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Jesus or Caesar?

These Things are Written that You May Believe Series

John 19:1-16

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Studies continue to show roughly eighty percent of people in America self-identify as Christian. I would suggest to you many of those are what I would refer to as cultural Christians. They could not explain the basics of the gospel or have experienced a personal relationship with Jesus. So here's the question: "If things in America were to significantly change, and it would require a significant cost to identify yourself as a follower of Jesus, what percentage of the eighty percent would be willing to pay that cost?" That's what we want to talk about this morning. If you have a Bible, turn with us to the Gospel of John, Chapter 19. If you're visiting with us, we're working our way through the Gospel of John; we find ourselves in chapter 19. Pilate has publicly declared Jesus to be without guilt but, in an attempt to win the favor of the Jewish crowd, he offers to release Jesus to them. Much to his surprise, they choose a terrorist by the name of Barabbas instead. So now he must deal with Jesus, a man whom he believes to be innocent.

Just before we pick up the story, I want to identify a couple of timeline issues and just kind of get them out of the way so when we tell the story, we're not interrupted. They show up in verse 14: ***Now it was the day of preparation for the Passover; it was about the sixth hour.***

So, the language can get confusing. I mentioned last week that Passover can refer to a day, but it also can refer to the entire feast, which was about a week and a half. Luke actually tells us that the Feast of Unleavened Bread was referred to as Passover. The words *day of preparation* is only used in the Bible in reference to the Sabbath. The reason is because on the Sabbath you are not to do any work; so you had to prepare ahead of time so as not to work on the Sabbath. This confirms our timeline that this is Friday morning, the *day of preparation* for the Passover Sabbath.

The other issue isn't quite so easily resolved, and that is the identification of the *sixth hour*. Reading the Synoptic Gospels, and specifically the Gospel of Mark, he identifies the time of the crucifixion began at 9 o'clock in the morning, and that is most certainly correct. So we're a little bit confused by John's reference to the *sixth hour*. If it was Jewish time, which started at sunrise, it would be noon, and if it is Roman time, which began at midnight, it would be six in the morning. So, if it was six in the morning, we're not quite sure what would occupy three hours until He gets to the cross. There are lots of different ideas and theories, but none of them are really satisfactory. So we're going to just kind of leave it there for now—that there's no good explanation—and maybe someday we'll figure it out better. It is helpful, though, to understand these times are approximations. They didn't have clocks; they didn't have watches. They're looking at the sun and they're factoring time. So it is possible that they could be off by quite a margin. So if Mark was somewhat off, and John was somewhat off—and these times merged closer together—maybe that's an explanation. It doesn't change the story or the theology, but I wanted to get that out of the way so we don't have to talk about that in the flow of the story. Chapter 19, verse 1:

Pilate then took Jesus and scourged Him. And the soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on His head, and put a purple robe on Him; and they began to come up to Him and say, “Hail, King of the Jews!” and to give Him slaps *in the face*.

(*NASB, John 19:1-3)

So we're a little bit confused by this, as readers. Pilate has just publicly announced Jesus to be without guilt, so the next thing he does is scourge Him and we're left with the question, “Why would you scourge an innocent man?” We'll get to that in just a couple of minutes. When you read through again, the synoptics—Matthew, Mark and Luke—Jesus is **scourged** *after* the condemnation to be crucified. In John's Gospel, this is well before that. *After* would be after verse 16; this is well before that. So how do we reconcile those?

It's helpful to understand that the Romans had three levels of scourging—from the lowest level to the most violent level. Those three levels of scourging were identified by three different words. So, if you put all the details together, we have high confidence that Jesus was scourged twice. This is the word for the lowest scourging. This would be done to someone as a form of punishment, and then they would be released. The third level is by far the most violent. It was reserved for only those who received a death sentence, and it was not unusual that someone would actually die in the process of scourging before they even make it to the cross.

The instrument for scourging was called a flagellum. It had a wooden handle; it had three or four straps of leather, and at the end of those straps were pieces of metal or bone. This was not a whipping. You see images of Jesus where He's got welts on His back. It was not that. The torturer became quite skilled at his craft, and learned how to strike the victim in such a way that the bone or the metal dug into the flesh, and then he would pull the flagellum down and strip layers of skin off the back. The goal was to remove the skin off the back of the victim. At the most violent level, it was common that when they were done, there was no skin and only the skeleton remained. It was an absolutely horrific punishment.

