man," Solomon wrote, "But its end is the way of death." (Pro 14:12). Whenever people choose 'Caesar' over Christ, regardless of how right and safe that choice may seem at the time, they always choose slavery over freedom—they always choose death over life.

As for Pilate, who didn't invite any of this on himself and who woke up one morning and found himself engulfed in a storm, he had opportunity: He met the King and Savior—but didn't follow Him. Instead, after declaring Him innocent, he violated the Roman law, (that he was to uphold), and condemned the Lord to save himself from

Caesar's wrath. Well, he did that—but only temporarily. A few years later, he was recalled to Rome to face trial for his brutality as governor.

There are various traditions about Pilate's end: Some, that he was sent into exile and spent his last days in remorse and despair. But according to the ancient historian Eusebius, after returning to Rome, his life fell apart and it ended by his own hand—a victim of suicide.

What an opportunity he had. Not one of his own choosing, but of divine providence, when he spoke face to face with the Son of God, heard His voice—heard God's voice. There was the opportunity to follow. And if he had followed Him, if he'd followed conscience and acquitted Jesus, it wouldn't have prevented the crucifixion—for even from the cross, Christ would have protected him. Christ protects those who follow Him...and who knows, He may have exalted him to be one of the greatest men of history.

He was “at the flood”, as it were, but rather than follow the current that would “lead on to fortune”, eternal life and glory, he “Omitted” it, and the rest of his life was “bound in shallows and miseries”.

But though he is gone, Pilate still speaks out of the Scriptures, from the Gospel of Matthew, where he asked the crowd that Friday morning, "What shall I do with Jesus?" (Mat 27:22).

Maybe some of you here are considering that question for the very first time. Don't answer it as Pilate did. Don't respond like those in ‘The parable of the soils’, and be like ‘the seed that fell by the road, and the birds came and snatched it up.’ (Mat 13:4). "Today," the author of Hebrews says, "if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts." Three times he gives that warning. (Heb 3:7,15; 4:7).

If you're here this morning without Christ, don't harden your heart. Don't neglect the invitation. “Today”, come to Christ. We come through faith alone in Him: Faith alone, in Christ alone, as our Savior, as the Son of God. He died for sinners, bore the Father's

righteous wrath in our place, so that we who believe in Him would escape it and have forgiveness and eternal life.

That's the message. That's the Gospel given. But the devil is there to snatch it up as soon as it's given, so that you don't pay attention to it. Hear it. "Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your heart!" Hear God's Word. Take the current that leads on to fortune—and life everlasting. May God help you to do that.

And help each of us to live for Him; knowing, that as we're faithful to Him, He's faithful to us. In fact, He's faithful to us even when we fail Him. He's sovereign. He protects, and He blesses. May God help us to know that and to live in light of it.

(Closing prayer) Father, we, as Your people, do run the race every day. And it's full of challenges, challenges like those that we've considered, and that those around Christ at that time were not sufficient for. None of us is really sufficient for it, Father.

But through Your grace and Your mercy, You have made us new people in Christ. We are a new creation and we have not only new faculties, revived, restored faculties, but we have the Spirit of God within us to enable us to live a life that is honoring to You. And we live our best life as we live by faith.

So many in that crowd, (that we considered this morning), could not live by faith; they lived by sight. LORD, bless our faith; strengthen our faith that we would live obediently to You knowing that You are faithful to us...always faithful. We thank You for that; may we live well for You.

Now 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)