

Message #58

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PILATE AND UNEXPECTED ENCOUNTERS WITH JESUS

JOHN 18.38-19.16

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

William Murray III was not looking for Jesus. His parents were both serving in Italy at the end of WW II and were married to other people when he was conceived. His father was a Catholic officer who refused to divorce his wife. William's mom did divorce her husband when she arrived back in the United States. She named her son after his actual father. But she raised William on her own in Baltimore.

Mom was attracted to Communism and Marxism. She regarded herself as an atheist. When William was exposed to daily Bible readings and prayers at school, it bugged her. She filed a lawsuit against the school district. That lawsuit was combined with another lawsuit which eventually was heard by the US Supreme Court. In 1963 the Court ruled that public schools cannot sponsor prayers and Bible readings. Mom went on to form a group based in Texas called the American Atheists. Many of you will recognize her name: Madelyn Murray O'Hare.

After his schooling, William got involved in business and became quite successful. He found that his mom's Marxist views did not work so well in the real world. Along the way, he got caught up with booze and sex. Then he had an unexpected encounter with Jesus. He recognized that he had a problem, and he got involved with a twelve step program. There he encountered Christians who told him about Jesus. In 1980 this son of a famous atheist became a Christian. (PROJECTOR ON--- WILLIAM MURRAY) Worse than that, he became a Baptist minister. He wrote a book entitled *My Life Without God*. He currently serves as chairman of the Religious Freedom Coalition, which has as its mission the defense of America's Christian heritage. Before she died, his mother said this about William: **"One could call this a postnatal abortion on the part of a mother, I guess; I repudiate him entirely and completely for now and all times... He is beyond human forgiveness."** Fortunately, he was not beyond divine forgiveness. (PROJECTOR OFF)

In our ongoing study of John's Gospel we have encountered several people who had unexpected encounters with Jesus. Many of the disciples were not expecting an encounter with the Messiah. Matthew, the tax collector--- among the most despised of occupations among the Jews, was certainly not expecting to be called by Jesus. The Samaritan woman at the well was expecting to draw water at the well when she encountered Jesus. Then there was the lame man healed by Jesus at the Pool of Bethesda. He turned Jesus in to the religious authorities. The blind man healed by Jesus had a more positive response. Now there is Pilate.

In earlier messages we have seen that Pontius Pilate married the daughter of the Roman emperor Tiberius. That may have been largely the reason for Pilate's appointment to be governor of Judea in 26 AD. (PROJECTOR ON--- JUDEA MAP) The Roman province of Judea is marked out in the gold color on this map. The provincial capital was in Caesarea on the coast. (JUDEA MAP) Pilate would show up in Jerusalem for the three annual religious feasts and would bring with him additional troops. If there was going to be trouble with the Jews, it was likely to happen at a time when all of these religious pilgrims were around.

As this Passover feast was about to begin, the Romans received a request from the Jewish leaders for Roman troops to assist in arresting a troublemaker. (PROJECTOR OFF) Jesus was arrested in Gethsemane and brought before Annas, the patriarch of the family of high priests, then before Caiaphas, the actual high priest, then before the Sanhedrin, the high council of Judaism. All of this happened in the night.

Now Jesus was brought before Pilate early on Friday morning. In Chapter 18 we have seen some of the initial discussion that Pilate had with Jesus about the nature of His kingship over the Jews. Pilate recognizes that he is headed for a clash with the Jewish leaders. It has to do with this unexpected encounter with Jesus. Some of us have had unexpected counters with Jesus. Perhaps for some of us, it is an encounter that we are still trying to figure out. We shall look at the passage before us and see what it has to teach us about such encounters.

I.

Beginning in v. 38 of #18 through v. 7 of #19, we find that PILATE DESIRES TO FREE JESUS BECAUSE HE DISLIKES THE JEWS. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. PILATE DESIRES TO FREE...) In the second part of v. 38, which is found on p. 905 of the black Bibles under many of the chairs, we read, **"After he had said this, he [Pilate] went back outside to the Jews and told them, 'I find no guilt in him.'"**

Pilate has quickly determined that Jesus is not a political rebel. He is not one of the Zealots, the Jewish ISIS group that is seeking to kick the Romans out of Judea. Jesus strikes Pilate as more of a religious philosopher. So he wants to let Jesus off.

