

King Jesus

John 18:28-40

In the year 410 AD, something unthinkable happened. Something unimaginable. Something as incomprehensible to the proud and confident citizens of the Roman Empire as the destruction of Washington, DC would be for the people of the United States today. Prior to 410, the city of Rome was called the eternal city. It was the heart of that great empire once ruled by Julius Caesar. In 410, that eternal city was rendered mortal. The city was plundered and destroyed by the Goths, sending shock waves through the civilized world.

How could it be that the capital of this great and mighty empire would fall, particularly after the recent decree of Emperor Constantine declaring the nation to be Christian. Unbelieving pagans would lay the blame upon Christians, for when Rome worshipped pagan gods, they had flourished. When they began worshipping the Christian God, they had crumbled. Christians of that day were ill-equipped to respond to that charge, for it seemed that the Bible agreed with the pagan's logic that prosperity depended upon serving the proper god. In Psalm 32:12, we read, "Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD."

And so the Christian believers asked themselves a most perplexing question, "How could God possibly have allowed the Roman Empire to disintegrate just when it had become Christian?"

One man answered that question best of all, a man named Augustine. He wrote a book entitled the City of God, exposing the idea of an eternal Rome to be an idolatrous myth. Rome was just like every other kingdom of this world, filled with its own sinful self-deception. Its crumbling certainly wasn't the fault of

Christianity. His profound explanation emphasized that there is only one true eternal city, God's city. God's kingdom alone will endure forever. And Christians throughout this age are actually citizens of two cities, two kingdoms. The kingdoms of the world and the kingdom of heaven. Augustine's masterpiece was really a tale of two cities.

Those two cities came into conflict prior to the destruction of Rome in 410. And they are in clear view before us in our text this morning, as Jesus stood before Pontius Pilate. What we have is the king and ruler of one city standing before the king and ruler of another city. The leader of the heavenly kingdom is brought before the leader of the earthly kingdom. And the former would be condemned by the latter and put to death upon a cross.

In that judicial condemnation, we find gross injustice. Yet, we also find the execution of God's own eternal purpose. So as we study Jesus before Pilate from John 18, I want to emphasize the interplay between,

I. GOD'S PURPOSE AND MAN'S INJUSTICE.

You might find it hard to consider those two things together, but you must consider them both. Both are so obvious and so evident. Sinful man is demonstrating his horribly wicked sinfulness. And the God of heaven and earth is carrying out his purpose which he determined before the creation of the world, to send his son as the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world.

So, to start out with, we see that,

A. Jesus is proven to be innocent.

He is found guilty and condemned to death, but in that process he is actually proven to be not-guilty. Specifically, we read the findings of Pontius Pilate in no uncertain terms.

v.38 “I find no fault in Him at all.”

Indeed, everything we read in this text leads us to that implication of Jesus’ innocence. And as J.C. Ryle so well points out, “Our Lord, we may remember, came to be a sacrifice for our sins. It was only fitting that he who was one of the chief agents in killing him, should publicly declare that, like a lamb without blemish, there was ‘no fault in Him.’”

We see what led to Pilate’s conclusion.

v.28-29

There was none evident, and the Romans are to be praised for requiring a specific charge to be laid against a man prior to his conviction. “What was it,” asked Pilate quite properly. What is the charge?

The response was filled with smug self-righteousness and arrogant pride. The Chief Priests were indignant that such a question was even asked, at least they pretended to be indignant.

They said,

v.30

They are saying, “If he weren’t guilty, we wouldn’t bring him to you. So just trust us and condemn him.” But such a haughty tone was not likely to please or impress the Roman governor.

Pilate could see through them quite well, and obviously wanted nothing to do with the case. He evidently wanted nothing more than to put it away from him, and to avoid condemning a man he knew to be innocent. Actually, we know from Luke’s gospel what it was that the Jews said to convince Pilate to take the case.

Luke 23:2 And they began to accuse Him, saying, “We found this fellow perverting the nation, and forbidding to pay taxes to Caesar, saying that He Himself is Christ, a King.”

