

“It Was About the Sixth Hour”

The Fifty-Eighth in a Series of Sermons on the Gospel of John

Texts: John 19:1-16a; Isaiah 52:13-53:12

Who would have ever thought that one of the most significant events in human history would play out in a Roman military headquarters in Jerusalem, in a trial presided over by a man (the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate) who is at first curious about Jesus' presence before him, then convinced of Jesus' innocence, then angered by Jesus' accusers (the Jews) who refuse to take “yes” for an answer, and then as the drama unfolds, becomes increasingly worried that he is being drawn into something much greater than he first thought, and who then does everything in his power to put an end to the spectacle this trial has become, before finally giving in to the Jews, ordering the death of Jesus by crucifixion. It has been said that the Lord works in mysterious ways. Surely, Jesus' trial before Pilate is one of the most mysterious!

There is no question that Jesus' appearance before Pontius Pilate is one of the most dramatic scenes in the whole of the New Testament. Pilate wants nothing more than to get through another Passover without incident. He knows nothing and cares less about Jewish theology. He is aware of the constant infighting between the various Jewish factions—the ongoing feud between the Pharisees (the theological conservatives) and the Sadducees (the theological liberals). Pilate knows the Jews do not trust him, nor like him, and that they long for the day when they are free from Roman occupation. He also knows that when the Jews bring Jesus before him on the morning of the Passover (the Jews most sacred holy day) something much more than meets the eye is going on behind the scenes. What could this man Jesus have possibly done to upset the Jews so greatly?

As we make our way through the Gospel of John, we have come to the Passion Narrative (chapters 18-21 in John's Gospel). So far in these chapters, John has recounted Jesus' betrayal by Judas (one of his own disciples), Jesus' arrest in Gethsemane (where Jesus had gone to pray with his disciples after celebrating the Passover together), Jesus' interrogation by Annas (the high-priest emeritus, who ignored the rules of Jewish legal procedure to personally question Jesus about his disciples and his teaching), before Jesus was turned over to Caiaphas for trial (Annas' son-in-law, and the current high priest). John also tells us that three times, Peter denied knowing Jesus, and that after the third time he denied his Lord, a rooster crowed, exactly as Jesus had foretold in the upper room earlier that same evening.

Although the synoptic gospels go into great detail about Jesus' trial before the Sanhedrin—informing us that Jesus was unanimously convicted without any evidence against him, and that the Sanhedrin formally ratified the verdict from Jesus' trial before Caiaphas early on Friday morning—John skips over these events. John simply tells us that Annas bound Jesus over to Caiaphas, who, in turn, handed Jesus over to Pilate, which sets up the dramatic scene we covered last time in John 18:28-40, with Jesus (who is Israel's Messiah and the true heir to David's throne) standing before the same Gentile pagan who had offended much of Israel by insisted upon posting Roman legion banners throughout Jerusalem which identified Caesar Tiberias as a god. Only the mysterious providence of God could have brought Pilate and Jesus together, with Pilate seemingly holding Jesus' fate in his own hands.

After questioning Jesus, Pilate acknowledges Jesus' innocence, as a goodwill gesture, and in what had become a customary act, Pilate offered the Jews a choice as to whether or not he would release Jesus or

Barabbas because it was Passover. The latter was a man who had been arrested for insurrection (the ESV uses the weaker term, robber)—the very thing about which Pilate had questioned Jesus, who was satisfied that Jesus was no threat to Rome, Herod, Pilate, or to the peace of Jerusalem during the Passover.

In what is a remarkable irony (typical of John's Gospel), John recounts that after Pilate made his offer to release one of his two prisoners, the crowd began chanting for the release of Barabbas, and demanded that Jesus be the one put to death. The shocking nature of the crowd's demand that Barabbas be the one released can be understood only in light of the fact that on Palm Sunday (just five days earlier), Jesus entered Jerusalem in a manner not been seen since the days of David and Solomon. Crowds chanting messianic anthems cheered for Jesus as he entered the city, apparently, to claim David's throne and then return the nation to its former glory. But days later, on the morning of the Passover, here stands Jesus seemingly helpless before Pilate, accused of unspecified evil, deserted by his disciples, and largely rejected by his own people, who instead want Barabbas (a terrorist) released. How did it come this?

