



Pilate Before Jesus Part 2
John 19:1-16
March 20, 2022

Main Idea: Jesus is the true King who exposes the hearts of people by his substitutionary death.

Personal Study Guide

READ ENTIRE TEXT: JOHN 19:1-16

Highlight – What stands out?

*Try reading this text from two different translations (Examples: ESV, NIV, NASB, NKJV, CSB). As you read, compare and contrast between the two as you answer these questions.

1. Who are the characters in the text? What does each character do and say?
2. Is there anything surprising to you about the characters in this text?
3. Do you have any questions about the characters or their actions in this text?
4. What stands out to you about each character?

Explain – What does this mean?

1. Why is it ironic that the Pharisees told Pilate that he was not a friend of Caesar if he pardoned Jesus? Look at 19:15-16 to see this irony even further.
2. How does Jesus inform Pilate about God's sovereignty? What does Jesus' interaction with Pilate reveal about Pilate's motivation and posture towards Jesus' claims?
3. Try to recite or write down from memory the purpose statement of John from John 20:31. How does this passage fulfill this passage?

4. Read Psalm 33. How does this psalm speak to the power struggle between Jesus, the Pharisees, and Pilate?

Apply – How does this change me?

1. What does it look like in today's world to endure suffering?
2. How do you deal with God's will when it does not line up with your own personal plan for your life?

Respond – What's my next step?

1. How can you pray to be more accepting of God's will for your life when it doesn't line up with your will at first?
2. How are you tempted (or how are people tempted) to align with worldly ideas and leaders in order to get what we want?

Commentary

TAKEN FROM THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOHN BY D.A. CARSON

19:1. Since Pilate has already declared Jesus to be innocent (18:38), at first sight it is surprising to read, *Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged (emastigōsen)*. The context shows, however, that this is nothing but a fresh strategy to set Jesus free (*cf.* notes on vv. 4–6). Pilate orders a flogging which, he thinks, will meet the Jews' demand that Jesus be punished, and perhaps evoke a little sympathy for him as well, and thus dissipate the clamour for his crucifixion. The scene parallels Luke 23:13–16: Pilate tells the Jewish officials that Jesus 'has done nothing to deserve death', and concludes, 'Therefore, I will punish (*paideusas*) him and then release him.'

Perhaps nowhere more than in the sufferings of the Master does it seem distracting and ungrateful to focus on perceived difficulties in relating John to the Synoptic Gospels. But reflection on some of these questions helps us to understand a little better just what he endured. The question, then, is how this flogging relates to the witness of Mark 15:15 (*cf.* Mt. 27:26), which affirms that Pilate had Jesus flogged (*phragellōsas*) *after* the capital sentence was passed.

Flogging administered by the Romans could take one of three forms: the *fustigatio*, a less severe beating meted out for relatively light offences such as hooliganism, and often accompanied by a severe warning; the *flagellatio*, a brutal flogging administered to criminals whose offences were more serious; and the *verberatio*, the most terrible scourging of all, and one that was always associated with other punishments, including crucifixion. In this last form, the victim was stripped and tied to a post, and then beaten by several torturers (in the Roman provinces they were soldiers) until they were exhausted, or their commanding officer called them off. For victims who, like Jesus, were neither Roman citizens nor soldiers, the favoured instrument was a whip whose leather thongs were fitted with pieces of bone or lead or other metal. The beatings were so savage that the victims sometimes died. Eyewitness records report that such brutal scourgings could leave victims with their bones and entrails exposed.

What beating, then, did Pilate administer to Jesus? There appear to be two possibilities.

(1) The scourging was the most brutal, the *verberatio*, Mark's *phragellōsas* (Mk. 15:15), commonly meted out to a victim about to be crucified to weaken and dehumanize him. But if John is referring to the same beating, then it is necessary to follow Blinzler (p. 334), who argues that the aorist participle in Mk. 15:15 refers to a scourging administered to Jesus *before* Pilate delivered the death sentence. Thus the discrepancy in time between John and

Matthew/Mark is cleared up. But for three reasons, this is quite unlikely. First, when an aorist participle (like Mark's *phragellōsas*) follows the finite verb on which it depends (*paredōken*, 'handed him over'), it usually refers to a succeeding event; second, it is hard to imagine any Roman prefect administering the *verberatio* before sentencing; and third, it is so brutal that it ill accords with the theme of Luke and of John, that Pilate at first found Jesus innocent and merely wanted to administer enough punishment to be able to appease Jewish officialdom and then let Jesus go.

