

## The Tragic Irony

### John 18:28-32

So Pilate came outside to them and said, "What accusation do you bring against this man?" (John 18:29)

If you are watching a movie or reading a good book, there is a literary device called dramatic irony that is often utilized. It's that moment in your book or in the movie when you know the characters are going into a situation thinking one thing, but the reality of that situation is far different. This is when we yell at the people in the movie, "Don't go in there! Don't do it! That's a really bad decision!"

There are many of these moments in the Gospel of John and the Apostle is very gifted at highlighting the painful, ironic realities of the arrest, trial and crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth. Most of the characters in John think one thing, but the reality of that situation and the perspective of Jesus is far more momentous.

As we are introduced to Pontius Pilate, we realize that any diplomat or ambassador or politician sent to this region was thrust into an impossible predicament. Whether it was the Assyrians or Babylonians, Persians or Greeks, Romans or Muslims, Crusaders, Ottoman Empire or the British rule, the promised land of Israel had had very little time of peace. The hope of any politician was to keep things quiet, prevent trouble, present a good front to people back home and hope that no major disaster brewed up.

This was the task of a Roman called Pontius Pilate ("Prefect of Judea" inscription discovered in 1962 in the Herodian theatre in Caesarea). For ten years he was tasked with this impossible job after he received his appointment from Emperor Tiberius in AD 26. We don't know a lot about Pilate; maybe he was a career politician or perhaps a soldier who had risen up the ranks. Maybe he thought if he could successfully keep the peace in Judea, better things, better pay, or more appealing postings would come his way. Many historians concluded that he was morally weak, a vacillating man who tried to hide his flaws through brutality (Luke 13:1 tells us that his rule earned him the loathing of the Jewish people when he put down a group of Jews with savage ferocity).

Nearly 2000 years ago, Pontius Pilate woke up on the Jewish Passover thinking it was just another day in miserable Judea. Instead, the Son of God, the incarnate Word of God full of truth and grace, was found bound by the Jewish leaders and placed on his front porch. Jesus was not interested in Pilate's job or political overthrow, but spiritual overthrow. He was not looking for crowns; He was looking for crosses. He was not looking for the exaltation of man, but the exaltation of the Father as He (Jesus) was lifted up as a curse for us.

### The unfathomable riches and love of God are found in the tragic irony of the cross.

<sup>28</sup> Then they brought Jesus from Caiaphas to the Roman governor's residence. (Now it was very early morning.) They did not go into the governor's residence so they would not be ceremonially defiled, but could eat the Passover meal. <sup>29</sup> So Pilate came outside to them and said, "What accusation do you bring against this man?" <sup>30</sup> They replied, "If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you." <sup>31</sup> Pilate told them, "Take him yourselves and pass judgment on him according to your own law!" The Jewish leaders replied, "We cannot legally put anyone to death." <sup>32</sup> (This happened to fulfill the word Jesus had spoken when he indicated what kind of death he was going to die.) (John 18:28-32)

In the Gospel of John there were many plots and attempts on Jesus life (5:18, 7:1, 19, 8:37,40, 10:31, 11:8, 16, 47-53, 12:10). All of these efforts were thwarted, because it was not yet "His time" (7:30, 13:1). Now is the time and Jesus stands before Pilate bound but in full control of His destiny.

#### Why did the Jewish religious leaders need Pilate?

1. All attempts prior to this were fumbled attempts to arrest Jesus. It didn't go well and maybe they didn't want to make the same mistake they did before (8:57, 10:39).
2. The Passover Feast would ensure that Rome would be well prepared and on alert and it was unlawful for the Jewish leaders to put anyone to death (18:31). (What about Stephen in Acts 7? The stoning of Stephen in Acts 7 was done without Rome's consent and was not during a festival. It was more like mob violence than officially sanctioned by the court.)
3. The chief priests clearly wanted to ensure that Jesus was not viewed as a martyr for God's cause but an imposter who died under the curse of God (Matt 26:65-66). Pilate's involvement guaranteed that when sentence was finally passed, Jesus would be executed by crucifixion, not by stoning. They wanted crucifixion and they weren't getting crucifixion without Pilate. Deuteronomy 21:23 declares, "Anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse." They wanted to ensure that Jesus was publicly viewed during Passover as accursed!