There are three reasons why Jesus finds himself alone before Pilate. The first reason is that Jesus has been rejected by his people—Israel. The Jewish religious leadership vehemently rejected Jesus from the moment his messianic mission began—because they saw in Jesus a threat to their own power and prestige, not a messiah sent from God. Even those most loyal to Jesus, his own disciples, fled after Jesus was arrested and have gone into hiding for fear that what is happening to Jesus will happen to them. Jesus must face Pilate without them. And from the moment that those Jews seeking in Jesus someone who can deliver them from Roman oppression realized what Pilate had come to understand—that Jesus' kingdom was not from this world and that Jesus had no political designs—they turned against Jesus. Almost as if to take out their anger against Rome upon Jesus, the crowds chant for the release of a man (Barabbas) who had been arrested because of his desire to instigate a revolt against Rome. Jesus, the Prince of Peace, now has been rejected by all of Israel—the Sanhedrin, his disciples, and now the people.

The second reason why Jesus is standing before Pilate is that Pilate knows and accepts no authority but the military might of Rome. Pilate's job is to keep the peace in a very volatile region of the Roman empire. He knows that Jesus entered Jerusalem to great fanfare, and that messianic rumors about him are everywhere among the Jews. Pilate's own soldiers participated in Jesus' arrest. Pilate does not care who Jesus is to the Jews, only that Jesus not disrupt the peace on Pilate's watch. Pilate does not understand what Jesus has done to offend his people so greatly that they would turn Jesus over to him for execution on the morning of the Passover. He surely understands that Jesus' fate is in his hands, and that the petty jealousies and political intrigue of the Sanhedrin are behind the arrest and conviction of Jesus by the high priest. The Jews want Jesus executed quickly, but Pilate is not about to accept their verdict on face value. He too has rules to follow, and Pilate soon realizes that the man before him has done nothing wrong.

It is hard to understand what, exactly, Pilate thinks about all this—though as the gospels indicate, once Pilate realizes Jesus' innocence and hears Jesus speak, he grows increasingly apprehensive about going through with the execution. According to Matthew's account of Jesus' trial before Pilate (Matthew 27:19), "*while [Pilate] 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.'*" By this time, Pilate is starting to wonder about just who it is that is standing before him. Pilate has asked Jesus, "*Are you the King of the Jews?*" He has asked him, "*Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done?*" When Jesus answered the governor, it is obvious that Pilate did not get the answer from Jesus which he expected. "*You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth*

listens to my voice.” Jesus has come to do the Father’s will, so as to accomplish our salvation. Pilate wants no part of Jewish debates over obscure points of theology, and he cynically dismisses Jesus’ main point. “*What is truth?*” Pilate snarls.

But John wants his reader to know the third and most important reason why Jesus was taken before Pilate. In John 18:32, the disciple informs us that, “*this was to fulfill the word that Jesus had spoken to show by what kind of death he was going to die.*” God willed that Jesus die by crucifixion so that Jesus might bear in his body the curse rightly meant for us. This is where God chooses to reveal his glory and save his people. Had the Jews gone ahead with their plot and put Jesus to death by stoning him, the Romans probably would have done nothing about it—Pilate has even tried to refer this whole matter back to the Jews, and will do so again.

Yet the Jews are afraid that if they take it upon themselves to execute Jesus, then they risk the wrath of their own people, many of whom would be furious with the Sanhedrin if the Jewish ruling body actually carried out the sentence of death. Far better, they reasoned, to have the Romans execute Jesus. This way, the people would blame Rome, not the Sanhedrin. Yet it is this sinful and duplicitous act on the part of the Jews which brought about the fulfillment of biblical prophecy. The Romans will put Jesus to death by crucifixion—no insignificant accident of history, but is instead the means through which God will save his people from their sins.