But Pilate’s reaction shows his real objective.

v.31a

“It’s your problem, deal with it.”

But the Jews had a problem, considering the fact that they wanted Jesus to be put to death. The Sanhedrin Council had authority to make judgments, but they had no authority under the Roman government to inflict capital punishment. They couldn’t put anyone to death, so they were forced to get Pilate’s help.

The pitiable and miserable character of Pilate comes into clear light at this point, for he was a man utterly destitute of moral courage. Presumably, up to this point, he assumed that the Jews were wishing to inflict some form of punishment short of death, and he simply told them to handle it without him. But when he realized they actually wished to put an innocent man to death, he refused to stop it. He dared not displease the Jews by acquitting him, knowing he would do wrong in convicting him but afraid to do the right.

The proverb is certainly true,

Prov. 29:25 “The fear of man brings a snare.”

Pilate would have one last attempt to wiggle out of the situation without condemning an innocent man to death nor offending the Jews.

v.39

We don’t know where that custom arose, but from Pilate’s perspective, it wasn’t a bad idea. Jesus could still be found guilty

and the Jews satisfied, yet Jesus would go free. The plan doesn't eliminate the moral cowardice of such an unjust judge unwilling to do what is right in the eyes of justice, but at least Pilate could live without Jesus' blood on his hands.

Everything Pilate does is a vindication of the innocence of Jesus Christ! For he was the innocent lamb that would be the perfect sacrifice for sins. And why is that sinless innocence of Jesus so important? Because only a sinless sacrifice would have any atoning merit. Therefore we read in,

2 Cor. 5:21 "For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him."

And,

Heb. 7:26 "For such a High Priest was fitting for us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and has become higher than the heavens; 27 who does not need daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the people's, for this He did once for all when He offered up Himself. 28 For the law appoints as high priests men who have weakness, but the word of the oath, which came after the law, appoints the Son who has been perfected forever."

Jesus is proven to be innocent. It is,

B. The Jews who are proven to be wicked.

Everything I have just gone over brings out that wickedness. They couldn't even specify a charge against him. Verse 30.

And when the case was properly turned back to them for their disposition, they are compelled to admit that their intentions are murderous! They intend for Jesus to die, just as they had plotted.

v.31

The crowds get in on this demonstration of wickedness, when they reject Pilate's compromise offer of setting Jesus free at the passover.

v.39-40

Those same crowds had just five days earlier cried, "Hosanna! 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!' The King of Israel!" That was Sunday. Now the late night arrest on Thursday has turned into Friday morning, and there was a growing thirst for blood. "Crucify him!" They were the wicked ones!

Let me pause just a moment at this point for one final exposition of the wickedness of the Jewish leaders, made clear by the incredibly self-righteous hypocrisy. Look at,

v.28

The Praetorium was the governor's palace, his official residence, and if the Jews were to enter those walls they would render themselves ceremonial impure. They would be considered unclean and defiled, since Pilate was a Gentile. On such external things, they were incredibly scrupulous, yet they were at the very same time deliberately committing a gross and horrible sin! As J.C. Ryle notes, "The Jews were afraid of being defiled by going into a Gentile's house, at the very moment when they were doing the devil's work, a murdering the prince of life."

Augustine remarks, "O impious blindness! They would be defiled by a dwelling which was another's, and not be defiled by a crime which was their own. They feared to be defiled by the praetorium of an alien judge, and feared not to be defiled by the blood of an innocent brother."

Poole remarks, "Nothing is more common for persons over zealous about rituals to be remiss about morals." Jesus had

already condemned them for that, though, hasn't he?

Mat. 23:23 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone. 24 "Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel! 25 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence. 26 "Blind Pharisee, first cleanse the inside of the cup and dish, that the outside of them may be clean also. 27 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. 28 "Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness...33 "Serpents, brood of vipers! How can you escape the condemnation of hell?"

