

Luke 23:1-25 Jesus' Trials Before the Romans

Pontius Pilate was the Roman procurator of Judea. He ruled there for ten years, from AD 26–36. His headquarters were at Caesarea, but he frequently went up to Jerusalem. Pilate, according to one source, was a “typical Roman ... of the imperial period, a man not without some remains of the ancient Roman justice in his soul, yet pleasure-loving, [overbearing], and corrupt. He hated the Jews whom he ruled, and in times of irritation freely shed their blood. They returned his hatred ..., and accused him of every crime, [mis]administration, cruelty, and robbery.”¹

An inscription at Caesarea gives the technical title of his position as, prefect of Judaea (*praefectus Iudaeae*). A prefect (ἡγεμών) was a leader of 500–1,000 military troops. The office involved military, financial, and judicial responsibilities (Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 44).²

Pilate's cruel behavior and disregard for Jewish customs began immediately upon his arrival in [Judea] in AD 26. He first offended the Jews by bringing Roman [flags/pennants]—with images of the emperor—into Jerusalem. This created a near-riot among the Jews. A second conflict occurred after Pilate took funds from the [temple] treasury to build aqueducts. When the Jews protested, his soldiers beat them with clubs, and many Jews died. On another occasion, Pilate placed shields bearing the emperor's name in ... Jerusalem. The Jews requested that Pilate remove the shields. When he refused, they appealed to Emperor Tiberius by letter. Tiberius was infuriated and ordered Pilate to remove the shields.³ Such errors caused Pilate to fall into disfavor with the Roman leadership, and he was eventually removed from office in AD 36.

Pilate returned to Rome, but nothing is recorded of him after his arrival there. His name fades into obscurity. Had he not appeared in the pages of the Gospels, he would have been little more than a footnote in history. But because of his association with Jesus, Pilate is one of the most recognizable characters in ancient history.

¹ M. G. Easton, *Easton's Bible Dictionary* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1893).

² Michael Brandon Massey, “Pontius Pilate,” ed. John D. Barry et al., *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

³ Michael Brandon Massey, “Pontius Pilate,” ed. John D. Barry et al., *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

And there is no doubt that Pilate was a genuine historical figure. In 1961, archaeologists found physical evidence of Pilate's existence and activity in the Holy Land. They uncovered a block of stone with an inscription mentioning Pontius Pilate and his position in the Roman Empire. So here's another example of how archaeology confirms the Bible.

Today we begin Luke chapter 23. Perhaps the main theme in this passage is that Jesus is innocent of the charges brought against him. Both Pilate and Herod agree that Jesus did nothing worthy of death. In spite of his innocence, the corrupt Jewish leaders insist on his death. Humanly speaking, Jesus died because the Jewish religious officials pressured Pilate into killing him. But from a divine point of view, all of this happened as a fulfillment prophecy. Jesus was rejected by his people, mocked and ridiculed, abused, and ultimately crucified in accordance with God's foreknowledge and plan.

Let's take a look at Jesus' trial before the Roman authorities.

I. .1-7 The first trial before Pilate⁴

- A. .1 The "multitude" would have been the whole council of the Jews, the Sanhedrin. Jesus had a trial before them, and once they were satisfied that they had evidence to convict Jesus, they brought him to Pilate.
- B. .1 Jesus stands before Pilate.
 - 1. Pilate occupied a Roman fortress in the city of Jerusalem—the Praetorium. The Romans built this fortress in the city because the Jews were constantly revolting and rioting. The Romans wanted a large group of soldiers in the city to deal with these constant uprisings.
 - 2. The Jews hated Pilate, and Pilate hated the Jews. One Jewish writer from that time (Philo) called Pilate "inflexible, merciless, and obstinate." He was a cruel tyrant who shed gallons of Jewish blood. But the Jews needed him at this point; they had to persuade Pilate to kill Jesus.

⁴ Some of this basic outline from Roy E. Gingrich, *The Gospel of Luke* (Memphis, TN: Riverside Printing, 2001), 64–65.