Verse 2 tells us about the **crown of thorns**. These were not little thorns, like on a rosebush. This would have been a date palm with long 8 to 12-inch thorns. Certainly the idea of the pain of jamming this on His head is obvious, but the reason for the date palm thorns was more than that. Almost all scholars agree it was meant to create what they called a *radiant crown*. This is the idea that those long thorns actually created the imagery of these beams of light radiating off of the king. If you look at some old Roman coinage, there are images of Caesar wearing a wreath, and there are beams of light radiating off him, indicating his deity. The closest imagery we would have would be the Statue of Liberty, that has these beams radiating off her head. It's the same idea. So the thorns sticking up were meant to mock both Jesus' claim to be King and His claim to be God.

Verse 3 talks about them—the grammar would be—*continuously* striking Him **in the face**. Again, the idea is that this is an innocent man. The Romans hated the Jews. The Jews hated the Romans. There were not many opportunities where soldiers were allowed the freedom to vent their hatred of the Jews, but they knew, in this moment they had such freedom. Whenever there is mob violence, when people feel like this is a moment where, “I can do anything and get away with it,” you get a glimpse of our true depravity, and that's what's happening here. As for no reason, they strike Him again, and again, and again, in the face. Verse 4:

Pilate came out again and said to them, “Behold, I am bringing Him out to you so that you may know that I find no guilt in Him.” Jesus then came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, “Behold, the Man!” (Vs.4-5)

This is now the second time that Pilate has publicly identified Jesus to be without guilt. But what he brings out is a Man whose face would have been swollen and disfigured, His head bloodied, His robe stained in blood. Why would Pilate scourge an innocent Man? When he says, “**Behold, the Man,**” it is saying, “Behold this pitiful sight. He is no danger to you; He's no risk; He's bruised; He's bloodied. In essence, what Pilate is saying is, “He's innocent. This is enough...this is enough!” He is hoping that there is enough blood and punishment that these religious leaders will find the slightest ounce of compassion and humanity to say, “That's enough; let Him go.” But once again, he greatly underestimates these religious leaders. Verse 6:

So when the chief priests and officers (not the mob, the chief priests and officers) saw Him, they cried out saying, “Crucify, crucify!” Pilate said to them, “Take Him yourselves and crucify Him, for I find no guilt in Him.” The Jews answered him, “We have a law, and by that law He ought to die because He made Himself out to be the Son of God.” (Vs. 6-7)

So Pilate is hopeful that they will accept this to be enough, but it doesn't faze them. These are the chief priests—the religious leaders of the nation—supposedly representing God, but in this moment, they want Him executed. It would be good to remind ourselves what exactly this Man had done that would stir up such violence and hatred against Him. This is what He has done: He has made the lame to walk. He has made the blind to see. He has raised the dead to life. He has walked on water. He has fed 5,000 with a few loaves and fishes. He has loved the unlovable. He has touched the untouchables. He has spent His time with sinners and misfits and losers. He gave hope to a hopeless Samaritan woman by giving her the water her soul has longed for her whole life. He gave compassion and forgiveness to a woman caught in adultery that the religious leaders wanted to put to death. This is what He has done. Oh, and one more thing. He has exposed their sin and their hypocrisy—and for that He must die! This is about power and control and it's them or it's Jesus. So Jesus must die! You hear the frustration in Pilate's voice when he says, “You do it. You take Him; you do it.” For the third time, “I find no guilt.” Pilate knows they can't do that. He's just frustrated and doesn't know what else to do. The Jewish leaders remind him that they have a law. Jesus is guilty of blasphemy, for He has claimed **to be the Son of God**. Therefore, under their law, He must die. The reason they say that is because under the umbrella of the Roman Empire, nations like Israel were allowed to have their own religion and practice that religion. And part of the responsibility of the governor was to allow and promote that. So what they're saying is, “This is our religion; these are our rules. It's your job to follow through on this.” Verse 8:

Therefore when Pilate heard this statement, he was *even* more afraid; and he entered into the Praetorium again and said to Jesus, “Where are you from?” But Jesus gave him no answer. So Pilate said to Him, “You do not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release You and I have authority to crucify You?” Jesus answered, “You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given you from above; for this reason he who has delivered Me to you has *the* greater sin.

