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I Find No Fault

Jesus was without guilt and sinless in every way.

JOHN 18:28-40

“We the jury find the defendant . . .” Most of us are intrigued about the factors that swayed a jury to decide one way or the other. The appeal of whodunit novels and stories highlight our desire to piece together the evidence so we can develop our own verdict. Pilate interviewed Jesus to piece together the evidence and found Him not guilty. Yet, Pilate ignored his own conclusion and handed Jesus over to the mob for crucifixion.

What factors intrigue you the most when watching a legal drama or reading a book about legal proceedings?

UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

JOHN 18:12–19:15

By torchlight, an armed mob seized Jesus and brought Him bound before Annas. A former high priest, Annas retained considerable power and lived in the palace of his son-in-law, Caiaphas, the current high priest. In this hearing, Jesus was falsely accused and cruelly treated. When He challenged His assailants to testify of any wrongdoing, He was met with silence since they had no real evidence. Subsequently, Annas sent Jesus to Caiaphas for further examination.

These hearings, held at night against lawful procedures, took place while Simon Peter waited in the palace courtyard. Peter had followed John into the compound to see what would happen to Jesus. Already frightened by the events in the garden, Peter responded defensively when questioned about his association with Jesus. Three times various people accused him of associating with Jesus, and three times Peter denied knowing Him. Following his third denial, a rooster crowed for the second time. Reminded of Jesus's predictions, Peter fled the palace in tears.

Shortly after daybreak, knowing they lacked authority to execute Jesus, the Jewish leaders took Him to the Roman governor. At first, Pilate refused to hear the case. Finally, he yielded to their insistence and questioned Jesus. He focused his interrogation on whether Jesus claimed to be a king. Such an assertion would be treasonous in an empire ruled by Caesar.

After further examination, Pilate declared he found no fault in Jesus. He recognized the false testimony of conflicting witnesses to be a set-up by the Jewish authorities. Several times, Pilate sought to release Jesus. Instead, the Jews cried out for the governor to release a criminal named Barabbas. As the crowd became increasingly unruly, Pilate gave Jesus over to be scourged and crucified.

Read John 18:28–40 in your Bible, noting the progression in the conversation between Pilate and Jesus. How do Jesus's responses lead Pilate to conclude Jesus to be innocent?

EXPLORE **THE TEXT**

THE TRANSFER (JOHN 18:28-32)

²⁸ Then they led Jesus from Caiaphas to the governor’s headquarters. It was early morning. They did not enter the headquarters themselves; otherwise they would be defiled and unable to eat the Passover. ²⁹ So Pilate came out to them and said, “What charge do you bring against this man?” ³⁰ They answered him, “If this man weren’t a criminal, we wouldn’t have handed him over to you.” ³¹ Pilate told them, “You take him and judge him according to your law.” “It’s not legal for us to put anyone to death,” the Jews declared. ³² They said this so that Jesus’s words might be fulfilled indicating what kind of death he was going to die.

VERSE 28

The appearance before Annas would have been for an informal hearing; being brought before the Sanhedrin, though, was significant. This was the highest ruling Jewish body of the first century. They heard accusations against Jesus—even though the testimonies were contradictory (Mark 14:56). Two accusers stepped forward and recalled how Jesus stated He could rebuild the temple in three days. The high priest accused Jesus of blasphemy, a charge that called for the death penalty (Lev. 24:16). The Sanhedrin did not have authority to put anyone to death. For that to happen, Jesus would need to appear before the Roman authorities. •***Caiaphas*** had received the sentence he wanted for Jesus; the so-called trial before the religious leaders was thus complete.

They, the chief priests, tied Jesus up again and led Him to ***the governor’s headquarters***. All the Sanhedrin accompanied them (Luke 23:1-2). Jewish law was passed down orally through the generations. Eventually these laws and traditions were put into a written document known as the Mishnah. This text claimed all Gentile homes were unclean; entering resulted in a defilement requiring a seven-day purification period. The Jewish leaders who led Jesus to *the governor’s headquarters* thus stayed outside in the courtyard. Doing otherwise meant they would have been ***unable to eat the Passover***. In the scenes that follow, Pilate entered and exited the residence

as he talked with Jesus inside the headquarters and the Jewish leaders outside.

VERSES 29-32

Emperor Tiberias had appointed **•Pilate** as governor of Judea in AD 26. Pilate showed himself to be an insecure, insensitive, and morally weak leader who responded to perceived threats with excessive brutality (Luke 13:1). His ruthlessness eventually led to his being removed from office after eleven years of service.