(2) It is better to follow Sherwin-White (pp. 27–28), who argues that the flogging threatened in Luke and reported here in John is the *fustigatio*, the least severe form, and was intended partly to appease the Jews and partly to teach Jesus a lesson (*cf.* Luke's *paideusas*; John's *emastigōsen*, 'had [him] flogged', is a more generic description) for being something of a trouble-maker. The chronology of Luke and John is correct. But this means that Jesus received a second scourging, the wretched *verberatio*, after the sentence of crucifixion was passed. This would hasten death, and the nearness of the special Sabbath of that week provided the officials with some pressure to ensure that the agony of crucifixion, which could go on for days, would not be permitted to run on too long (Jn. 19:31–33). This also explains why he was too weak to carry his own cross very far (*cf.* notes on v. 17).

19:2–3. At one level the cruelty depicted in these verses is nothing other than barracks vulgarity. Probably the 'crown of thorns' was twisted together from the long spikes of the date palm, fashioned into a mock imitation of the radiate crowns oriental god-kings were depicted as wearing. The intention of the soldiers was rough mockery, but the long thorns (up to twelve inches) added to the blood and the pain. The 'purple robe' was probably a military cloak flung around Jesus' shoulders, mocking dress-up for a royal robe (*cf.* Carson, *Matt*, p. 573). The soldiers line up to pay their homage, but as they bend the knee and cry *Hail, king of the Jews!* they strike him in the face (for the word *rhapisma*, *cf.* notes on 18:22). *Cf.* Isaiah 50:6.

At the same time, however, this scene provides indirect evidence that the charge the Sanhedrin preferred against Jesus before Pilate is that he claimed to be the king of the Jews—from their perspective, a messianic pretender, and in Pilate's eyes (they hoped), a rebel against Caesar. At a still deeper level, John is writing ironically: once again Jesus' opponents, in this case Gentiles, speak better than they know (*cf.* 11:49–52), for Jesus is in truth the king of Israel (1:49; 3:3, 5; 18:36; Dauer, pp. 262–263).

19:4–5. *Once more* Pilate steps out of the *praetorium* (*cf.* 18:28) to address the Jews. He delivers his verdict (*cf.* 18:38), and then dramatically presents Jesus—a sorry sight, swollen, bruised, bleeding from those cruel and ridiculous thorns. Aware as he is that it is *the people* who must choose the man who will receive the governor's amnesty, he presents Jesus as a beaten, harmless and rather pathetic figure to make their choice of him as easy as possible. In his dramatic utterance *Here is the man!* (in Latin, *Ecce homo!*), Pilate is speaking

with dripping irony: here is the man you find so dangerous and threatening: can you not see he is harmless and somewhat ridiculous? If the governor is thereby mocking Jesus, he is ridiculing the Jewish authorities with no less venom. But the Evangelist records the event with still deeper irony: here indeed is the Man, the Word made flesh (1:14). All the witnesses were too blind to see it at the time, but this Man was displaying his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, in the very disgrace, pain, weakness and brutalization that Pilate advanced as suitable evidence that he was a judicial irrelevance.

19:6. The chief priests (*cf.* notes on 7:32) and their officials cannot be so easily placated, partly, no doubt, because of their animus against Jesus, and partly because they resent Pilate's mockery of them. They will not be satisfied by anything other than Jesus' death. Indeed, they are aware that the charge they are bringing against him can have but one outcome if he is found guilty. Anyone not a Roman citizen found guilty of sedition could expect crucifixion. Recent memory provided many examples both in Judea and in surrounding territories; only a slightly longer perspective would call to mind Alexander Jannaeus who in 88 BC crucified 800 rebels (*Jos., Bel. i. 97*). And so they cry, *Crucify! Crucify!*

Discovering that his stratagem has failed, Pilate responds with dismissive indignation and disgust: *You take him and crucify him*. The pronouns have emphatic force: *You take him ... I find no basis for a charge against him* (*cf.* 18:38; 19:4). Of course, this is not a formal transfer of his prerogatives to the Jewish court (*cf.* 18:31), as the reply of the Jews in the next verse demonstrates; rather, it is a sarcastic taunt: You bring him to me for trial but you will not accept my judgment.