3. The Jews did not have the right to enact capital punishment. The Romans reserved that right for themselves. So if the Jews wanted someone killed, they would have to convince the Romans to do it. And the best way to get the Romans to kill someone was to convince them that the person was a threat to the government. If they could convince Pilate that Jesus was an insurrectionist/revolutionary, they would probably kill him. So that's the charge that they bring.
- C. .2 The Jews make their accusations against Jesus.
1. The main charge that the Jews had against Jesus was a religious one—blasphemy. He claimed that he was the Son of God, the Messiah. But they couldn't take that charge to Pilate. He wouldn't have cared about religious matters like that. So they brought other charges against Jesus.
 2. They charged him with “perverting the nation.”
 - a) I.e., misleading the nation, deceiving the nation. The “nation,” of course, is the Jewish nation—Israel.
 - b) They seem to be charging Jesus with seducing the Jews away from loyalty to Rome. This was a false charge. Jesus never tried to lead the nation in rebellion against Rome.
 3. They charged him with “forbidding to give tribute/tax to Caesar.”
 - a) This was a serious accusation. Refusal to pay taxes to the Romans was a form of rebellion, and Rome took that very seriously.
 - b) This was an absolutely false charge. Remember Jesus' statement, “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's...” (20:25). He never told anyone to withhold paying taxes.
 4. They charged him with claiming to be “Christ a king.”
 - a) This is a true accusation. Jesus did claim to be Christ the king of the Jews. He was claiming divine authority over the people.
 - b) Anyone claiming to be a king would clearly be a threat to Roman rule. That's what the Sanhedrin wanted Pilate to think.

- c) But Jesus' kingdom was no threat to the Roman Empire. In fact, in the other Gospel accounts, we find the record of Jesus saying to Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36).
 - d) Jesus' kingdom was a threat to the Jewish religious leaders, but not to Rome.
 - 5. So the Jews here were accusing Jesus of being a politically-dangerous person. Pilate would more likely condemn Jesus if he believed Jesus was creating civil unrest. So that's the charge.
- D. .3 Jesus admits that He is a king.
 - 1. .3 The question: (lit) "*You* are the king of the Jews?"
 - 2. Jesus answered, "Thou sayest it"—lit "you are saying." He probably means something like "what you say is true" or "it is as you say."
 - 3. Jesus was the King of the Jews, the Messiah, the Son of God. He made that claim very clearly just a few days before this when he entered the city at the Triumphal Entry. The city welcomed him as their king, and he accepted their worship.
 - 4. Many of the people accepted Jesus as their king, but the Jewish religious leaders did not.
- E. .4 Pilate declares Jesus innocent.
 - 1. We know from the other Gospel accounts that Pilate took some time to interview Jesus before coming to this conclusion. Cf. vs. 14b.
 - 2. Pilate actually *emphasizes* here that he found no fault in Jesus (lit. "no cause/no legal grounds of action do I find in this man."). I.e., these charges had no basis; there was no reason for punishment. Pilate does not believe the accusations against Jesus are true.
 - 3. That should have been the end of the trial. His next words should have been, "He is free to go." Pilate is the judge, he'd heard the accusations, and he found Jesus innocent; that was his verdict. He should have let him go. That would have been just and fair.
 - 4. But that was not God's plan, as we know. And the Jews were not ready to let him go. So the story goes on.

F. .5 The Jews repeat their previous accusation—he “stirreth up the people” from Galilee to Jerusalem.

1. The word “fierce” means “urgent, insistent.” They were not willing to let the matter rest. They kept pressing Pilate.
2. The word “stir up” (ἀνασείω) means “to incite, to shake up, to disturb, to instigate.” He’s inciting civic turmoil and unrest from Galilee to Jerusalem.
3. The Jews bring this accusation about stirring up the people because they know that Pilate’s job is to keep the peace in this region. He doesn’t want the people to be stirred up; he wants to avoid civil unrest. If someone were inciting riots or sedition, Pilate would want to deal very severely with that person.

G. .6-7 Pilate punts.

1. When he heard that Jesus was from Herod’s province, Galilee, he saw a way of getting rid of this annoying case.
2. It seems that Pilate is trying his best to get himself out of this sticky situation. He believes Jesus is innocent, but he knows he has to try to satisfy the Jews.

Pilate is in a difficult situation because the Jews had caused him trouble previously, and the government officials in Rome were not happy with him. If the Jews rioted or revolted again—if Pilate could not keep the peace in Jerusalem—it was likely that he would lose his position as governor. So he’s in a sticky spot. He doesn’t want to rile up the Jews, but he also doesn’t want to kill an innocent man. Maybe Herod could take care of this difficult situation.