That danger is still with us today, isn't it? A concern for external, religious ritual, even with self-righteous condemnation upon those who don't outwardly conform. And inwardly, moral filth and corruption. There are many professed Christians today who would be accurately described by these words, "whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness."

But, having said all of that, having spent all that time focusing upon man's wickedness, the real point of this text is that,

C. God's purpose is proven to be sovereign.

Look at, v.32

What is played out for us, even through the means of the

wickedness of Pontius Pilate and the Jewish leaders, is that God is bringing to pass the very thing he had determined to do, from before the creation of the world. His only begotten son would become man, and in his flesh, be put to death as the atoning sacrifice for the sins of his people in the whole world!

Peter would preach about Jesus at Pentecost, as the one, Act 2:23 "... being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death."

But the crucifixion wasn't the end of God's plan. Peter's message about Jesus continued,

Act 2:24 "whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by it... 32 "This Jesus God has raised up, of which we are all witnesses. 33 "Therefore being exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He poured out this which you now see and hear. 34 "For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he says himself: 'The LORD said to my Lord, "Sit at My right hand, 35 Till I make Your enemies Your footstool.'" 36 "Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ."

And that is what I preach to you today! God's sovereign purpose to save his people from their sins, by grace, through faith in Jesus Christ. The invitation of the gospel is plain and clear, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved!"

There is one more thing about Jesus that I want to emphasize from this mockery of a trial before Pilate, and that goes back to my introduction. The two cities. The two kingdoms. The one king of the eternal kingdom brought before the other king of the

earthly kingdom. And because God is in control of these circumstances, because his purpose is sovereign and will be carried out, not only is Jesus' innocence made know, but also,

II. JESUS IS ACKNOWLEDGED AS A KING.

Jesus' kingdom is recognized and identified, in words that are still so very crucial for us to understand today. The most basic understanding that we must recognize is that Jesus IS a king! Even at his crucifixion, he was a king.

And not a king in exile, for he reigns over a kingdom.

If he were king of an earthly kingdom, a nation of this world, then his crucifixion would banish him to such an exile. If he were the King of the nation of Isreal, as it was, and now again is, founded as a political and civil nation on earth, if that were the nature of his kingdom, then he would not be king! For in those days, Israel as a nation was already consumed into the Roman empire. Even then, there was no earthly kingdom of Israel. They were subject to the kingdom and rule of the Romans. And Pontius Pilate, their royal governor. But as he stands before that representative of the earthly emperor of Rome, he is acknowledged as king.

v.33-34

Now, there is no disrespect in Jesus for the worldly authority of Pilate, but clearly Jesus appeals to Pilate's conscience as a judge. Is there evidence of this charge, that "I am a king."

Now, of course, the charge was made by the Jews in order to present Jesus as a traitor, a threat to Caesar and therefore worthy of death. But Jesus answers that charge by accepting the title of king, but in that then,

A. He proclaims the true nature of his kingdom.

v.35-36

There it is, that which must be firmly grasped by us today. Jesus has a kingdom. He is king. But it is not of this world.

And the proof of that is so obvious, I hesitate mentioning it at the risk of being repetitive. But Jesus' proof that his kingdom is not of this world is that he didn't fight with the weapons of this world. And the broad application of that is that we must never fight for the kingdom of God with the weapons of this world! Three applications of that.

First, politics. Now, I doubt that my political views are very well hidden. Politically, I am conservative. But the kingdom of Jesus Christ will not be extended by political efforts or successes. The kingdom of Christ, with all the moral implications of that kingdom, will not come through mobilizing the religious right. It won't come if we elect Christian leaders. It won't come if the Supreme Court reverses several rather recent decisions that run contrary to biblical morality.

All those things might well be good things, in the kingdom of this world. I wouldn't hesitate to pray for those things that I believe to be good, good for the United States of America. But the kingdom of Jesus Christ comes when the disciples of Jesus pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." The kingdom of Jesus Christ comes when the preachers in the visible church of Jesus Christ will preach the gospel in truth, the whole counsel of God, so that the word of God would come upon people with power.