19:7. At one level this does not report a change in the charge brought against Jesus, for as we have seen (*cf.* notes on 18:33), in the mind of the Jewish authorities Jesus' messianic pretensions were both religious and political in nature. They have judged it advisable, in their initial approach to Pilate, to stress the political elements in the case, thinking that these would prove most damaging to Jesus in the eyes of the Roman governor. Finding their strategy slipping away, they emphasize the religious elements—and thus expose their deepest motives. A Roman prefect was not only responsible for keeping the peace but, within the constraints of Rome's priorities, he was to maintain local law as well. So the Jews expound the point of law they want Pilate to grasp. *We have a law* does not refer to Torah as a whole but to one statute, presumably Leviticus 24:16: 'anyone who blasphemes the name of the Lord must be put to death. The entire assembly must stone him. Whether an alien or native-born, when he blasphemes the Name, he must be put to death.' By the time the Mishnah was codified, about ad 200, this statute was interpreted to mean that an essential element in blasphemy was the actual articulation of God's ineffable name (*Mishnah Sanhedrin 7:5; Kerithoth 1:1-2*), but apparently no such restriction was in force in Jesus' day. The charge of blasphemy figures largely in the trial before Caiaphas (*Mk. 14:55-64 par.*), so it is unsurprising to

find it alluded to here. Moreover, in the Fourth Gospel the charge of blasphemy has been a rising theme (e.g. 5:18; 8:58, 59; 10:33, 36).

The language of the Jewish officials, 'he claimed to be *the Son of God*', almost sounds as if the claim itself was sufficient to presume guilt of blasphemy. In many contexts that was demonstrably untrue. The anointed king of Israel was sometimes referred to as God's Son in the Old Testament (Pss. 2:7; 89:26–27), and in some intertestamental sources 'Son of God' is parallel to 'Messiah' (4Q *Florilegium*; cf. notes on 1:49; *NIDNTT* 3. 637). But Jesus' opponents rightly recognize that as he uses the title there are overtones not only of messiahship but of sharing the rights and authority of God himself (cf. 1:34; 5:19–30).

19:8. When Pilate heard this slight revision of the charge the Sanhedrin was preferring against Jesus, *he was even more afraid. Why even more (mallon)?* It is possible to read some kind of fear or at least begrudging awe into Pilate's question in 18:38 ('What is truth?'), but the flow of the narrative up to his point makes Pilate cynical and blunt, and more interested in putting the Jewish authorities in their place than in standing up for justice. Indeed, the Greek word *mallon* ('more' or 'even more' or 'rather') could be taken two other ways. Verse 8 may mean that when Pilate heard the revised charge 'he become afraid *rather than* (complying with their wish)'. As cynical as many senior Roman officials were, many of them were also deeply superstitious. To a Jewish ear, the charge that Jesus claimed to be the Son of God would be taken as a messianic pretension, and perhaps also, in the light of the continuing debate between Jesus and Jewish officials, as a blasphemous excuse to claim prerogatives that belong to God alone; but to a Graeco-Roman ear, the charge sounded quite different. It had nothing to do with blasphemy, and presented no threat to the Roman Empire; rather, it placed Jesus in an ill-defined category of 'divine men', gifted individuals who were believed to enjoy certain 'divine' powers. If Jesus was a 'son of God' in this sense, Pilate might well feel a twinge of fear; he had just had Jesus whipped. Moreover, the Greek word *mallon* may simply have relative rather than comparative force: *i.e.* Pilate 'was very much afraid'.

19:9. Back inside the *praetorium* (cf. 18:28), Pilate seeks to alleviate his own fear by questioning Jesus about his origins: *Where do you come from?* Jesus gave him no answer, a silence which is a Johannine parallel to Mark 14:61; 15:5 (cf. Is. 53:7). Neither in John nor in Mark is the silence absolute: in both, Jesus speaks again. But the question as Pilate phrases it cannot rightly be answered with a word, a phrase, a clause—at least, not if Pilate is to understand it. And Pilate has shown no interest in real understanding: he has contemptuously dismissed Jesus' claim to testify to the truth (18:37–38), so why should Jesus think the governor is any more prepared for truth now? What answer, long or brief, could Jesus have provided for the Roman prefect who is more interested in political manoeuvring than in justice, who displays superstitious fear but no remorse, who (in the next verses) still struts on the stage of human power but is enslaved by the political threats of his frenzied opposition?

19:10. Jesus' silence irritates Pilate. That silence was much worse than the modern crime of contempt of court, for as long as Pilate held the imperial commission he retained in his power both sweeping executive power and, for non-citizens, final judicial authority. Pilate interprets Jesus' silence as at best stupidity, at worse a baiting sullenness.