(Vs. 8-11)

It's interesting that John says Pilate **was even more afraid**, meaning he was already afraid because there's something about Jesus that has completely unnerved him. Somewhere in this story, Matthew tells us that Pilate's wife sent word that she had had a dream, and Pilate should have nothing to do with Jesus. Perhaps that's part of the fear. The Romans believed it was possible for the Greek gods to come to earth, mingle with humans, and even produce offspring. Perhaps Pilate was concerned that Jesus was some sort of offspring. Thus, his question, "Where are You from?" He knows He's from Galilee. That's not what he's asking. Jesus has already said, "I'm from a different realm," and Pilate now has heard that He's claimed to be the Son of God, so he asked him, "Where are you from?" But Jesus answers him not. What is Jesus supposed to say? He already knows Pilate isn't interested in the truth; he's just looking for a reason to execute Jesus. So Pilate tells Him, "Why don't you answer me? Don't you know I have the power to release you..." which was a joke. If he had the power to release Him, release Him! You've already declared Him innocent three times. He knows he's backed into a corner, "...or to crucify You," to which Jesus responds, "Pilate, you're not really in charge here. You're not running this show. You have no authority, except from above."

Paul tells us in Romans 13, "*All governing authorities are under the sovereign rule of God.*" This is the problem with most politicians; they think they're in charge. They're not in charge. God is in charge, and God lifts them up and God takes them down. Jesus is not in this position because Pilate is running the show. Remember in the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus said, "*I AM,*" and everybody hit the dirt? At any moment in this journey to the cross, Jesus could wipe them all out and go back to the Father and be done with this. The reason Jesus is taking this journey to the cross is because it was the fulfillment of a promise made all the way back in Genesis 3:15.

Jesus knew that two thousand years later, there would be people in Nebraska and around the world that would have no hope if He didn't go to the cross. So, "Pilate, you're not in charge here. That's not what's happening." But He also identifies that the greater sin is with Caiaphas. Pilate didn't want this; Pilate didn't go looking for this. Pilate is trying to get out of it and release Jesus, but what's driving this is Caiaphas. The high priesthood was given to be a mediator between sinful men and women and a holy God. It was the most high and holy calling imaginable within the Jewish religion. Yet in this moment, Caiaphas is determined that Jesus must die. Verse 12:

As a result of this Pilate made efforts to release Him, but the Jews cried out saying, "If you release this Man, you are no friend of Caesar; everyone who makes himself out to be a king opposes Caesar."

This is the chief priests playing their final card and this was a powerful card! What they're saying is, "If you release this one who claims to be a king, we will go to Caesar in Rome, and we will tell him that this is what you've done." The Caesar at this time was Tiberias. Like many of the Caesars, Tiberias was unpredictable. He was highly immoral; he was deeply insecure and always concerned about threats to his throne, Tiberias had already removed other governors and put them to death. We know from history that Pilate was already on thin ice with Caesar. It is highly likely, if these religious leaders would have gone to Caesar, Caesar would have removed him and likely put him to death. This is not an empty threat, and Pilate knows it. Therefore, he's out of options. It's Jesus or Pilate, and he knows that. Verse 13:

Therefore when Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus out, and sat down on the judgment seat at a place called The Pavement, but in Hebrew, Gabbatha. Now it was the day of preparation for the Passover; it was about the sixth hour. And he said to the Jews, “Behold, your King!” So they cried out, “Away with *Him*, away with *Him*, crucify *Him*!” Pilate said to them, “Shall I crucify your King?” (Vs. 13-15a)

One of the primary areas of focus for John in this discussion with Pilate is *Jesus as King*. It starts with Pilate in chapter 18 asking, “Are you the King of the Jews?” It's the focal point of the mocking, and now it comes up with Pilate as he presents Jesus to the chief priests—and he gives them their King. What Pilate doesn't realize is how prophetic he is in that moment. That *is* exactly what he's doing. This is the long-awaited King of Israel. This is the One who has been imaged, who has been promised, who has been pictured, who has been longed for—for hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of years. This is the One who would sit on the throne of David. This is the long-awaited King of Israel. John, chapter one, “*He came to His own and His own received Him not.*” This is their King. This is their long-awaited Messiah! And look at what they have done to Him! They respond:

The chief priests answered, “We have no king but Caesar.” So he then handed Him over to them to be crucified. (Vs. 15b-16)

We'll pick up the story there next week. I want to wrap this up by bringing it back to that stunning confession that the chief priests just made. “**We have no king but Caesar.**” The Jews hated the Romans. They deeply resented them for ruling over them for hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of years. The God of the Hebrews—*Yahweh*—has been faithful to them again and again and again. Yet in this moment—this stunning moment of history—the chief priests of Israel have rejected *Yahweh* as their God and identified Caesar as their one and only king.

This is about power and control, and a willingness to do anything necessary to remain in power and control. The greatest commandment was to “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength,*” yet in this moment, they have traded the God of Israel for Tiberius Caesar, the pagan, immoral ruler. They have traded Jesus for the terrorist, Barabbas. This is an absolutely stunning moment in history.

