

**John 18:28-37 [NIV]**

*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?"*

*<sup>30</sup> "If he were not a criminal," they replied, "we would not have handed him over to you."*

*<sup>31</sup> Pilate said, "Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law."*

*"But we have no right to execute anyone," they objected.*

*<sup>32</sup> This took place to fulfill what Jesus had said about the kind of death he was going to die.*

*<sup>33</sup> Pilate then went back inside the palace, summoned Jesus and asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?"*

*<sup>34</sup> "Is that your own idea," Jesus asked, "or did others talk to you about me?"*

*<sup>35</sup> "Am I a Jew?" Pilate replied. "Your own people and chief priests handed you over to me. What is it you have done?"*

*<sup>36</sup> 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."*

*<sup>37</sup> "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."*

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The "Passion Place" we'll look at today comes from John chapter 18, John's account of Jesus at the residence of Pilate, the governor.

Other gospel writers call the place the "Praetorium," which is the Latin word for the "tent," or in this case, "the home and headquarters of the highest ranking official." This actually doesn't have any real bearing on the message, but you know, I've read and heard the word "praetorium" all my life and never really knew what it meant until this week—so, I had to work that in there.

Anyway, at this point, Jesus has been declared worthy of death by the Jewish religious court for the crime of blasphemy—his claim to be co-equal with God. Of course, both Matthew and Mark tell us plainly that even Caiaphas knew that the real reason the Jewish high priests wanted Jesus killed was envy.<sup>1</sup> But that remains the dirty little secret that no one involved would address.

Envy—wanting what someone else has—is a tremendously effective tool of the enemy; it can destroy a soul for eternity. Don't let envy get a foothold in your life.

Now, when Rome conquered a land or a people, as much as possible, they tried to leave the existing laws and justice systems in place. All of it had to come beneath Roman rule, of course, but that's why these religious courts (like the Sanhedrin) and Kings (like Herod) still existed. Rome had ultimate control certainly, but left

some self-governance in place for the sake of cultural peace.

Ostensibly, under Rome, those local religious courts could not, themselves, execute a person, although there is some question about that. Some think the Jews could have asked Pilate if they could kill Jesus, which would have then been done probably by stoning. But they didn't do that—partly because they wanted Him crucified, because that indicated that he was accursed of God; and maybe, too, because of their fear of the crowds who supported Jesus. It would look better for them if Rome actually did the dirty deed here.

And, of course, John saw that, and we understand that, as not just a human decision but as a fulfillment of prophecy that Jesus would be lifted up from the earth, and in doing so, people would be drawn to Him.<sup>2</sup> Jesus predicted that himself in John 12.

At any rate, a group of priests and scribes escort Jesus to Pontius Pilate, who was the governor of the province, and who had the certain authority to rid them of Jesus.

And what happens there at Pilate's place is a remarkable and intriguing collision of people.

You've heard the old philosophical puzzle, the question that asks, "What happens when an *unstoppable force* collides with an *immovable object*?" Well, in some ways, that's the sort of thing that happened here.

Here you have, first of all, two governing entities who despised each other, but who, at this moment particularly, need each other.

The chief priests, who held great influence among the people of the city, hated the Romans who ruled over them. They thought them dirty, irreligious and uncivilized. They thought Pilate, personally, an especially crude and violent man, and history tells us that was so. At times, Pilate so intentionally and cruelly provoked the people he governed, he was even censured by his own superiors in Rome for his actions.

So, the Jews were repulsed to have to even deal with Pilate; yet they needed Rome to accomplish their goal here. They could push the governor, but not too far, and they knew that.

Pilate, the governor, despised the Jewish religious establishment. He didn't understand their practices, he didn't understand their convictions, and he didn't care to. Like the many governors before him, Pilate found the Jews a very difficult people to govern. In at least that one way, Pilate was like God Himself, because the truth is, they were hard for anyone to govern—and especially hard for Rome, due to the major clash of cultures and values and expectations, not to mention the constant resentment of Roman rule that boiled under the surface of

<sup>1</sup> Matthew 27:18; Mark 15:10

<sup>2</sup> John 12:32

every Jewish person. It was like governing a case of explosives: you never knew what might set it off.