I explained in an earlier message that Pilate had three major encounters with the Jewish religious leaders. He came out on the losing end of each encounter. A couple of times he received rebukes from the emperor about his handling of the religious situations that happened. So Pilate did not care for the Jews very much, especially for their leaders. When they showed up with a request to rubber stamp their desire to execute this Jesus, he was inclined to resist any effort to be manipulated by them.

John the Apostle, the author of this Gospel, has a purpose of demonstrating that Jesus is the real deal, the Messiah prophesied in the Old Testament. So he is careful to note three times in the passage before us that the representative of the Roman Empire declares that Jesus is not guilty. Verse 38 has the first of these declarations.

The Apostle John is condensing the legal action that happens before the civil government. According to the Gospel of Luke, Pilate learns that Jesus is from Galilee. So he decides to send Jesus to King Herod Antipas, who is the ruler over Galilee, to get his take on this Jesus. Antipas is also in Jerusalem for Passover. But Jesus won't even talk to Herod Antipas, who had recently had John the Baptist executed. So Herod sent Jesus back to Pilate. Perhaps v. 39 takes up the action after this.

Pilate says in v. 39, **“But you have a custom that I should release one man for you at the Passover. So do you want me to release to you the King of the Jews?”** We don't know the origin of this custom. The other Gospels also make reference to it.

Pilate is misreading his audience. He realizes that the religious leaders want Jesus killed, but he sees a larger crowd gathering before him. Pilate probably heard reports about this Jesus being welcomed by large crowds when He showed up in Jerusalem a few days earlier. He has perhaps heard stories about Jesus healing people. So he wrongly thinks that this crowd may go for His release. This is not the same crowd that welcomed Jesus on Palm Sunday. It is likely that those Palm Sunday people were mostly Galileans. The Sanhedrin has been responsible for putting these legal proceedings together overnight. Galilean pilgrims in Jerusalem for the Passover, and other supporters of Jesus, may not have had time to hear about these proceedings.

The Gospels indicate that the disciples of Jesus were not in any kind of mindset to organize a protest against Jesus' arrest. It is likely that the Sanhedrin had gathered their own supporters on this early morning. (MARK 15:11) In Mark #15 v. 11 we are told, **"But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release for them Barabbas instead."**

Verse 40 in our passage makes more specific reference to this other prisoner: (PROJECTOR OFF) **"They [the crowd of Sanhedrin supporters] cried out again, 'Not this man, but Barabbas!' Now Barabbas was a robber."**

Most translations have "robber" or "thief." The original Greek word can mean that. The better term would be "criminal." The Roman government did not deal with thieves or robbers, unless the victim was a Roman official. Jewish courts normally dealt with these matters. Mark #15 v. 7 makes it clear that Barabbas was more than a robber. (PROJECTOR ON--- MARK 15:7) That verse says, **"And among the rebels in prison, who had committed murder in the insurrection, there was a man called Barabbas."** So Barabbas was a guy who was involved in trying to overthrow the Romans, and he had killed someone in the process.

There are a number of ironic things about Barabbas. His name has ironic significance. "Bar" is Aramaic for "son." "Abbas" means "father." So Barabbas is "Son of the Father." Who is Jesus? His claim is that He is the unique Son of the Heavenly Father. Now the crowd is wanting Barabbas to be released in place of Jesus. So Jesus, the innocent one, is going to die in the place of the true rebel and murderer. Jesus is going to have a substitutionary death. He is going to die so that the true sinner can go free. The Jews are choosing to support a rebel and a murderer, and they are choosing to kill their true king. For that they will suffer.