Rather than simply rubber stamp the Sanhedrin's decision to kill Jesus, Pilate asked what charges were being brought against Him. Those who led Jesus offered no specific accusation. They brazenly declared that handing Jesus over to Pilate was proof enough that He was a **criminal** and worthy of death. The word for *criminal* referred to a wicked person who disobeyed the law. Other Gospel writers note additional charges made against Jesus, including opposition to taxes and claiming to be Messiah, the king of the Jews (Luke 23:2). Tension between the Jewish rulers and Pilate was unmistakable. The Jews resented the presence of the emperor's occupation forces. With an attitude typical to Romans, Pilate despised the Jews.

Pilate saw through their scheme and wanted no part of their plot. His saying, ***you take him and judge him according to your law***, forced the Jews to admit they were powerless to execute Jesus. If Jesus's alleged crimes were against Roman law, Pilate would have exercised quick and severe justice. Since the priests were accusing Jesus of violating their religious rules, Pilate initially refused to play the game.

The Jews thought they had the power to order Jesus to be executed. Pilate felt certain the decision was his. Both were wrong. All the details about the death of Jesus had been orchestrated long before this mock trial. (See John 3:14; 8:28; 12:32.)

Jesus warned His disciples that the same kinds of people who hated Him would persecute them. Opposition should not surprise or discourage us. Seeing Jesus's response to unfair cruelty can encourage us when confronted by unjust treatment.

Why would the Jewish leaders be so eager to get rid of Jesus?

KEY DOCTRINE: *God the Son*

Jesus perfectly revealed and did the will of God, taking upon Himself human nature with its demands and necessities and identifying Himself completely with mankind yet without sin. (See Isaiah 53:9; 1 John 3:5.)

THE TRIAL (JOHN 18:33-38a)

³³ Then Pilate went back into the headquarters, summoned Jesus, and said to him, “Are you the king of the Jews?” ³⁴ Jesus answered, “Are you asking this on your own, or have others told you about me?” ³⁵ “I’m not a Jew, am I?” Pilate replied. “Your own nation and the chief priests handed you over to me. What have you done?” ³⁶ “My kingdom is not of this world,” said Jesus. “If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would fight, so that I wouldn’t be handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.” ³⁷ “You are a king then?” Pilate asked. “You say that I’m a king,” Jesus replied. “I was born for this, and I have come into the world for this: to testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.” ^{38a} “What is truth?” said Pilate.

VERSE 33

When the wise men arrived from the east, they appeared before Herod and asked, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star at its rising and have come to worship him” (Matt. 2:2). Decades later, Pilate saw standing before him this bound Galilean. Nothing about the prisoner’s appearance indicated He was a threat. No army stood ready to protect Him. He had no royal robes, crown, or jewelry. One can almost hear the disbelief in Pilate’s voice. In the Greek text the “you” is emphatic: *You? Are you the king of the Jews?*

How Pilate came to associate the title **king of the Jews** with Jesus is unclear. He may have seen the crowds cheering as Jesus entered Jerusalem on the back of a donkey a few days earlier: “They kept shouting: ‘Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord—the King of Israel!’” (John 12:13). Or it may have been sarcasm.

BIBLE SKILL: *Compare similar situations.*

Compare Jesus's interaction with Pilate to Paul's interaction with the Athenians (Acts 17:16-34). What issues are similar in the two exchanges? How do the key points made in both settings compare? Write a short statement expressing how you might respond to someone who denies the truth of Christ and His gospel.

VERSES 34-35

Before answering Pilate's question, Jesus asked for clarification. If Pilate was asking this on his own, that meant he was concerned Jesus was trying to establish Himself as a political king. If this were the case, Jesus would have been guilty of insurrection and would have been a threat to Rome. The answer to this question would have been "No." If the question, though, had come from something the religious leaders had reported, then the question was religious in nature: "Are you the Messianic King of Israel?" The answer to this question would have been "Yes."

Pilate responded with contempt. Not being a Jew, Pilate had no interest in the charges this religious mob was hurling at Jesus. He clearly saw that Jesus was not a political threat. Jesus must have done something, though, to draw these people's ire and cause them to hand Jesus over to him—hence, the question, ***What have you done?***

VERSES 36-38a

Jesus responded to Pilate's first question, "Are you the King of the Jews?" by explaining how His ***kingdom*** was different. His kingdom was ***not of this world*** and posed no threat to Rome. Jesus had explained earlier in His ministry that He is not of this

world and that He is from above—having come down from heaven (see John 6:41; 8:23). His kingship likewise was not from here. It, therefore, would not have to be defended like other earthly kingdoms.

