

## WHAT IS TRUTH? - JOHN 18:28-19:16

### Interviews of Jesus #9

Just over 200 years ago, Joseph Samuels of Sydney, Australia was arrested, accused of stealing a bag of gold and silver coins. Because a policeman was killed in the process, the charge of murder was made against him and a trial was hastily put together. Despite his protests of innocence, he was tried, convicted and sentenced to be hanged in September of 1803. Up to the very last moment before his execution, Joseph continued to proclaim his innocence, even to the point where he pointed out the person whom he thought was guilty of the crime in the crowd gathered to witness his hanging. Isaac Simmonds, the man who was fingered by Joseph, took exception to the accusation and got into a shouting match with the condemned man. As Samuels was lead to the gallows, the two continued to exchange curses with each other. Finally, the hangman intent on getting the execution over, slipped a noose around Joseph Samuels' neck and put a hood over his head so he couldn't see or talk anymore. Samuels then stood silently on the cart apparently accepting his fate. The driver snapped his whip and the team of horses pulled the cart away. But the hangman's knot came undone and the condemned man fell to the ground unharmed. The attending police stood Joseph Samuels back up on his feet again, ordered the cart to be pulled back under the noose while the hangman tied another noose, this time making sure it was good and tight. He then went through the whole procedure again, standing the condemned up on the cart and fitting the noose around his neck. But this time when the horses pulled the cart from under Samuels, the knot at the top of the rope came undone and he fell again to the ground unharmed. As you can imagine, now the crowd was becoming restless. But the police and hangman were determined to carry out their mission, so they again stood Joseph Samuels back onto his feet, ordered the cart to be pulled back under the noose and tied the knot to the gallows good and tight. They then stood the condemned man back on the cart a third time and slipped the noose around his neck. As the horses pulled the cart from under Joseph Samuels the third time, the hangman's rope snapped right in two and he fell a third time to the ground unharmed. The crowd now realizing that they were witnessing a miraculous intervention, demanded that Joseph Samuels' life be spared. Not knowing what else to do, the police returned the prisoner back to his jail cell. They then reopened the case and began to reevaluate the evidence that they had accumulated. In the process, a new witness was found who implicated Isaac Simmonds in the robbery and murder. After the new trial, Simmonds was convicted and condemned and Joseph Samuels was freed. Simmonds execution went exactly as planned.

It would be wonderful if perfect justice occurred every time there was an arrest and trial, wouldn't it? It would be ideal if no innocent person ever had to suffer unjustly and no guilty person ever beat the system. In a perfect world, there would be a miraculous intervention every single time an injustice was about to occur.

But we all know that we live in an imperfect world, distorted by sin and wickedness. Sometimes innocent children die in the explosion of a terrorist attack. Sometimes the unscrupulous businessman does get away with siphoning off the company's profits. Sometimes people even get away with committing murder.

We must remember that ours is not the only time in history when people have suffered unjustly. In fact, of all the justice systems that people have lived under down through human history, ours with all of its imperfections is one of the best. After sin entered the world through that temptation in the Garden of Eden, Satan became the god of this age. Just as God is committed to justice because He is righteous in all of his character, so Satan is committed to injustice because He is wicked in all of his character. So the enemy of all that is right and good promotes injustice in this world and delights whenever there is a perversion of that which is right and good.

There has never been a greater illustration of injustice than that found in the interview that we just heard this morning. The only man who had never done anything illegal or ethically wrong in his life was condemned to the most inhumane execution that was available at the time.

David McKenna in his Communicator's Commentary on Mark lists 9 specific injustices in the trial of Jesus Christ that should have rendered it to be a mistrial under both Jewish and Roman law. His arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane was illegal because it was before a specific charge had been made against Jesus, according to its own rules the Sanhedrin was prohibited in considering a capital offense charge during a feast time, it was illegal to make a final judgment on a charge at night or outside of the Sanhedrin's chambers, a death sentence required the unanimous testimony of at least 2 independent witnesses, Caiaphas the high priest put aside his sacred trust as being the impartial moderator and assumed the role of prosecutor asking leading questions of Jesus, after failing to lead Jesus into incriminating himself Caiaphas even resorts to the tactic of coercing and leading false witnesses, Caiaphas manufactures a charge of blasphemy without any supporting evidence or witnesses, the Sanhedrin breaks its own rule of waiting 24 hours between the hearing and the sentence in Jesus' case, and there was a clear violation of the human rights that the Sanhedrin was so proud of with the continuing beating and torturing of Christ.