John’s point is that death by crucifixion rather than by stoning would fulfill the prediction Jesus made earlier in the upper room during the Passover celebration (John 12:32-33). “*And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.*” He said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die.” Jesus’ words clearly point us back to what was until then an obscure passage found in Deuteronomy 21:22-23. “*And if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God. You shall not defile your land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance.*” The Sanhedrin wanted Jesus dead, but did not want to execute Jesus themselves—the public relations risk was too great. If only Pilate would put Jesus to death, then the members of the Sanhedrin would be off the hook. Ironically, the Sanhedrin’s stubborn refusal to execute Jesus themselves, and their insistence that Pilate do it, brings about the fulfillment of biblical prophecy and accomplishes our salvation.

Meanwhile, back at Pilate’s headquarters, John tells us that as soon as the mob assembled outside began demanding the release of Barabbas, it was clear that Pilate’s good-will gesture has backfired. Now, Pilate has no choice but to release a terrorist as well as begin the process of carrying out the sentence of death by crucifixion, even though he has already declared Jesus innocent. Growing uneasy by all of this Pilate still seeks for a way to release Jesus. In verse 1, of chapter 19, John tells us that “*then Pilate took Jesus and flogged him.*” As Carson suggests, Pilate may have ordered the flogging (whipping Jesus) to satisfy the Jewish demand for some sort of punishment, yet which would still allow Pilate to eventually set Jesus free.¹ Jesus will be flogged and humiliated and hopefully learn his lesson.

Such is the sentiment expressed by Pilate in Luke 23:13, when he tells the Jews, “*I will therefore punish and release [Jesus].*” If the sequence of events suggested by Carson is correct, Jesus is flogged twice—once here after Pilate finds him innocent (in a painful, but not severe manner) and then again later,

¹ Carson, The Gospel According to John, 596-598.

before the crucifixion is carried out—this time in a much more brutal manner, with a whip with nine leather strips with embedded bits of stone, bone, and metal, specifically designed to open the skin so as to cause blood to flow profusely, greatly weakening the victim before they are actually crucified. The Romans had seen victims survive for days on the cross and they learned to weaken them first through blood loss. This explains why Jesus could be interrogated again as recounted in John 19:9-15, yet be too weak to carry his own cross in verse 17. He will be flogged again, far more brutally than at first.

During this initial flogging, Jesus is mocked by Pilate's men. John tells us that "*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 very fact that Jesus' royal identity is mocked, tells us that by this time, it was clear that the real issue which brought Jesus before Pilate is Jesus' messianic claim and his rejection by his own people. What kind of a Messiah is it who is welcomed into Jerusalem with such enthusiasm on Sunday, but is then sentenced to death by these same people five days later on the holiest day of the year. From the soldier's perspective Jesus was just another religious nut who must eventually answer to Rome for challenging Caesar's authority. They have done this so many times before that it had become sport to them. But what those who love the darkness cannot see (blinded by their unbelief) is the irony of what they are doing. Jesus *is* the king of the Jews. He *is* Caesar's Lord. He *is* Pilate's lord. He *is* their Lord. One day, these men now tormenting Jesus will find themselves bowing before him, when he passes final judgment upon them. But that day cannot come *until* Jesus endures the shame and humiliation at their hands as described by John.

Pilate knows something is terribly wrong in all of this—but he seems not to be sure of what exactly. The man the Jews brought to him is obviously innocent. Why then should Pilate do the Sanhedrin's dirty work for them? Enough is enough. Knowing that the crowds are still outside waiting to hear his verdict, Pilate steps outside his headquarters to show those assembled that he has sufficiently punished Jesus by having him flogged, and then mocked by his soldiers for making grandiose claims that he was a king. According to verse 4, "*Pilate went out again and said to [the crowd which had gathered], 'See, I am bringing him out to you that you may know that I find no guilt in him.'*"

Pilate's announcement did not ease the tension. It only infuriated those who assembled, because both Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin had found Jesus guilty, expecting even the godless Romans to do the same. In order for Pilate to prove to the Jews that Jesus was no threat, "*Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, 'Behold the man!'*" Tired of it all, Pilate openly mocks his prisoner by bringing Jesus out before his own people, so that they can see for themselves that Pilate has already punished him sufficiently. Jesus is beaten, bloodied, bruised, crowned with thorns, and wearing the costume of a king. Jesus is utterly humiliated by all of this. Pilate mocks Jesus and those chanting for his death. *Ecce homo!* This man is innocent according to Roman justice. But he's been punished regardless—at the Sanhedrin's and the mob's insistence, not Pilate's. Helpless and mocked by his captors and his people, it is obvious that this man is no king, and that he's been punished enough.