3. .7 He sent Jesus to appear before Herod, who was then residing in Jerusalem during the Feast of the Passover.

II. The trial before Herod .8–12

A. This Herod is Herod Antipas, the ruler (“tetrarch” 3:1) of Galilee and Perea. His father was Herod the Great, the previous ruler of Judea. When Herod the Great died, his territory was divided up between his sons. Eventually, Pilate was given the job of governing Judea. Herod Antipas is the ruler over Galilee, about 80 miles northeast of Jerusalem. This is the same Herod to cut off the head of John the Baptist.

- B. .8 Herod had heard about Jesus and he hoped to see Jesus perform a miracle. Herod was interested in Jesus for his entertainment value.

BTW, could Jesus have produced a miracle that would have convinced Herod? Yes, had Jesus wanted to prove himself to be the Son of God, he easily could have done a miracle to prove his claims to be true. The fact that Jesus didn't do a miracle or even say anything shows that he is not trying to save himself. He's intentionally moving toward his own death.

1. .9 Herod asked Jesus many questions, but Jesus just ignored him; he didn't respond, didn't defend himself. This sounds like Isa 53:7—"He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth."
2. .10 The Jewish leaders "vehemently accused him," but Jesus did not respond. The word "vehemently" implies that the Jews were making these accusations very forcefully. But Jesus just ignored them.

- C. .11 Finding that he couldn't provoke a response from Jesus, Herod and his soldiers made fun of him by arraying him in a kingly robe. This was mockery or ridicule, and it appears as if Herod himself participates in making fun of Jesus—"Herod, with his men of war..."

- D. .11end Herod sent Jesus back to Pilate, and we find out later (vs. 15), that Herod found no cause for Jesus' death. Herod didn't accept any charges against Jesus; he didn't find him guilty of what the Jews were accusing him. In fact, Herod could have set Jesus free. The Jews were not able to prove their case against him.

III. The second trial before Pilate (23:13–25)

In this section, we find a contest of sorts between Pilate and the Jewish leaders. Pilate wants to set Jesus free, but the Jewish leaders want to see Jesus crucified. The harder Pilate attempts to free Jesus, the more the Jews insist that he should be killed. Eventually, Pilate gives in to the demands of the Jews.

- A. .14 Pilate had questioned Jesus and found him to be innocent. The charges against him are not true.
1. .15 Herod found no fault. Herod would have been more familiar with Jewish issues than Pilate was. Not even Herod found anything worthy of death in Jesus.
 2. .16 Pilate would chastise him and release him.

- a) Pilate was suggesting that he'd beat or whip Jesus. This was a serious punishment, but not as violent and dangerous as a flogging/scourging.
 - b) Jesus was innocent of the charges against him, yet Pilate was willing to abuse and mistreat him.
 - c) Pilate probably hoped that the Jews would be satisfied with that. Maybe they'd be satisfied to see Jesus bloodied and humiliated.
3. .17 Customarily, the Roman ruler would release a prisoner during "the feast" – i.e., the Passover. Here's another opportunity. Pilate could release Jesus because of this tradition.
- B. .18 The Jews were not satisfied with Pilate's plan.
- 1. "Away with this man" is a way of saying "execute this man." The whole crowd is now shouting for Jesus' death.
 - 2. They would rather have Barabbas, a notorious insurrectionist and murderer, released to them. They chose a *murderer* over their *Messiah*. They accused Jesus of insurrection, then asked for an insurrectionist to be released. Doesn't make much sense.
- Quote:** Luke portrays the choice available for Jesus' opponents as a clear decision between good and evil; a holy, righteous man and a murderer; Jesus and Barabbas.⁵
- Their choice of Barabbas over Jesus shows their murderous hearts. When they had the opportunity to choose the good, they chose the evil.
- C. .20-23 Things were becoming more intense, more heated. This situation could easily spiral out of control.
- 1. .20 Pilate is still looking for a way to release Jesus. He tries to convince them that Jesus should go free. Pilate deserves at least a little credit for attempting to release Jesus.
 - 2. .21 The crowds were demanding Jesus' crucifixion.