It's easy to look at them and to shake our heads and to criticize them, but are we sure that the church in America is so different? If it became necessary to pay a significant cost to following Jesus, how many of the eighty percent would ultimately say, “I have no king but Caesar”? In the mid-twentieth century, with Germany under Hitler and the Nazis, the overwhelming majority of the church—both Protestant and Catholic—sided with Hitler. “I have no king but Caesar.” It was a small remnant of the church that stood up and opposed the evil of Hitler. Some of them, like Bonhoeffer, ultimately were executed for their choice to stand for Jesus. Already in our country, you're seeing more and more churches, pastors, preachers, Bible teachers and Christian celebrities compromising, willing to affirm and encourage beliefs and behaviors that are deeply offensive to God in order to be in alignment and accepted by popular culture. “We have no king but Caesar.” There was a time when Christianity was in the mainstream of popular culture in America. Friends, the winds of change, they are blowing, and I do not believe that will continue to be true. And there will be a cost to follow Jesus.

Let me remind you that everything Jesus experiences in chapter 19, He experienced willingly. At any moment He could have stopped this, could have wiped them all out and gone back to the Father and said, “I’m done!” But He willingly took this horrific journey to the cross. Why did he do that? Because He had you in mind, and if He didn't go to the cross, you would have no hope. That's the cost He was willing to pay, so He could spend forever with you.

So what is the cost that you would be willing to pay to be faithful to Him? I have made my decision...I have made my decision! “Here I stand. I have no King but Jesus. I have no King but Jesus, and I invite you to join me as we take our stand together. We have no King but Jesus—the One who is the King of Kings, the One who is the Lord of Lords—for He is the great I AM!

Our Father, my prayer is that many of us would pledge our allegiance to Jesus first, and Jesus alone! We have no King but Jesus. In His name we pray, Amen.

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Introduction

This week, we step into a courtroom where Jesus confronts Pilate's views on authority and kingship, guilt and innocence. Though beaten and wearing a crown made of thorns, there's little doubt that Jesus controls the outcome. Our questions focus on how this shapes our *belief* in Him.

Warm Up *(Suggested time: 30 min)*

Here are some suggestions to get your conversation started:

1. What's something you have that carries sentimental value?

2. What is your favorite time of day and why?

Getting Started

Transition into group discussion.

- 1) Open group discussion with prayer. Here are a few potential prayer items:
 - a. For the Spirit of God to lead you in truth
 - b. For openness to what you're learning together
 - c. For friendships to deepen and grow
 - 2) Invite someone (or a couple of people) to read John 19:1-16 to the group.
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Study Questions *(Suggested time: 40 min)*

Please complete these questions before your group meets.

- 1) Based on things you're learning throughout the book of John and including this passage, what kind of King is Jesus?

- 2) Pastor Bryan has described Pilate as a practical man who wanted to please Rome and keep the peace among the Jews. Read John 19:4-8 to gain some insight on Pilate's leadership.
 - a. Consider what kind of leader Pilate was. Why would He scourge a man he finds no fault in?

 - b. What was Pilate so afraid of? (See also Matthew 27:19)

- 3) If you could put yourself in Pilate's shoes – a practical man, in a dead-end job, and visibly afraid – what would you hope to achieve by claiming authority as he did in verse 10?

What impact would the words of Jesus have on you (as Pilate) in verse 11?

Now read verse 12 and discuss what the phrase "as a result of this" refers to in this exchange between Pilate and Jesus. Can you make an educated guess about what Pilate is thinking?

- 4) As key players in this courtroom drama, the Jewish Chief Priests claim allegiance to Caesar over King Jesus in verse 15.
- a. Who or what do you pledge allegiance to instead of allowing King Jesus to have authority?

 - b. How might you express your *belief* in Jesus this week by giving Him authority in some area of your life?

Prayer *(Suggested time: 10 min)*

A significant part of creating unity with God and one another is being open and honest with our lives. Praying with a group of people may be a new experience for you, or it may be familiar. Whether or not you choose to verbalize your prayer, everyone participates in sharing this time before God together. Here are a couple of suggestions of how you can pray together as a group.

1. Read John 10:14-18 and consider what it means for Jesus to be your Good Shepherd. As thoughts of how Jesus leads, directs, and protects you come to mind, take turns speaking them in simple sentence prayers, “Jesus, thank you for being _____.” or “Lord, we praise you for _____.”

2. This is a group prayer time where each person in the group will pray. Before you start, tell everyone that if someone is not comfortable praying out loud in the group setting, they can pray privately and say “Amen” when they are finished. That will let the next person know it is their turn to pray. The group leader will start the prayer time.