But the now pitiful sight of Jesus does not satisfy the more militant among the Jews—the chief priests and those who served them. According to verse 6, "*when the chief priests and the officers saw him, they cried out, 'Crucify him, crucify him!'*" These men have hated Jesus since the days of John the Baptist. Their hatred for Jesus increased all the more when Jesus came to Jerusalem for the Feast of Booths, several months before. They have carefully plotted Jesus' death, and now that Jesus has been arrested, tried and found guilty before a Jewish court and the verdict ratified by the entire Sanhedrin, here's Pilate telling them that Jesus is innocent, and that Pilate has already sufficiently punished Jesus by flogging him, beating him, and humiliating him. For Pilate, this has been more than enough. For the chief priests

(likely at the instigation of Annas and Caiaphas) it is not nearly enough. They want Jesus crucified.

Those present are furious with Pilate. They brought Jesus to Pilate so that Pilate would put him to death. Pilate will not. So they chant louder and with even greater fury for Jesus' death. But Pilate is now angry with the Jews. The Sanhedrin brings an innocent man before him on a holy day, but won't accept Pilate's verdict. Bewildered, Pilate attempts to throw the whole matter back in the Sanhedrin's lap. *"Pilate said to them, 'Take him yourselves and crucify him, for I find no guilt in him.'*" You can sense Pilate's frustration growing by the minute. He's already uneasy about the fact that Jesus is innocent, but the Jews are demanding that he (Pilate) put Jesus to death. Pilate does not want to give the Sanhedrin what it wants—they are to submit to him, he does not submit to them.

But the Jews are not about to give up. According to 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.'"* At first, the Jews told Pilate that Jesus had done "evil." Upon questioning Jesus for himself, especially in light of what had happened on Palm Sunday, Pilate soon figured out that this whole matter had something to do with the ongoing Jewish debate about their Messiah. Pilate will not allow Jesus to challenge his authority, but it is now clear to Pilate that Jesus is not a threat to Rome or to the peace of the city.

But it is also widely-known in the Roman court that Jesus made overt messianic claims, and so Pilate mocks him, and has him flogged as punishment. Jesus' claims to be the Son of God were no direct threat to Pilate. But such claims were a threat to the Sanhedrin, and they are not leaving until Jesus is crucified. The Jews are so frustrated with Pilate's reticence to put Jesus to death, they now openly admit that the only crime Jesus has committed is that he claimed to be one with YHWH. Pilate cares nothing about religious disputes. He's repeatedly tried not to get pulled into a theological debate. But the Jews are furious, and according to Matthew's account, they are about to riot. Pilate's job is not to settle theological disputes, but to keep the peace.

For the Jews, the matter is beyond dispute. If Jesus has blasphemed (and he has, if he's not truly the Son of God) then Jesus must be put to death. From Pilate's point of view, why must he be the one to mete out a death sentence under Jewish law? The Jews are hoping that Pilate will finally see that if Jesus is claiming to be the Son of God, and king of the Jews, then Jesus is challenging Roman authority, despite what Jesus told Pilate. But Pilate is convinced of Jesus' innocence. Things will soon spiral out of control unless Pilate does something. But put an innocent man to death?

In verse 8, John tells us that *"when Pilate heard this statement, he was even more afraid."* There was something about Jesus which, apparently, troubled Pilate. He was clearly innocent of creating evil. He may have called himself "the son of God," but Pilate was not sure what this meant, and how such a claim violated Jewish law. He knew of his wife's troubling dreams not to put Jesus to death, and he had seen for himself that Jesus was not the kind of religious nut who makes claims he cannot back up. Jesus was reportedly a miracle-worker. Pilate realizes that flogging Jesus, and mocking him is not enough to pacify the Jews. They want Jesus dead, will settle for nothing less, and Pilate now finds himself growing deeply afraid that by putting an innocent man to death, he might end-up offending his own Roman gods. Who is this man standing before him? What sort of a holy man is he?