However, the Jewish religious leaders appear to have incorrectly assessed the situation. They may have assumed that since Pilate had provided Roman soldiers to assist in the arrest of Jesus (18:3,12), he was giving them a “blank check” to deal with Jesus as they saw fit. The Jewish leaders boldly arrive at Pilate’s home in the early hours of the morning, with Jesus in their custody (verse 28), expecting a quick indictment to the cross. Instead, Pilate required them to declare formal charges against Jesus, charges that they had not been able to establish, even though they worked at this all night long (see Matthew 26:59-60; Mark 14:57-59). What accusation do you bring against this man? What’s the official charge? This question formally opened the Roman judicial proceedings.

Before the Jews, Jesus had confessed that He was “guilty” of being the Son of Man. They reasoned that this “confession” made Him guilty of blasphemy, and that because of this, Jesus must be put to death (Matthew 26:62-65, Mark 14:64). However, this would not get their crucifixion by Rome and was not solid evidence of a capital offense against Caesar.

How does Pilate respond? He tells them to judge Jesus by their own Law. Pilate knew what the Jewish authorities wanted. He said - you deal with it! If they wanted a capital offense, they were going to have to speak up and convince him.

What are the painful, ironic realities of this scene?

- 1) The dwelling of Gentiles was an unclean dwelling. Pilate’s residence was ceremonially unclean. They won’t enter into Pilate’s residence because they want to stay ceremonially pure for Passover. That’s what’s happening here. The painful, ironic reality is that they are holding fast to the ceremonial parts of the Law while they have in their possession, tied and bound, the promised Deliverer and Fulfiller of the Law. They seek to execute the only One who can fulfill and rescue them from the condemnation and judgment of the Law (Rom 10:1-4).
- 2) Another painful irony is that they couldn’t enter Pilate’s residence because they were preparing for the Passover meal. The reason God instituted the Passover was so that people of Israel would always *remember* and *proclaim* the great exodus from Egypt (Ex. 12:14, 25-27). In their arms is the One who will provide the greatest exodus as the promised Deliverer of Israel, the Son of God and Savior. They couldn’t enter Pilate’s residence because they were preparing the Passover meal, and at that very time they are busy manipulating the judicial system to secure the death of him who alone is the true Passover (1 Cor. 5:7).

John tells us that this happened to fulfill the word Jesus had spoken when he indicated what kind of death he was going to die. Jesus says in John 8:28 that “when you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am He.” John 12:32-33, “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” John tells us that Jesus knew the exact kind of death He was going to die (vs. 33).

The double meaning and great tragic irony of the cross is that Jesus is being lifted up on the cross, reserved for Roman rebels. It resulted in God’s glory and Satan’s defeat. The cross showed the angels and principalities in heavenly places, along with the whole world, the unfathomable riches of the love and grace of God. The cross became the watershed event in human history.

We have no hope, unless God, in his remarkable love and grace, is willing to transfer our curse and sentence onto Jesus (Gal 3:13-14). The heart of the gospel is that Christ, who knew no sin, became sin for us. And we not knowing righteousness, received Christ’s perfect righteousness (2 Cor. 5:21, Isaiah 53:4-6).

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### **Our tragic and painful ironies must intersect with the unfathomable riches and love of the cross!**

I think that apart from the love of Christ, these are the questions of our lives:

What do you think of me? Are you looking at what I am doing? Aren’t I great? Do you think I’m ok? Do you accept me? Do you see me as good? Do you like me? Do you love me?

We are frantic in trying to prove our worth. We are frantic in trying to prove our acceptance. We are frantic in trying to pass the test of being someone who is unique and lovable. The power of the cross is that it proves once and for all that we are not what we do, we are not what we have and we are not what others think of us.

The curse, pain, defeat of this life has been taken on by Jesus. Our real, tragic selves and all our circumstances must meet the unfathomable riches and love of the cross. We are held safe by His everlasting and unending love.