19:11. Behind Pilate's 'power' (*exousia*, 'authority'), however, Jesus discerns the hand of God. Typical of biblical compatibilism, even the worst evil cannot escape the outer boundaries of God's sovereignty—yet God's sovereignty never mitigates the responsibility and guilt of moral agents who operate under divine sovereignty, while their voluntary decisions and their evil rebellion never render God utterly contingent (e.g. Gn. 50:19–20; Is. 5:10ff.; Acts 4:27–28). Especially in writing of events that lead up to the cross, New Testament writers are bound to see the hand of God bringing all things to their dramatic purpose (cf. Carson, 'OT', esp. 247–248), no matter how vile the secondary causalities may be; for the alternatives are unthinkable. If God merely outwits his enemies, whose evil sets both the agenda and the pace, then the mission of the Son to die for fallen sinners is reduced to a mere after-thought; if God's sovereignty capsizes all human responsibility, then it is hard to see why the mission of the Son should be undertaken at all, since in that case there are no sins for the Lamb of God to take away.

Pilate's authority, then, was given to him *from above* (*anōthen*; cf. notes on 3:3, 5). *Therefore (dia touto) the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin.* The force of the *Therefore* is not immediately clear, and some suggestions are almost certainly wrong. Morris (p. 797), for instance, plausibly argues that Caiaphas is the betrayer, the one who handed Jesus over to Pilate, and that Caiaphas is 'ultimately responsible' since Judas was merely 'a tool' and Pilate was serving under the delegated authority of God himself. But if Judas was a tool, he was a *culpable* tool; moreover, if God's sovereignty mitigates Pilate's responsibility, why should it not similarly attenuate the responsibility of Caiaphas (cf. 11:49–52!)?

The way forward turns on three observations:

(1) The text does not exonerate Pilate; his sin is only relatively less than that of the person who handed Jesus over to him. The fact that he would not have had *any* authority over Jesus apart from heaven's sanction therefore does *not* absolve him of *all* responsibility.

(2) The identity of the person *guilty of a greater sin* is uncertain. Because he is described as *the one who handed [Jesus] over (ho paradous)* to Pilate, and that verb, often rendered in some form of the verb 'to betray', is regularly attached to Judas (e.g. 6:71; 13:21; 18:2), it is natural to think of Iscariot. On the other hand, Judas plays no part in the plot after 18:13, and, technically speaking, he was not responsible for handing Jesus over to Pilate. The verb is twice used with reference to Jesus' accusers handing him over to Pilate (18:30, 35), but the singular form of the expression in this verse encourages us to think of one person. On the whole, it seems best to fasten on Caiaphas, since he not only

took an active if not determinative part in the plot against Jesus (11:49–53) and, as high priest presiding over the Sanhedrin, he took a leading part in formulating the charges against Jesus (*cf.* Mk. 14:61–64), charges of which John demonstrates his thorough awareness. The critical point, however, is this: whether the person *guilty of a greater sin* refers to Judas or to Caiaphas, the distinguishing feature in that sin is its initiative, the active role of handing Jesus over.

(3) Most important, what God ('from above') gives to Pilate (*i.e.* the antecedent of *it*) is not 'authority' or 'power' (*exousia*), since this Greek word is feminine while 'it were ... given' (*ēn dedomenon*) is neuter. In other words, although it is true that all civil authority is mediated authority from God himself (*cf.* Pr. 8:15; Rom. 13), that is not the point here. The neuter verbal form suggests that what is given to Pilate is the entire turn of events, or, more precisely, the event of the betrayal itself. It is not God's sovereign hand behind Pilate's authority that mitigates his guilt: that would be to disown the compatibilism of which the biblical writers are so fond, and would imply that God is less than sovereign over the person with the greater guilt. Rather, Pilate's guilt is mitigated because he takes a *relatively* passive role. True, Pilate remains responsible for his spineless, politically-motivated judicial decision; but he did not initiate the trial or engineer the betrayal that brought Jesus into court. Judas, Caiaphas and Pilate all acted under God's sovereignty. But Pilate would not have had judicial authority over Jesus unless the event of the betrayal itself had been given to him *from above* (and thus God was in some mysterious sense behind the action of the one who handed Jesus over to Pilate). *Therefore* the one who handed Jesus over to Pilate, the one who from the human vantage point took the initiative to bring Jesus down, is guilty of the greater sin.

19:12. *From then on* (*ek toutou*, which could be causal, 'For this reason', instead of temporal), *i.e.* from the time Jesus gave the response of v. 11, Pilate *tried to set Jesus free* (whether by dismissing the case or by attempting to manipulate the crowds into applying the amnesty to Jesus; the text does not specify). This does not mean that Pilate had a full grasp of what Jesus was saying; it means that Pilate was convinced that Jesus had done nothing worthy of death. Neither the charge of sedition nor the additional charge of blasphemy held up in Pilate's eyes.