Pilate decides to question Jesus again, only this time with a much greater sense of urgency, and not out of mere curiosity as before. *"He entered his headquarters again and said to Jesus, 'Where are you from?' But Jesus gave him no answer."* Even the bravest of soldiers did not possess this kind of unflappable inner strength. Pilate is completely flummoxed by Jesus' refusal to respond. Doesn't this man

understand that Pilate can spare his life? According to verse 10, “*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?’*”

Again, Jesus’ answer is not what Pilate wants to hear, nor expects to come from a man already flogged once, completely humiliated, and with a mob of his own people angrily demanding his death. Jesus answers Pilate in verse 11, “*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.*” Jesus affirms God’s sovereignty over all the affairs within the civil kingdom. Evil and injustice are being inflicted upon the sinless Son of God. God has ordained it, yet will hold those who do so completely responsible for their actions. We think here of the prayer of the first Christians in Acts 4:27-28, “*for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.*” God will turn this unspeakable evil into the greatest good imaginable.

The rage of the Jews against Jesus, along with the vacillations of Pilate, will bring to pass another line of biblical prophecy, that of Israel’s coming king also being a suffering servant (from our Old Testament lesson, Isaiah 52:13-53:12). Isaiah foretells that the suffering servant-king, will be “*despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.*” Isaiah says of him, “*he was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth,*” and “*although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth. Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand.*” Jesus is all of these things while standing before Pilate.

Pilate is still convinced that Jesus has done nothing to deserve the wrath of the angry mob still outside his headquarters. After Jesus answered him, we read in verse 13 that “*from then on Pilate sought to release him, but the Jews cried out, ‘if you release this man, you are not Caesar’s friend. Everyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar.’*” We know from Jewish sources that the Jews had complained about Pilate to the emperor and to Herod on several occasions. Pilate realizes that his own job might be in jeopardy if he fails to execute a man brought before him on the charge of sedition. The pressure is now too great and the situation too explosive, so in verse 13 of John 19, we read, “*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. Now it was the day of Preparation of the Passover.*” Although greatly troubled, Pilate now gives in to the demands of the mob—although Matthew tells us that Pilate told the Jews, “*I am innocent of this man’s blood; see to it yourselves.*” Jesus will indeed be crucified.

The “Preparation” of the Passover refers to the fact that the Passover took place on a Friday this year, and Friday was the day on which the Jews made preparations for the Sabbath (Saturday). Since they would not buy or sell, they would shop and prepare meals on Friday to be eaten the next day. John says “*it was about the sixth hour,*” which meant it was now noon on Friday. Finally, Pilate will do what the Jews want him to do. It is better to put Jesus to death (and struggle with conscience) than to face an angry emperor and allow a riot to break out in during the Passover. Jesus’ fate is sealed.

Pilate “*said to the Jews, ‘Behold your King!’*” Pilate is now openly mocking Jesus, as well as those Jews who want this innocent man put to death. As Pilate sees it, this pitiful man, who is about to die at the hands of Rome, is the only king the Jews will ever know, so long as Rome stands. If the Jews want their king this badly, they can have him. Realizing that Pilate has changed his mind and will give them what

they want, the Jews now shout out louder, “*away with him, away with him, crucify him!*”

Again, the irony is powerful and tragic. Jesus is truly their king, but they refuse to accept him as such despite the fact that everything he has said or done proves that he is the Son of God and their Messiah. “*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.*” The chief priests accept Pilate’s challenge. If they must proclaim their allegiance to Caesar to get what they want—which is an out and out denial of the messianic promise that God will place one of David’s descendants on Israel’s throne—they will do so. As John has already told us in the prologue to his gospel, “*he came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.*”

Jesus’ obedience has led to his betrayal, arrest, being denied and deserted by his disciples, questioned illegally by the high priest emeritus, tried and convicted by a court with no evidence against him, found innocent by a pagan Gentile governor, who has repeatedly sought ways for Jesus to be released, and who finally gives in to the demands of the Jews. Jesus’ obedience will now take him to the cross.

Throughout this Gospel, Jesus has been predicting that his hour would come—when God will reveal his glory and save his people. Well, that hour has come—“*It was about the sixth hour.*” Jesus will suffer and die to save us from our sins. It is the will of his Father to crush him, for us, and in our place.