⁵ Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, vol. 24, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 582.

- a) The crowd was getting loud, crying out for Jesus' death. The grammar here suggests continued, constant crying out for Jesus' crucifixion—"they were crying out."
 - b) This crowd could easily turn into a mob and riot.
 - c) The Jews wanted the Romans to impose a painful and humiliating death on Jesus. They demanded his crucifixion.
 - d) Crucifixion was the common means of execution for enemies of the state. If you were a citizen of the Roman Empire, you would be spared crucifixion. Rome reserved crucifixion for serious criminals and slaves.
3. .22 Pilate again declares that he found "no cause of death" in Jesus. This is the third time that Luke records Pilate stating that Jesus did nothing worthy of death. If we look at all the Gospel accounts, it appears that Pilate states five times that Jesus was innocent.
- .22end Pilate still hopes that he could appease the crowd by having Jesus beat and whipped.
4. .23 The crowds would not be satisfied with anything less than Jesus' death. The mob was "**instant** with loud voices." We would use the word "insistent" instead of "instant."
- a) The word (ἐπίκειμαι) means "to oppress, to bear down."
 - b) The Jewish leaders kept up the pressure, kept insisting with great passion that Jesus be crucified. They kept pushing Pilate to give in to their murderous intent.
5. .23end The voices of the crowd and of the chief priests prevailed. That is, the crowd overpowered (κατισχύω) Pilate's desire to release Jesus. The crowd intimidated Pilate into caving in to their demands.

The Jews were just about ready to riot. Pilate understood that if he didn't calm things down, this situation could go very badly for him.

He decided that it was more in his interests to preserve the peace rather than insure justice for Jesus. He could avoid a riot if he simply gave in to their demands, and so that's what he does. The other Gospel accounts tell us that Pilate washed his hands and declared himself to be clean from the guilt of Jesus' innocent blood. And the Jewish people infamously and coldly respond, "His blood be on us and on our children" (Mt 27:24-25).

D. .24 Pilate sentenced Jesus to death.

The word "gave sentence" (ἐπικρίνω) is a legal term for a judicial decision or a verdict. Pilate knew that Jesus was innocent, but he ruled against him anyways. He sentenced an innocent man to a cruel death.

Quote: This pronouncement, made by a judge who again and again had declared that Jesus was innocent, was the most shocking travesty of justice history has ever recorded.⁶

E. .25 Pilate gives in to the demands of the Jews.

Notice the language—"he delivered (παραδίδωμι) Jesus to their will."

1. This is the same root word used of Judas' betrayal of Jesus.
2. Also, Isa 53 tells us "the Lord delivered him up for our sins...his soul was delivered up to death." So Pilate inadvertently fulfilled OT prophecy.

Quote: No sympathy ... should be lost over a man who willingly executed someone he knew to be innocent. The one human being who had the most to do with Jesus' crucifixion was Pontius Pilate. He had the authority to release an innocent man or crucify him. He chose the latter to preserve his political career. As a result, history and the church will always confess that Jesus "was crucified under Pontius Pilate."⁷

The leading Roman authorities, Pilate and Herod, both agreed that Jesus had done nothing wrong and was not worthy of death. That's an important part of the Christian Gospel. Jesus didn't die for his own sins; he didn't deserve to die. He voluntarily laid down his life as a substitutionary sacrifice for our sins. He was the sinless lamb of God.

⁶ William Hendriksen and Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Luke*, vol. 11, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953–2001), 1019.

⁷ Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, vol. 24, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 583.

Pilate is a good example of a man who tried to resolve a difficult situation justly, but ultimately gave in to pressure. He capitulated; he caved in. Instead of doing the right thing, he did the convenient thing. Instead of protecting an innocent victim, he protected himself.

Under pressurized situations, it's easy to cave in, to compromise, to capitulate to those who want you to do wrong. Let's not behave like Pilate. It's hard to stand up for truth and righteousness, but that's what we must do. We must not give in to the pressure to conform to the will of the crowd.

Jesus obviously could have avoided this whole situation. He could have escaped. He could have defended himself. He could have done a miracle to substantiate his claims. But he subjects himself to this fraudulent set of trials in order to fulfill the will of God and to provide salvation for us. He patiently endured these trials so that he might lay down his life as a sacrifice, that we might be saved.