Verse 1 of #19: **"Then Pilate took Jesus and flogged him."** Luke's Gospel seems to provide a fuller explanation of what is happening at this point. (LUKE 23:13) Beginning with v. 13 of #23, Luke tells us, **"Pilate then called together the chief priests and the rulers and the people, (LUKE 23:14) and said to them, 'You brought me this man as one who was misleading the people. And after examining him before you, behold, I did not find this man guilty of any of your charges against him. (LUKE 23:15-16) Neither did Herod, for he sent him back to us. Look, nothing deserving death has been done by him. I will therefore punish and release him."**

Pilate is still trying to free Jesus. He is hoping that a beating will be enough to satisfy the multitude. There were three levels of beatings in the Roman judicial system. None of them were pleasant. Probably this was the least severe of the punishments. (PROJECTOR OFF)

According to vv. 2 & 3 in our text, **“And the soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head and arrayed him in a purple robe. They came up to him, saying, ‘Hail, King of the Jews!’ And struck him with their hands.”** The Roman soldiers probably shared their governor’s dislike of the Jews. In an earlier incident they had come into Jerusalem with their banners flying. On the top of the banners was a figure of the Roman emperor. The Jews made such a fuss about it that they eventually had to remove them. Conquered people in other parts of the empire just added Roman gods to their religious worship. The Jews refused to do that. They had no respect for the Roman gods. Yet the emperor made them be cautious in their treatment of these people. So now there was an opportunity to have some brutal fun with this supposed king of the Jews.

Some Roman coins pictured their leader wearing a crown of date palm branches with the thorns pointed out. In this way it looked like the crown radiated glory. Now the thorns were turned inward to make the victim bleed.

Christians would have recognized the ironic significance of this crown of thorns. Genesis #3 spoke about the results of Adam’s sin. The Lord declared that the ground would be cursed because of it and the first product of the ground would now be thorns. Jesus is bearing God’s curse for man’s sin as He goes to the cross.

As He does so, he wears the trappings of a vassal king. Roman soldiers are actually declaring a truth--- that Jesus is the King of the Jews. But they are mistreating Him. They are beating Him, slapping Him in the face, mocking Him, and--- according to the other Gospels--- spitting in His face. It is one big comedy to the Roman soldiers, but it is, in reality, a tragedy. They are bringing judgment upon themselves.

Verses 4 & 5 tell us, **“Pilate went out again and said to them, ‘See, I am bringing him out to you that you may know that I find no guilt in him.’ So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, ‘Behold the man!’”** Pilate is still trying to free Jesus. For the second time, he declares that he finds no guilt in Jesus. If Jesus is truly innocent, Pilate should free Him. He should not have had Him beaten in the first place.

Now Pilate presents Jesus to the crowd. He probably looked like a pathetic creature. He was bloody and beaten. He had little resemblance to a king or a dangerous rebel. Pilate presents Him as “the man.” He was indeed that. Jesus favorite description for Himself was “Son of man.” But Jesus was also much more than just a man.

According to v. 6, **“When the chief priests and the officers saw him, they cried out, ‘Crucify him, crucify him!’ Pilate said to them, ‘Take him yourselves and crucify him, for I find no guilt in him.’”** Pilate is frustrated. He wants to free Jesus, but the crowd is not satisfied with a beating. They want Jesus dead. Perhaps Pilate is saying, “If you won’t respect my judgment, crucify Him yourselves.” They do not have the authority to do that. Only Pilate can carry out that judgment.

Verse 7: **“The Jews answered him, ‘We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has made himself the Son of God.’”** The Old Testament law said that the penalty for blasphemy was death. Thus the religious leaders are revealing their real complaint. The charge of rebellion and treason is simply a cover to get Jesus killed by the Romans.

But another irony is that the Law also said that the Messiah had to suffer and die. Such was the testimony of Isaiah #53. Also at the beginning of John’s Gospel in #1 (PROJECTOR ON--- JOHN 1:29), the Apostle quoted John the Baptist when he saw Jesus, **“Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.”** Such was the mission of the Son of God. The ultimate plan was for Him to die as a sacrificial lamb.

Thus it is that Pontius Pilate desires to free Jesus, primarily out of a dislike for the Jews, especially for their leaders. But his desire seems to be thwarted. He has the power to free Jesus, but he seems unable to do the right thing.

II.

In vv. 8-12 of #19 we find that PILATE DESIRES TO FREE JESUS BECAUSE HE FEARS HIM. (II. PILATE DESIRES TO FREE...) According to v. 8, **“When Pilate heard this statement, he was even more afraid.”** Apparently this was the first time that Pilate had heard the term “Son of God” applied to Jesus.

In Roman and Greek mythology there were stories of the offspring of the gods becoming semi-divine beings who had miraculous powers. Hercules, for example, was supposedly the result of a union

between a god and a human--- between Zeus and the woman Alcmene. He was alleged to have miraculous powers.