During these past Sunday mornings we have been looking at various interviews that the Lord Jesus Christ had while he walked the surface of this earth. The interview that we conclude our series with comes right at the end of his earthly life. It was the interview that Jesus had with Pontius Pilate that was part of his trial just before his execution. It is fitting that we look at this interview as we begin this week when we commemorate the atoning, sacrificial death of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The trial of Jesus was carried out in several stages. We must compare each of the gospel accounts to get the full picture. After Judas Iscariot betrayed Jesus to the authorities in the Garden of Gethsemane, the

Lord Jesus Christ was taken to the house of the former high priest, Annas, for questioning. Annas was the father-in-law of Caiaphas who was the current High Priest - and had been the former High Priest. Caiaphas the current High Priest was the next stop on Christ's itinerary that night. After the hearings before Annas and Caiaphas, it was determined by the Sanhedrin who were there questioning Jesus that he deserved to die. The problem for the Sanhedrin was found in the fact that while they were the ones who desired the death of Jesus, they had no legal authority to condemn him to death. A person could only be legally condemned to death by the Roman authorities at this time. So Jesus was sent from the high priest's house to Pontius Pilate who was the Roman governor of Judea. Now Pilate's questioning of Jesus took place in 2 segments as we will see in a moment. During the first segment, Pilate learned that Jesus had been raised in Nazareth and therefore could be considered to be a Galilean. Since Herod, who was the Roman ruler over the Galilean Region, happened to be in Jerusalem at the time, Pilate had Jesus sent over to the place where he was staying in an attempt to relieve himself of the responsibility of dealing with the Christ. Herod was curious to see Jesus and hoped that he would perform some miracle for him, but when Jesus refused to respond to his questions, Herod quickly tired of dealing with Jesus and sent him back to Pilate again. It was at this time that Jesus and Pilate had their second conversation. It was after this that Pilate released the Lord Jesus Christ to the Sanhedrin to be executed by crucifixion. So in the space of about 9 hours - from the middle of the night to early the next day - Jesus went from the Garden of Gethsemane to Annas' house to Caiaphas' house to Pilate's palace to the place where Herod was temporarily staying in Jerusalem back to Pilate's house and then on to the place of execution at Golgotha, the place of the skull. Of all of these meetings, the most critical legally were the times Jesus met with Pontius Pilate - for these would have constituted the formal trial that would have been recognized by the Roman Government. The interview that we are looking at this morning was a part of that very trial that Jesus endured.

Now John records the 2 conversations that Jesus had with Pilate. He does not speak about Christ going to see Herod - Luke adds these details to the account. But it is clear from a comparison of the gospels that the 2 conversations between Jesus and Pilate are separated by the Lord meeting with Herod.

Pilate's concern during that first conversation was whether or not Jesus claimed to be a king of the Jews. Pilate's concern during that second conversation was whether or not Jesus claimed to be the Son of God. And the change in Pilate's attitude shows the critical difference between these 2 approaches to the Lord Jesus Christ. Let's look at these 2 parts of the interview that the Lord Jesus had with Pilate this morning.

1. Even though the major accusation against Jesus was that he was a blasphemer, claiming to make himself equal with God, the Jewish authorities realized that this religious accusation would not carry as much weight with Pilate as a political one. So they presented the Lord Jesus Christ to Pilate as one who claimed to

be the king of the Jews the first time.

There is a seemingly minor detail that John brings out that reveals the potential of self-deceit and hypocrisy in the human heart. When these Jewish religious leaders came to Pilate's palace, they were very careful not to enter the palace grounds because they did not want to become ceremonially unclean by going into a Gentile's place of dwelling. The feast of the Passover was here and they wanted to be able to observe it - they knew that they could only eat of the Passover meal if they were ceremonially clean. Here they were involved in the execution of God's one and only Son, the sacrificial lamb of God who was only pictured in every Passover lamb that had ever been eaten, and they were concerned about the outward appearances so that they might remain ceremonially clean so they might eat the Passover meal. It is amazing what the human mind is able to rationalize even to the point of committing cold-blooded murder and convincing oneself that it is the righteous and godly thing to do.

When Pilate learned that Jesus claimed to be the King of the Jews, he was only humored. This certainly posed no threat to him. If Jesus were a king of the Jews, he obviously was a king without a following - the powerful religious leaders were the ones demanding his death. And even if the Jews presented a legitimate king, what could they possibly hope to accomplish against the mighty Romans. Pilate was the Roman governor. He had all of the authority and power of the Roman Army behind him. The soldiers that he had at his immediate command could quickly dispel any Jewish insurrection. The Jews didn't even have a standing army. They didn't have any real power. So Pilate approaches Jesus in a patronizing, political way at first. When the Lord speaks of truth, Pilate answers *What is Truth?* You see, in the political realm there is no absolute truth. Whatever works is expedient. Pragmatism is the rule of the day. If one needs to compromise his principles in order to satisfy people and also get what he wants, he is acclaimed as a wise person. And that is just what Pilate was in the midst of doing here. Keeping the Jewish leaders happy. Playing his political role. This king of the Jews posed no real threat to him. So he toyed with him for a while, long enough to realize that he really wasn't guilty of anything deserving execution. Then in a twinge of his nearly seared conscience, Pilate tried to get off the hook by sending him over to see Herod, the ruler of the Galilee region. He, of course, had Jesus beaten first so that the Jewish leaders would think that he was serious about this matter. But it is clear from his actions that he didn't really take this one who had a kingdom in another world very seriously at this point.