But then a new and sensitive issue is introduced. The Jews expose the desperate weakness of Pilate's authority by shouting, *If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar*. Pilate had ample reason to fear the implicit threat. Tiberius Caesar was known to be quick to entertain suspicions against his subordinates, and swift to exact ruthless punishment (*cf.* Additional Note). On earlier occasions the Jewish authorities had communicated their displeasure with Pilate to the Emperor; Pilate had no reason to think they would refrain from doing so in this case. What defence of himself could he possibly give to a somewhat paranoid ruler, against the charge that he had failed to convict and

execute a man arraigned on well-substantiated charges of sedition—brought up on charges put forward by the Sanhedrin, no less, the highest court in the land and known to be less than enthusiastic about the Emperor's rule? Whether or not *friend of Caesar* was at this point a technical term, everyone knew that even the claim to be a king (unless some kind of vassal-king status was granted by the Emperor himself) signalled opposition to Caesar.

The verse is saturated with irony. In order to execute Jesus, the Jewish authorities make themselves out to be more loyal subjects of Caesar than the hated Roman official Pilate is. They thereby demonstrate their slavery not only to sin (8:34) but to the political thralldom they earlier disavowed (8:33). Jesus *claims to be a king*, but king of such a nature (18:36–37) that he is far less of an immediate threat to Caesar than are the people who are levelling the charge—as is made clear by the Jewish revolt, which lay ahead of the crucifixion but was almost certainly behind John the Evangelist when he wrote. And when the Jews eventually revolted, they were ruthlessly crushed and their temple was razed, while even as John writes the kingship of the crucified Master is running from strength to strength.

19:13. Confronted with such pressure, Pilate capitulates. Judgment must be declared, and on the original charge of sedition. Correspondingly, *he brought Jesus out* (*cf.* notes on 18:28–29) *and sat down on the judge's seat* (*bēma*)—assuming this is the correct rendering (*cf.* Additional Note). This seat was placed on the spot known as *The Stone Pavement* (*lithostrōtos*), called *Gabbatha* (and the meaning of this Aramaic word is sharply disputed; *cf.* notes on 5:2). An area paved with stones, originally about 3000 square feet in size, has been discovered in a building identified as the Fortress of Antonia, but it is far from certain that Jesus' trial actually took place in Antonia (*cf.* notes on 18:28; *ISBE* 2. 373). Be that as it may, the actual *bēma* was far more important than the paving stones: here is the personal representative of Rome offering his judicial decision on the one who alone is the promised Messiah, the one to whom the Father himself entrusted all (eschatological) judgment (5:22).

19:14a. The precise referent of *day of Preparation* (*paraskeuē*) is disputed. If this refers to the day before the Passover, *i.e.* the day in which one prepares for the Passover, then John is presenting Jesus as being sent to execution about the same time the Passover lambs are being slaughtered. That would mean that the meal Jesus and his disciples enjoyed the night before was not the Passover supper; and that in turn brings us into sharp contradiction with the Synoptic witness, which makes it clear that Jesus and his disciples ate the Passover (*cf.* notes on 13:1, 27; 18:28). The attractiveness of this theory, despite the clash with the Synoptists, rests in the assumption that John introduces this time factor here as a symbolic way of saying that the true Passover lamb was none other than Jesus himself: he was sentenced to be slaughtered just as the slaughter of the lambs began.

One would have thought, however, that if this were John's intent he would have achieved much more dramatic power by inserting this time notice just

after v. 16a. Moreover, a better way of reading the passage turns on recognizing that *paraskeuē* ('Preparation') regularly refers to Friday—*i.e.* the Preparation of the Sabbath is Friday. Despite the fact that Barrett (p. 545) confidently insists *paraskeuē tou pascha* must refer to the Preparation day of (*i.e.* before) the Passover, he does not offer any evidence of a single instance where *paraskeuē* refers to the day before any feast day other than Sabbath. If this latter identification is correct, then *tou pascha* must be taken to mean, not 'of the Passover', but 'of the Passover Feast' or 'of the Passover week'. This is a perfectly acceptable rendering, since 'Passover' can refer to the Passover meal, the day of the Passover meal, or (as in this case) the entire Passover week (*i.e.* Passover day plus the immediately ensuing Feast of Unleavened Bread: *cf.* Jos., *Ant.* xiv. 21; xvii. 213; *Bel.* ii. 10; Lk. 22:1; *cf.* notes on 18:28). Hence *paraskeuē tou pascha* probably means 'Friday of Passover week' (*cf.* also notes on v. 31). In this view, John and the Synoptics agree that the last supper was eaten on Thursday evening (*i.e.* the onset of Friday, by Jewish reckoning), and was a Passover meal.