Evidently the only word that caught Pilate's ear was *kingdom*. Not having fully grasped what Jesus was saying, he pressed further: **You are a king then?** Jesus did not deny He was a king.

Having said what His kingdom was not (v. 36), Jesus next explained the nature of what His kingdom was. He stated He was born to be a king. This, the only direct mention of Christ's birth in John's Gospel, clearly connects His coming to earth with His mission—**to testify to the truth**. This echoes the earlier statement Jesus made to His disciples, that He is the way, the truth, and the life (14:6).

This *truth* had nothing to do with merely acquiring additional knowledge. He came to reveal the truth about God's nature, about salvation, and grace. Those who are **of the truth** are those who listen to His voice (see John 10:27). This echoed what Jesus earlier said to the Jewish leaders: "The one who is from God listens to God's words. This is why you don't listen, because you are not from God" (8:47). Implied in what Jesus said to Pilate was a call to self-examination: "Pilate, are you listening to my voice? Are you part of the truth?"

Rather than catch what Jesus was saying, Pilate responded with a cynical philosophical question, **What is truth?** He had completely missed the implication of what Jesus said. Additionally, he revealed that he had no concept of what truth really is.

Believers can confidently proclaim Jesus bore no guilt. None of His accusers could get their stories straight. Christ faced the cross, not for anything He did, but for our sins. Only a sinless Savior could bear our guilt and die in our place.

How did Jesus's response to Pilate point to His innocence?

THE TRADE (JOHN 18:38b-40)

^{38b}After he had said this, he went out to the Jews again and told them, "I find no grounds for charging him." ³⁹ You have a custom

that I release one prisoner to you at the Passover. So, do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?”⁴⁰ They shouted back, “Not this man, but Barabbas!” Now Barabbas was a revolutionary.

VERSES 38b-40

Having heard nothing from Jesus that seemed to be a threat to the Roman Empire, Pilate went back outside to report his verdict to the Jews. He said he found ***no grounds for charging*** Jesus.

Implied in Pilate’s report was the possibility that although he found nothing to charge Jesus with, the Jews might still have grounds for an indictment—an offense that would allow them to judge Jesus according to their law (see v. 31). Pilate thus offered to release Jesus, the King of the Jews, to them, in keeping with Jewish tradition. During the intertestamental period, the Jews had begun this practice of releasing a prisoner at Passover. The Romans, having taken control of the land, continued the practice as a gesture of goodwill.

The crowd rejected Pilate’s offer. Mark explained what prompted their decision: “the chief priests stirred up the crowd so that he [Pilate] would release Barabbas to them” (15:11). John referred to **•Barabbas** as a ***revolutionary***. The Greek word can refer to a robber, outlaw, or revolutionary. Other texts refer to him as a notorious prisoner (Matt. 27:16) and a murderer (Mark 15:7; Luke 23:19; Acts 3:14).

The crowd, having been worked up into a frenzy, demanded *Barabbas* to be released from prison and Jesus to be released to them. Barabbas could say, “This man Jesus died the death I should have died. He died in my place.” We who are followers of Jesus know this truth equally applies to us as well.

The Jewish leaders’ agenda was to destroy Jesus at all costs. Some people today still reject Jesus regardless of the facts. To acknowledge Him as God’s Son would mean admission of their sin. Rather than repent and be forgiven, they prefer to continue living as they choose, even though the path they walk leads to judgment and death.

**How should we characterize Pilate’s attempt to release Jesus?
Why were the people so easily swayed to follow the Jewish leaders?**

APPLY THE TEXT

- Followers of Jesus should expect false accusations to be made against them.
- Believers can confidently proclaim Jesus is without guilt.
- Some people reject Jesus regardless of the facts.

Discuss with the group principles for engaging others who are unsure of or hostile toward the truth of Jesus. What communication practices did Jesus demonstrate when dialoguing with Pilate? How can the group help each other follow the example set by Jesus when encountering questions about Jesus?

List ways people today commonly misinterpret or misrepresent facts about Jesus. What can you point to from this study that counters the items you listed? With whom should you speak to and address the misinterpretations that you hear most often?

PRAYER NEEDS