Second example. Theology, especially eschatology, or a study of the last things. The Kingdom of Jesus is not restricted to

a future, earthly kingdom. When Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world,” he did not mean, “My kingdom is of this world but of a future age.” In other words, in speaking to Pilate about a kingdom, he is not speaking about a so-called millennial kingdom of an earthly reign for a thousand years after this present. Instead, it is a kingdom already present, but spiritual in nature!

Third example. Warfare. Combat. We ought never to engage in warfare to extend a spiritual kingdom, which is the root error of the crusades of the middle ages. And it is the root error, among others, of extreme Moslem faith today. There is no such thing as jihad, or holy war, being fought with guns and ships and bombs and soldiers! And don’t think, either, that giving the nation of Israel today those guns and soldiers or money is a means of extending the kingdom of Christ. Because Jesus’ kingdom is not of this world.

To be sure, it IS warfare in which we are to be engaged,
2 Cor. 10:3 “For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh. 4 For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, 5 casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ.”

Those are our marching orders. To bring every thought captive, to the obedience of Christ. To be every thought into the captivity of the truth! To proclaim the truth. And so, as he stood before Pilate,

B. Jesus proclaims the truth of the kingdom.
v.37-38

The issue is truth!

The issue isn’t abortion. Or homosexuality. Or the role of women in the church. Or the sabbath day. Or prayer in schools. Or gun control. Or illegal immigration. Or teenage pregnancy. Or illiteracy. Or universal health care.

Those are all sub-categories. The issue is truth. And the fundamental starting point for truth is the acknowledgement that truth exists, and that it has been revealed in objective, written form. Pontius Pilate asks a question that is very relevant for our day, “What is truth?”

That is the question unanswerable in the postmodernist and even post-Christian worldview of our day. That is the question unanswerable in the secular, unbelieving, agnostic, hedonistic, materialistic, relativistic, self-absorbed culture of our day in which we can accurately say “everyone did what was right in his own eyes.”

There is no truth in such a context, and the church has fallen prey to that hopeless trap. The church, that is, that fails to declare that this word is truth.

That is the foundation upon which I stand, and the foundation upon which this church is built, the infallible, inerrant truth of the word of God. And Jesus, the second person of the trinity, the eternal son of God, is that word made flesh. So don’t ever let anyone distinguish between the word made flesh and the word put into writing. For they both, equally and unitedly, define truth.

And woe am I if I am not about the business of proclaiming the eternal truth of God to you, the people of God. Woe to those false teachers of our day who so blatantly and callously deny the truth of God, and simply teach people what their itching ears want to hear.

The kingdom of God is come, it is made evident and it grows in the midst of this world when this message is preached, this message of Jesus,

v.37 “You say rightly that I am a king. For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice.”

So what about you? Are you citizens of two kingdoms? You all are citizens of this earthly kingdom we call the United States. You are all citizens of North Carolina, or some other state in our union. And that citizenship has its obligations and responsibilities, as well as its benefits.

But that’s not the kingdom that I am concerned about. I am interested in “the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.”

I am a loyal citizen of the country in which I was born and live, but that country isn’t the object of my deepest loyalty and service. There is a better country, a better kingdom. A heavenly one. And, by faith, I am a citizen of that kingdom as well. Thus I am compelled to see myself as a stranger and pilgrim on the earth. For the object of my hope, and the subject of my preaching, is “a better, that is, a heavenly country.”

That kingdom has come. It is not of this world, but it is in the world. The visible manifestation of that kingdom in the world today is the church, the faithful, visible, worshiping church of Jesus Christ. And we have come to this place today to worship the king, the head of that church.

So what is truth? Let me tell you! That is a bold statement, isn’t it? I intend it to be. Let me have the audacity to tell you the

truth.

John 14:6 Jesus said to him, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.”

This is truth,

1 John 5:11 “And this is the testimony: that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. 12 He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. 13 These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God.”