We must nevertheless advance a reason as to why the day is here introduced. The strength of the view that *paraskeuē* refers to the day before Passover turns less on linguistic arguments than on its (alleged) explanatory power: it makes possible the view that John is affirming that Jesus himself is the slaughtered Passover lamb. But another reason can be given for this insertion of the day. This is preparation for vv. 31–37, where the piercing of Jesus' side by a spear, and the 'sudden flow of blood and water', turns on the need to ensure that Jesus and those crucified with him be taken down from the cross promptly, since it was already *paraskeuē* (v. 31) and the next day, the Sabbath, was a special Sabbath (since it fell within the Passover week). This pattern—an advance time notice to anticipate the development of a theological theme that turns on this time notice—is already found in ch. 5: John remarks in passing that the healing of the man who had been paralyzed for thirty-eight years took place on a Sabbath (v. 9), and thus prepares for the Sabbath-controversy recorded a little farther on in the chapter (vv. 16ff.).

As for the time of day, this final decision and sentencing took place *about the sixth hour*. If we reckon the hours from sunrise to sundown, that would place it about noon. Mark 15:25 informs us, however, that Jesus was crucified at 'the third hour', about 9.00 a.m. Assuming that this is a correct reading of Mark's sentence division, the discrepancy is apparent. Westcott (2. 324–326) attempts to resolve the problem by arguing that John used a 'Roman' method of computing time, beginning the day with midnight and thus taking *about the sixth hour* to refer to 6.00 a.m. This is barely possible, but it makes the chronology extremely tight. In any case, there is no convincing evidence that this 'Roman' system of time-keeping was used 'other than in legal matters like leases' (*cf.* notes on 1:39; Morris, pp. 800f.—his discussion of the evidence is helpful). Barrett (p. 545) thinks it possible that there was an early transcriptional error introduced into the manuscript tradition by the confusion of the Greek numerals *gamma* Γ (3) and *diagamma* F (6). Again, this is possible, but no

manuscript evidence supports it. The theory that John changed the time to the sixth hour (*i.e.* noon) to bring Jesus' sentencing into chronological line with the slaughtering of the Passover lambs falls away if *paraskeuē* ('Preparation') is understood to refer to Friday. Moreover, that theory cannot explain why the sixth hour is associated with Jesus' *sentencing* rather than with his *death*.

More than likely we are in danger of insisting on a degree of precision in both Mark and John which, in days before watches, could not have been achieved. The reckoning of time for most people, who could not very well carry sundials and astronomical charts, was necessarily approximate. If the sun was moving toward mid-heaven, two different observers might well have glanced up and decided, respectively, that it was 'the third hour' or 'about the sixth hour'. Mark's concern is to set a time frame in which the three hours of darkness occur (Mk. 15:25, 33). By contrast, John's point appears to be that the proceedings had dragged on quite a long time, beginning with the 'early morning' (18:28) commencement of the proceedings before Pilate. During all this time it became ever clearer that justice demanded Jesus be released while evil's tide rolled inexorably on and brought him to the cross—the evil of the Jews, the evil of Pilate, the evil of all those for whom the Lamb of God died.

19:14b. Pilate knows he cannot escape the political trap that has been set for him, but he taunts his hated opponents once more. Without a trace of remorse for the shame and scorn that both he and his opponents are heaping on Jesus, he mockingly acclaims Jesus, as if at a coronation: *Here is your king*. Pilate is no fool. He is perfectly aware that the ostensible allegiance of the Jewish authorities to Caesar (v. 12) is no more than political hypocrisy deployed to ensure that he will condemn Jesus to the cross. By this acclamation of Jesus, he simultaneously throws up with bitter irony the spurious charge of sedition in their face, and mocks their vassal status by saying that this bloodied and helpless prisoner is the only king they are likely to have. But again, the Evangelist sees still deeper irony. Like Caiaphas before him (11:49–52), Pilate spoke better than he knew. The long-awaited king of the Jews stood before them, and they did not recognize him.