2. It was only as Jesus came to him the second time that Pilate realized that he hadn't really understood the claims that Jesus was making. When he started to get the full picture, his attitude changed dramatically. When he realized that Jesus was claiming to be the Son of God, he became afraid. Perhaps it was that dream that Pilate's wife had that scared her and caused her to warn him. Perhaps Pilate began to

realize that he had been asking the wrong question. When Jesus was talking about truth and Pilate asked *What is Truth*, Pilate had been operating in the political realm, an area in which he was an expert. But he was talking with a person who claimed to be the embodiment of truth. Jesus had claimed to be the way, the truth and the life just a few hours before (John 14:6). Perhaps Pilate should be asking himself the question *Who is truth?* This was obviously very unnerving to Pilate because the Lord Jesus Christ took this interview out of Pilate's realm.

When Pilate tried to return it to his own comfort zone by threatening Jesus - *don't you realize that I have power either to free you or to crucify you?* Jesus wouldn't allow him to stay there as he replied back *You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above.* It was clear to Pilate that this bound prisoner was taking control of this situation, and this was very unnerving to him - for Pilate began to realize in his heart that what Christ was claiming might very well be true.

Pontius Pilate faced a very critical crossroad that day. Should he do what he felt was expedient or should he do what he knew to be the right thing? Ultimately, Pilate returned to become the politician that he was. For he didn't feel that his career could survive another crisis of this magnitude. You see, what the Bible doesn't tell us but what we know from some extra-Biblical sources is that Pontius Pilate had just had a huge controversy with these Jewish leaders over hanging some golden shields in his palace. The shields had human figures on them which were offensive to these Jewish leaders - they felt that Pilate had brought idolatry into their city of Jerusalem. These leaders had appealed to Caesar in Rome. And even though the Roman Caesar didn't take their criticism seriously, he had let Pilate know that he had better keep things quiet over in Palestine for a while. And now, a potential uprising over a person who claimed to be a King of the Jews and the Son of God? Pilate was afraid Caesar might not understand and he might lose his governorship jeopardizing his political career. So when the Jewish leaders threatened to appeal to Caesar again - if you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar's - Pilate felt trapped by his own political ambitions. But what a personal cost Pilate paid choosing expediency over his conscience. For this man who ultimately would have a very brief political career would be forever identified with the greatest travesty of justice ever known to the human race.

We know from Roman history that Pilate's political career was short-lived. After Tiberius Caesar died, Pontius Pilate was recalled to Rome when the new administration took over. He had only served 10 years as governor of Judea, but he was relieved of any further government position and forced into an early retirement. There are many traditions as to how Pilate spent the remainder of his life. The best that we have is that he became insane, compulsively washing his hands over and over, and that he eventually took his own life in suicide. Amazingly, because of this one interview, this otherwise insignificant Roman governor

who only served in political office for 10 years would become among the most infamous of all Roman rulers in world history.

There are many in the world today who are very comfortable considering Jesus Christ on the level that Pilate maintained in that first section of the interview. They are willing to consider Christ's claims in a world of relativism where truth can be twisted and disputed to fulfill one's own ends. They are willing to negotiate with God, strike up some mutual compromise. If I do my best and God helps me with the rest, I can negotiate a ticket to heaven with God. You see, a person who approaches God on this level really sees God as an equal. And often, as Pilate, they try to assert themselves into the power role, setting forth the conditions of the compromise in their own minds, and convincing themselves that the deal has got to be good enough for God to take it. But, like Pilate, any person who tries to take this position hasn't even begun yet to see who Jesus Christ really is. For the Lord Jesus Christ came as the one and only Son of God. And when we recognize that single fact, we also realize that there is only one response that we can have possibly have that can be both pleasing and acceptable to God. We cannot negotiate with God. His perfection will not allow Him to compromise with us. We can only recognize his rightful place in our lives and allow him the total control and power that is rightfully His.

The claims of the Lord Jesus Christ were crystal clear. He claimed to be the perfect Son of God, equal with God. He claimed to be the only way to the father - *I am the way, the truth and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me. John 14:6.* Everyone of us must deal with that claim. If that claim is not true - Jesus either willfully deceived his followers or he was delusional, believing himself to be something that he was not. But if his claim is true - as his eyewitness followers believed with all of their hearts - then He deserves to be Lord in our lives. As our creator and redeemer, we must bow before him and give Him His rightful place in our lives. Are you still asking the question *What is Truth?* this morning, or have you come to a personal relationship with the one *Who is Truth?*