Pilate may well have heard stories about Jesus having miraculous healing abilities. Now he hears the Jews describing him as the Son of God. Pilate has just had this Jesus beaten. Perhaps he is now in danger of judgment.

The other factor affecting Pilate was a message that he received from his wife. (MATTHEW 27:19) According to Matthew #27 v. 19, **“Besides, while he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, ‘Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered much because of him today in a dream.’”** Romans, even educated Romans, were superstitious people. A wife who sent him a warning about an ominous dream would increase the fear and angst that Pilate was experiencing.

The story continues in v. 9 of our text: (PROJECTOR OFF) **“He entered his headquarters again and said to Jesus, ‘Where are you from?’ But Jesus gave him no answer.”** Pilate’s fear is growing. He is asking not about Jesus’ geographic origin, but about His ultimate origin. If Jesus had been properly trained in modern evangelistic techniques, He would have pulled out his Four Spiritual Laws and explained the gospel. But Jesus seems to think that Pilate has had his chance to respond to his spiritual overtures. He didn’t want to talk about truth when Jesus brought up the subject. Pilate’s courage has weakened. He is in the process of giving in to public pressure, despite his fear and dislike of the Jews.

We read in vv. 10 & 11, **“So Pilate said to him, ‘You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?’ Jesus answered him, ‘You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin.’”** Pilate might think initially that Jesus is talking about the authority of Rome. But His reference to sin makes it clear that Jesus is speaking about a heavenly authority.

All of this is working out according to God’s sovereign plan. Yet at the same time, human beings are responsible for the decisions which they make. Pilate is about to make a bad decision. But the one who handed over Jesus to Pilate is guilty of an even greater sin. I suspect that the reference is to the high priest Caiaphas. As a Jew who was educated in the Hebrew Scriptures, He should have recognized the fulfillment of prophecies made concerning the Messiah. These are the final words of Jesus to Pilate.

In the first part of v. 12 we are told, **“From then on Pilate sought to release him...”** He is still wanting to free Jesus. He now has fear of Jesus stacked on top of his dislike for the Jews. But will it be enough to overcome the other pressures that he faces?

It is good for people to have a healthy fear of the God who is really there. It is good to be nice toward Jesus and toward Christians. But niceness and fear are not enough. What is necessary to connect with the God who is really there is a faith commitment. It is a faith commitment that supersedes the other pressures of the world around us.

III.

In vv. 12-19 we find that PILATE CHOOSES TO CONDEMN JESUS BECAUSE HE CARES ABOUT HIS OWN POSITION. (PROJECTOR ON--- PILATE CHOOSES TO CONDEMN JESUS...) In the second part of v. 12, the author John writes, **“...but the Jews cried out, ‘If you release this man, you are not Caesar’s friend. Everyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar.’”**

This is all hypocrisy. The Jewish leaders did not care about Caesar. They just wanted Jesus dead. Thirty years later these Jewish religious leaders would back a rebellion against the Romans. That would result in the destruction of Jerusalem and the disappearance of Israel and Judea as a nation for 2000 years.

But Pontius Pilate was on thin ice with the Roman emperor. He had already been rebuked by Tiberius for his handling of the Jews. Tiberius was now in his seventies. In these latter years of his life he was becoming increasingly paranoid. He was handing out death sentences like candy. We know from history that Pilate was a close friend of the head of the Praetorian Guard. The Praetorian Guard was the military unit that was responsible for the security of Caesar. Its leader was a man named Sejanus. The Roman historian Tacitus (TACITUS QUOTATION) said this about Sejanus: **“...the closer a man is with Sejanus, ...the stronger his claim to the emperor’s friendship.”** (Tacitus, *Annals*, VI. Viii)

In 31 AD Sejanus was sacked by the emperor and executed along with several of his friends. The date for the crucifixion of Jesus is placed at 30 AD by some and 33 AD by others. I am inclined to agree with the latter date. If that is the case, then Pilate’s status in our text was even more shakey. His position was in danger if charges got back to Rome that he was backing an enemy of the emperor.

In His talk at the Lord's Supper a few hours earlier (JOHN 15:14), Jesus had told His disciples, **"You are my friends if you do what I command you."** Pilate is being forced by the situation to decide whose friendship was going to be his priority.