19:15. Pilate's tactics simply infuriate the crowd: *Take him away! Take him away! Crucify him!* With mock concern and more taunting, Pilate asks, 'Shall I crucify *your king*?' He thereby drives the chief priests to their own blasphemy: *We have no king but Caesar*. The Hebrew Scriptures repeatedly insist that the only true king of Israel is God himself (e.g. Jdg. 8:23; 1 Sa. 8:7); the Davidic kings are legitimate, at least in theory, only because they are vassal monarchs in liege to the Lord and bound by the covenant. By vehemently insisting they have no king but Caesar, they are not only rejecting Jesus' messianic claims, they are abandoning Israel's messianic hope as a matter of principle, rejecting *any* claimant ('We have *no king* but Caesar'), and finally disowning the kingship of the Lord himself. 'Their repudiation of Jesus in the name of a pretended loyalty to the emperor entailed their repudiation of the promise of the kingdom of God, with which the gift of the Messiah is inseparably bound in Jewish faith,

and Israel's vocation to be its heir, its instrument, and its proclaimer to the nations' (Beasley-Murray, p. 343). This is the ultimate evidence in support of the Prologue's pronouncement, 'He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him' (1:11), and of the terrible blindness depicted in 12:37ff.

Even so, throughout this degenerating series of exchanges (18:28–19:16a) between Pilate and 'the Jews' (*cf.* notes on 1:19), it is the Jewish authorities that are always in view—sometimes explicitly (*e.g.* 'the chief priests and their officials', 19:6), as here ('the chief priests'), and sometimes implicitly. This is part of early Christianity's most important apologetic, *especially in the evangelization of Jews*. Christians, whether Jews or Gentiles, had to explain to Jews how it came about that so many Jews, and especially the Jewish leadership, did not accept Jesus, and how this understanding undergirds the Christians' claim to be the true locus of the people of God. 'Writing as a Jew for other Jews, [John] is concerned from beginning to end to present the condemnation of Jesus, the *true* king of Israel, as the great betrayal of the nation by its own leadership' (Robinson, *John*, pp. 273–274).

19:16a. The actual death sentence is not pronounced, but is implied not only by Pilate's sitting down on the tribunal (v. 13) but also by his decisive control of the 'notice' on the cross (vv. 19–22). It is not entirely clear what is meant by 'Pilate handed him over to *them* (*autois*) to be crucified'. The preceding verse suggests that *them* refers to the Jewish authorities, but John knows full well that the Jews did not have the right, delegated or not, to crucify anyone: it is the soldiers, Roman auxiliaries, who perform the execution (vv. 23, 24). It seems best to understand *autois* as a dative of advantage: Pilate hands Jesus over [*sc.* to the soldiers] *to satisfy the demands of the Jews* (*cf.* *neb.*: 'Then at last, to satisfy them, [Pilate] handed Jesus over to be crucified'). This reading is confirmed by Luke 23:24: 'So Pilate decided to grant their demand' (lit. he 'handed Jesus over to their will [*tō thelēmati autōn*]').

Additional notes

19:12. 'Friend of Caesar' was virtually an official title by the time of the Emperor Vespasian (ad 69–71), but its exact status in Jesus' day is disputed. It probably enjoyed at least semi-technical force, being applied to a select number of distinguished persons amongst the leading men of Rome. A further fascinating conjecture has often been put forward. Pilate was a favoured acquaintance of Aelius Sejanus, prefect of the praetorian guard and highly influential in court circles; perhaps, too, he was his protégé (though this suggestion is based on an uncertain inference from Philo (*Leg. Gaium*. 159–161)). It is possible that Pilate secured 'Friend of Caesar' status under his sponsorship: the Roman historian Tacitus is frequently cited, 'the closer a man's with Sejanus, the stronger his claim to the emperor's friendship' (*Annals* VI. viii). In the autumn of ad 31, however, Sejanus fell from power, and Tiberius Caesar executed not only Sejanus but many of his closest friends and supporters. If the trial of Jesus took place after the fall of Sejanus, certainly Pilate and probably

Caiaphas (who was no mean politician) would have known of Pilate's precarious position, and the implicit threat of v. 12 assumes terrifying proportions.

As attractive as this reconstruction is, it stalls on the uncertainty as to the date of Jesus' trial and death. Those who detect a connection with Sejanus are inclined to place Jesus' death in ad 33, a calendrically suitable year. The majority, however, probably rightly, place his death in ad 30. On balance, it seems best to regard *friend of Caesar* in v. 12 as a semi-technical honorific that Pilate may or may not have enjoyed. If he did (*cf.* discussion in *NewDocs* 3. § 75), the threat would have been taunting and severe, even if Sejanus had not yet fallen. Indeed, even if Pilate could not claim the honorific, the implicit threat of the Jewish authorities ('If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar') would be perceived as a profound understatement soaked in vicious irony, a threat reminding Pilate of bad reports that had previously gone to the Emperor.