Yet Pilate needed the Jewish leaders too, because he wanted to keep his job. He knew that, above all else, his superiors in Rome valued peace and order, especially in this historically troublesome place.

So, although he despised them, Pilate knew his success and livelihood – and maybe even his life – were, in some way, tied to these priests.

That is the context for this, so called, “trial.” Both groups despised the other, but both needed the other in this moment.

Now, is that politics for you, or what? That, right there, is precisely how bad things happen to good people, good causes, good ideas. When the people in charge seek to serve themselves first, good for all is rarely the result.

And in our broken world, public service almost always turns into gross politics, especially at high levels. There’s a draw to that kind of power, and then, once in hand, a draw to use it for one’s own advantage, that very few people avoid once elected or appointed to office.

That’s why politics has always made strange bedfellows. (You kids who don’t know that that phrase means, you can talk to your parents about that.)

We see this strained, yet co-dependent sort of relationship working itself out in the course of this hearing – this trial.

The Jews, since it was close to Passover, didn’t want to even enter Pilate’s house, because that would make them ceremonially unclean and unable to easily participate in the feast. The Law said they could be in his courtyard, but not cross the threshold.

Notice how careful they were about ceremonial cleanliness and yet how blind they were to the gross injustice they were committing against Jesus? This is what Jesus meant when he accused them of straining at a gnat, but swallowing a camel.<sup>3</sup>

Regardless, this forced Pilate to keep coming outside, then go back inside to deal with Jesus, then come back outside, then go back inside – on and on it goes.

When you think about it, it’s remarkable that Pilate even did this. It surely seemed absolutely ridiculous to him. He surely thought, “I’m the big kahuna here. If they want to talk to me, let them come in here and talk to me!”

Yet even here, you see, Pilate accommodated them, because, due to Passover, Jerusalem was filled with people – Jews, pilgrims – from all over Israel. And Passover is the celebration of their nation’s victory over their Egyptian captors that happened centuries before. So, Passover not only stirred up the worship and praise of God in the Jews; it also tended to stir up their feelings of nationalism and their resentment for non-Hebrew governance. All of this means that if ever there was a possibility for some sort of violent uprising in Jerusalem, it could be now – and that was the last thing Pilate wanted.

That’s why we have this dance going on here.

These two groups of people were both powerful, and both, to some degree, held the welfare of the other in their hands, and they knew it. That’s why they were rude to each other, but not overly so.

Pilate found Jesus to be innocent of anything worthy of death. He declares it three different times, in fact.

Of course, “blasphemy,” the priests’ original charge against Jesus, meant nothing to Pilate, and the priests knew it. That’s why they wouldn’t even declare their charge against Jesus in the first place, and that’s why they answered Pilate quite curtly there in verse 30, *“If he were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you.”*

In other words, “You don’t need specifics – our assessment ought to be enough for you.”

Pilate, though, could see that Jesus was no real threat, and being a man who had faced charges of cruelty in the past, he likely felt – and hoped – that simply having Jesus flogged would satisfy these annoying priests.

But you see these priests were something like sharks – in that, seeing a bit of blood only made them want more.

And so, they escalated their argument. Further on, in chapter 19, verse 12, they drop the bomb on Pilate, *“If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be king opposes Caesar.”*

This was the argument that pushed Pilate over the edge, because he knew, just as the priests knew, that he could never explain to his superiors his defense of a Jew who claimed to be king.

That’s why Pilate dwells so long on the king thing as he talks with Jesus. He didn’t understand anything but earthly kingdoms, and so he couldn’t, especially at Passover, allow a Jew who claimed to be king to go on. Letting Jesus go would seem to make Pilate an accomplice to sedition against Rome.

And the priests knew they had Pilate right where they wanted him, and that he’d have to give in.

And he did.

And that is the maddening truth of politics – government and leaders in general: when leaders like both the priests and Pilate here are out only for their own sakes, for their own good, for their own benefit, everyone else – everyone around and beneath – loses.