We come then to v. 13 in our passage. **"So when Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judgment seat at a place called The Stone Pavement, and in Aramaic Gabbatha."** (HEROD'S PALACE 2) There is debate about the exact location of this hearing. Some think that it was at the Fortress Antonia next to the temple. Most recent commentators suspect that it was at Herod's Palace, a bit further to the west.

A couple of weeks ago I referred to the British legal system where the judge is on the bench, and the defendant is in a place called "the dock." In our situation it seems that Pontius Pilate is on the bench, and Jesus is in the dock. But from an eternal perspective, it is Jesus who is on the bench, and Pilate is truly in the dock. His eternal destiny is at stake in regard to what he will do with Jesus. (PROJECTOR OFF)

According to v. 14, **"Now it was the day of Preparation of the Passover. It was about the sixth hour. He said to the Jews, 'Behold your King!'"** There is some debate about both time references here. I am inclined to think that the day of Preparation of the Passover is the day before the Sabbath in the Passover week. The first day of Passover will always be the first day of the full moon. The Day of Preparation of the Passover would always be Friday.

There is more uncertainty about the sixth hour. The other Gospels indicate that the crucifixion of Jesus began at the third hour, which would be 9 AM, or the third hour after sunrise. This hearing had to be sometime before that. Some think that John was using a Roman chronology which counted hours after midnight. Others think that it was just a general time reference to a time before noon.

Verses 15 and 16: **"They cried out, 'Away with him, away with him, crucify him!' Pilate said to them, 'Shall I crucify your King?' The chief priests answered, 'We have no king but Caesar.' So he delivered him over to them to be crucified."** Both the Jews and the Romans have made a decision. The Jews have denied their Messianic hope. They have declared that Caesar was their only king. This was blasphemy. The teaching of the Hebrew Scriptures was that God was their ultimate king.

There is an ancient Jewish ritual that has been recited by religious Jews as part of their ceremony for centuries. The exact date of its origin is uncertain. It may have originated before the time of Jesus. At one point (PROJECTOR ON--- PASSOVER HAGGADAH) it makes this declaration: **“From everlasting to everlasting Thou art God; beside Thee we have no king, no redeemer, or savior... We have no king but Thee.”** Thus the religious leaders were bringing condemnation upon themselves and their people. In 70 AD the Romans would come in and destroy Jerusalem. They would level the temple. Israel would not exist as a nation for 2000 years. The temple is yet to be rebuilt. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Although Pilate was inclined to release Jesus, he cared more about his own position than doing the right thing. In the face of pressure, he chose to condemn Jesus. A few years later the Jews would lodge another complaint with Caesar about the behavior of Pilate, and he would be thrown out of office and sent into exile.

There are many Pontius Pilates in the world around us. They are people who have unexpected encounters with Jesus. They may develop positive feelings toward Jesus, but they are reluctant to make a true commitment. Under the pressures of the world around them, the concern about their own position and their perceived self-interest result in a decision to pass Him by. Others, like William Murray, decide to make a faith commitment.

The broader issue involved here is doing what is right in the face of opposition and pressure. I read this week that television star Alyssa Milano gathered fifty fellow actors who promised to boycott any filming in Georgia if its governor signed a law passed by the legislature outlawing abortion after an unborn baby's heartbeat can be detected. Georgia governor Brian Kemp said that he can't govern based on a fear of **“what someone in Hollywood thinks about me.”**

Georgia native Jimmy Carter says that Democrats should abandon their pro-abortion stance. History professor John Fea says that there are plenty of Democrats who agree with Carter, but they are inclined not to speak out because **“they don't want to be ostracized by the party or perceived as opposing women' rights.”** (*World*, 4/27/2019) Concern about position or status outweighs doing what is right.

We who are Christians regularly face pressures to not do what is right because of temptations to have concern about our position. I might not be respected at school if I speak out for Jesus. My job prospects at work might be affected if I speak out for what is right. People might think that I am a religious fanatic if I am too bold in my witness for Jesus.

But we can always be confident that Jesus will be with us when we seek to do what is right. Jesus said, **“You are my friends if you do what I command you.”** (John 15:14)