19:13. The interpretation of v. 13 offered above assumes that the rendering of the niv and most English versions is correct: *Pilate ... sat down (ekathisen) on the judge's seat (bēma)*. But it is linguistically possible to read the verb transitively: 'Pilate ... set [Jesus] down on the judge's seat (*bēma*)'. Although it is hard to imagine that any Roman governor, not least Pilate, would actually set a suspect on his own seat, it has been shown that *bēma* properly means 'tribunal', the platform on which not only the governor sat but also his clerks and advisors. The argument, then, is that Pilate had Jesus sit down on another chair on the tribunal, primarily to irritate his Jewish opponents; and in so doing contributed, however unwittingly, to the profound irony of the proceedings. Pilate's 'Here is your king!' (v. 14) now implicitly adds, 'on the *bēma*'. Moreover, John is intensely interested in the theme of judgment (*e.g.* 3:18–21; 5:22, 27; 12:48), and this interpretation brings the themes of kingship and judgment together: while the Jews cry 'Take him away! Crucify him!' (v. 15), Jesus confronts them as their judge—their judge because they will not accept him as their king.

As attractive as this view is, it should probably be rejected (*cf.* especially Dauer, pp. 269–274). Although *ekathisen* can be taken transitively, that is not the most common usage. In other passages in the New Testament where the verb is used in connection with kings and governors, the intransitive meaning prevails. More importantly, although the kingship of Jesus is a strong theme throughout this chapter, the theme of Jesus as judge is not. And if Pilate merely sets Jesus down on *another* chair on the tribunal, it would be an extraordinary act but would not in itself be a symbol of a judging role: it might symbolize the role of a court clerk! For unabashed symbolism of judging, Jesus would have to sit not only on the tribunal but in the governor's seat. Historically, that is most implausible; contextually, it does not quite fit; syntactically, it is possible but no more. The case for this alternative interpretation is not persuasive.



Group Study Guide

*This lesson is for the Sunday School teacher to use to teach the lesson and facilitate the discussion. It is not intended that you will use every question in this guide during your group time. You will likely only be able to cover 4-5 questions, depending on how discussion goes. This guide is longer than what you will need but provides the freedom and flexibility to pull questions out for discussion that will best serve your group time.

Tip: You may want to pull one question from each section for discussion or spend more time on a particular section than another on. It's totally up to your discretion.

Introduction

Icebreaker Question:

Have you ever been victim to suffering for a crime / offense that you did not commit? Were you able to explain it away? Did your accuser care what your story was?

READ ENTIRE TEXT: JOHN 19:1-16

Highlight – What stands out?

*There are suggested answers to aid the Group Leader in Discussion time for the Highlight and Explain sections. These are not meant to be exhaustive, but designed to help move the Group leader in the right direction if you need it.

*Try reading this text from two different translations (Examples: ESV, NIV, NASB, NKJV, CSB). As you read, compare and contrast between the two as you answer these questions.

1. Who are the characters in the text? What does each character do and say?
2. Is there anything surprising to you about the characters in this text?
3. Do you have any questions about the characters or their actions in this text?
4. What stands out to you about each character?

Explain – What does this mean?

*For larger groups, the questions that you choose from this section (and the Apply and Respond sections) might be best answered in a smaller group format. You could have people in your group turn to the person next to them (or get in a group of 3-4) and discuss for 5 minutes and then come back together as a group and have one or two groups share. This allows more people to learn from each other, but also promotes active learning in the group.

1. Why is it ironic that the Pharisees told Pilate that he was not a friend of Caesar if he pardoned Jesus? Look at 19:15-16 to see this irony even further.
2. Try to recite or write down from memory the purpose statement of John from John 20:31. How does this passage fulfill this passage?
3. Read Psalm 33 and then look back at John 19:1-16. How does this psalm speak to the power struggle between Jesus, the Pharisees, and Pilate?
4. Look up these parallel passages of Jesus before Pilate as a group. Ask your group to compare and contrast the scenes and how this speaks to Pilate and the Jews heart towards Jesus and belief in him.

- **Matthew 27:1-2, 11-26**
- **Luke 23:1-15**
- **Mark 15:1-15**

Apply – How do I live this out?

ILLUSTRATION IDEA: There are many countries where it is illegal for Christians to evangelize or believe in Jesus. Look at the additional resource below and consider

using one of these countries as an illustration to apply what it looks like for Christians to endure suffering.

1. What does it look like in today's world to endure suffering?
2. How do you deal with God's will when it does not line up with your own personal plan for your life?

Respond – What's my next step?

1. How can you pray to be more accepting of God's will for your life when it doesn't line up with your will at first?
2. How are you tempted (or how are people tempted) to align with worldly ideas and leaders in order to get what we want?

Additional Resources:

Article: [Map of where Christians are persecuted throughout the world.](#)