That’s why the Bible says so much about the necessary character of those in leadership.

That’s why the founders of this nation *implicitly, certainly,* but also *explicitly* in many places, suggest that the only way a representative republic like they were proposing would ever work – would ever endure – is if those elected as its leaders were people of the highest character – people who were more concerned with the public good than with their own will or enrichment or success.

The only way a people can be free is if those entrusted with leadership care as much about the good and the success of *others* as they do about their *own* good and their own success.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 23:24

And that's an explicitly Christian ethos – arising out of Judaism. It was imagined in Judaism, but Christianity, through the power of the Spirit, makes that actually possible.

You see, no person bent on pleasing themselves only can ever endure.

And no nation led by that sort of person can ever endure. History is full of examples.

If only our own nation could learn from history. But we haven't, and the truth is that if somehow we did, we'd be the first and only nation to do so.

And yet, an amazing and totally ironic thing is also going on here in this passage.

I love "divine irony." I love it when God takes something and just flips it on its head.

The amazing and ironic thing about this passage is how God acts in His redeeming way *precisely through* the sinful self-preoccupation of both Pilate and these Jewish leaders.

Even while they are here attacking each other, berating each other, bouncing off of each other, and looking out for their own best, God uses the very event of it to bring the hope of redemption to His world.

God uses the selfishness of these leaders as the very tool that brings the possibility of forgiveness for this very sort of self-absorbed, "my-way-or-the-highway," kind of thinking and behavior.

God uses one of the most egregious examples of selfishness in the history of the cosmos, to make forgiveness possible – for selfish people.

People like us – people like you and me.

You say, "I'm not selfish."

I say, "Oh yes you are."

Scripture says you are – we all are. We were born that way: born focusing inward, born preferring ourselves. We were born demanding our own way, just like Pilate – just like the priests here.

And so, how ironic is it that through their success at selfishness, the world can now be not only forgiven for it, but even set free from it?

That's what Jesus' death accomplished.

Through the self-centered frenzy of those religious and civil leaders, Jesus ushered in the opportunity for salvation from the very things they practiced.

Their guilt provides us the possibility of innocence.

Their blood-stained hands make clean hands possible for you and me.

Their dirty hearts helped give us the possibility of clean hearts: a clean heart: a pure heart, a heart that wants the best for others even if it costs us. That's possible for any who would choose – who would follow, who would exalt with their lives – the very same Jesus that these guys condemned.

You see, this is the power of God:

to change a situation,

to bring hope to a hopeless circumstance,

to completely transform a person.

In the end, neither the governor nor the priests were unstoppable forces or immovable objects in this encounter. Oh, they thought they were, but neither were, really.

The fact is, Jesus was both.

Even Pilate recognized it when he asked Jesus, "*Why will you not even answer me? Don't you realize I have the power to either free or crucify you?*"

Jesus simply answered, "*You would have no power over me if it were not given you from above.*"

You see, Jesus was the immovable object in the room – nothing was going to push Him around.

And Jesus was also the unstoppable force; nothing would keep Him from accomplishing His purpose – to save people like us from ourselves and our own sinful hearts.

That is Jesus' business here today: to save any who will trust and follow Him from a sinful, self-absorbed heart.

But even beyond that, He'd like to change hearts here today – to make us all the kind of people who put the good of others first, before even our own.

Wouldn't you love to live in a world where everyone was more concerned about the good of their neighbor than about their own good?

That's what Jesus made possible. That's God's Kingdom, and it's here now – a preview of Heaven, right here on earth.

If you'd like Jesus to do a work in your heart, why don't you ask Him to do that today? To save you out of the selfishness of the priests and the Pilates of the world, and give you a heart like Jesus' heart – concerned for others' good.

Closing Song: *Jesus Paid It All*

Benediction:

All that we are – every good thing about us – we owe to Jesus.

And every place within us where struggles still exist, we can give to Jesus, and He will redeem and transform them.

That's what God does for those who give themselves to Him in love: He works all things – all things – together for good.

May we all know, and participate fully, in both the saving and the renewing work of Jesus.