

## “What Crime Has He Committed?”

### The Forty-Fourth in a Series on the Gospel of Mark

*Texts: Mark 15:1-20; Isaiah 52:13-53:12*

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While Jesus and his disciples were still making their way to Jerusalem to complete his messianic mission, in Mark 10:33-34, Jesus made the following prediction. “We are going up to Jerusalem,” he said, “and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise.” It is now early Friday morning of Holy Week, and by now almost all of the things Jesus predicted have come to pass exactly as he said they would. Jesus has been betrayed by Judas, one of his own disciples. He has been arrested by the Sanhedrin and found guilty of blasphemy because he claimed to be Israel’s Messiah. He has been beaten and spit upon. Now, Jesus will be handed over by his own people (the Jews) to an obscure Gentile politician, Pontius Pilate, who will condemn him to death even though even Pilate knew full-well that Jesus had done nothing wrong. In just a few short hours, Jesus will be crucified, he will die and be buried, only to rise again from the dead that first Easter Sunday. Jesus’ remarkable prediction, will soon be completely fulfilled. Jesus will drink the cup of God’s wrath, endure unspeakable shame and humiliation, and in doing so, save us from our sins.

As we work our way through the final chapters of Mark’s Gospel we are nearing the end of our year-long series on this fascinating account of our Lord’s messianic mission. As we move into the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> chapters of Mark, where we will deal with Jesus’ death and resurrection, we need to keep in mind that Jesus’ appearance before Pilate—the subject of our sermon—is but one link in a long chain of events which began the previous Sunday (Palm Sunday) when Jesus entered Jerusalem. After entering the city in a grand messianic procession, Jesus soon drove the money changers out of the Temple. Throughout the early part of the week, Jesus confounded the various members of the Sanhedrin who confronted him and who were privately seeking to put him to death. In light of his impending death and resurrection, Jesus began preparing his disciples for his departure and ascension into heaven. By Thursday night of Holy Week, Jesus’ time had finally come. Jesus celebrated the Passover meal with his disciples (his last meal with them), before leading the disciples (minus Judas) out to the Garden of Gethsemane. This was the place where Jesus would go and pray in order to prepare himself to face the what was soon to come—rejection by his heavenly father when the guilt of our sins is imputed to him.

While in Gethsemane, Jesus fervently prayed that the cup of wrath be taken from him, but such was not the father’s will. Even though Jesus nearly collapsed under the weight of his ordeal and the very thought of being rejected by the father, Jesus remained absolutely obedient to his father’s will. But such was not the case for the disciples. Just when Jesus needed them most, the disciples were struggling to stay awake, apparently indifferent to the gravity of what was even then unfolding before them—Jesus’ impending arrest, trial and crucifixion. Judas, meanwhile, knowing that Jesus most likely would be in Gethsemane, led an armed mob to Jesus’ location, even kissing Jesus on the cheek to alert the mob that this was the man they were to arrest. When it became clear to the disciples that Jesus would actually be arrested, they fled in terror, afraid that they would share in Jesus’ fate. Although Jesus had told them but moments before that they would all fall away and desert him, they all vehemently denied it. But as soon as an armed mob showed up, the disciples did the very thing Jesus told them they would do.

Meanwhile, Peter, who refused to believe Jesus and protested boisterously when Jesus told him he

(Peter) would fall away, secretly returned to Gethsemane to see what had happened to Jesus. Hiding in the darkness, Peter followed the mob as they took Jesus to Caiaphas' house where Jesus was placed on trial before the Sanhedrin. While Peter was denying three times that he even knew Jesus, Jesus was being confronted by a series of "witnesses" who could not keep their stories straight and whose testimony completely contradicted one another. But when Caiaphas, the high priest and the one who presided over this inquest, asked Jesus if he was Israel's Messiah and the Son of God, he got a shocking answer. Jesus said that "yes," he was Israel's Messiah and that Caiaphas and all those who reject him would see Jesus coming on the clouds of glory on the day of judgment. With that answer, the entire situation immediately changed. Caiaphas tore his robes as a sign of personal outrage and immediately declared Jesus guilty of blasphemy. The members of the Sanhedrin agreed. They began to spit at Jesus and mock him as a sign that they too regarded Jesus' words as blasphemy.

Make no mistake about, the Sanhedrin's plan to deal with Jesus had worked perfectly. One of his own disciples (Judas) had betrayed Jesus, enabling them to arrest Jesus in the dead of night, while the city was sound asleep. Jesus was immediately placed on trial, and once a verdict was reached, Jesus would be turned over to the Romans before daybreak. Furthermore, the Sanhedrin now had a list of charges against Jesus they could present to Pilate, so that the Romans would be forced to carry out the sentence of death. Once Jesus was dead, the Sanhedrin would be rid of him, and Rome would appear to be responsible for all of it.

To the casual observer, Jesus is the one who is on trial before Caiaphas (and now before Pilate). But from a redemptive-historical perspective, it is Israel and the Sanhedrin who are actually on trial before YHWH. Jesus is Israel's Messiah. He has clearly proven as much by speaking the word of God, fulfilling prophecy, preaching about the kingdom of God and performing countless miracles and healings. And so it falls to Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin to recognize that Jesus is the God's Messiah who came to visit Israel with God's long-anticipated salvation. But since the kingdom Jesus came to bring was not a political kingdom in which Israel would be restored to its former glory, his fate was sealed. Jesus turned out not to be the Messiah the people wanted, and they hated him because of that.

The Sanhedrin hated Jesus for another reason. They were plotting from the beginning of his ministry to have Jesus killed, because Jesus repeatedly exposed the Sanhedrin's self-righteousness and hypocrisy before the people. Therefore, when Caiaphas pronounced Jesus guilty of blasphemy, ironically, God's covenant curses will fall upon Israel and the Jews will be dispersed into the four corners of the earth and removed yet again from the land promised to Abraham. Jerusalem will be sacked and the Temple will be destroyed by the dreaded Romans. But Jesus himself will likewise feel the sting of God's covenant curses, because the guilt of our sins will be imputed to him as he hangs upon the cross. Jesus will bear in his own body the wrath of God (the covenant curse) due us for our sins.

Once the trial (or inquest) at Caiaphas' house is over, it is nearly morning on Friday. We have finally come to the culmination of that series of events which began when Jesus entered Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover with his disciples Thursday afternoon about dusk, as well as to the culmination of Jesus' entire messianic ministry.

As we turn to Mark's account of Jesus trial before Pilate, it quickly becomes apparent that Mark is not interested in recounting the details of the trial. Instead, Mark is interested to explain what this trial means in terms of Jesus securing for us our salvation. In this regard, it is important for Mark to point out that at the inquest before Caiaphas, Jesus was found guilty of blasphemy because he claimed to be Israel's Messiah—no crime, of course, if Jesus is who he claimed to be! The charges made against Jesus

by the Sanhedrin will be tweaked so that they will stick under Roman law. If Jesus claimed to be Israel's Messiah, in effect, he was making more than a mere religious claim, he was also claiming to be a king. This meant that Jesus was challenging the author of Caesar and the Roman authorities, and was therefore guilty of sedition. This is the same charge spun two ways: one for a Jewish audience (blasphemy for claiming to be the Messiah), and another for the Romans (sedition—challenging the authority of Caesar).

But during both of these trials, it becomes perfectly clear that Jesus is truly Israel's Messiah. He fulfills many Old Testament prophecies. He is no mere pretender, nor just another zealot seeking to make a name for himself. That's the main point Mark seeks to make throughout both of these cases (Jesus before Caiaphas as well as before Pilate). When Jesus stands before both Caiaphas and Pilate, it is painfully obvious to anyone watching that Jesus has committed no crime and is absolutely innocent of any and all wrong-doing. It is also important for Mark to emphasize Jesus' willingness to stand before pagan Roman authorities and likewise acknowledge that he is the Messiah. Jesus' willingness to do this was important for Christians in Mark's original audience to know, since many of them were persecuted by Rome when Mark was written, and they faced the constant threat of arrest and imprisonment.<sup>1</sup>

But even as Jesus stands trial, it is those who “judge” him who are actually on trial before YHWH. And the horrible things they do to both Jesus and his disciples is evidence against themselves in the heavenly court—that was Jesus' point in warning Caiaphas that he would see Jesus coming on clouds of glory on the day of judgment. That is why Mark emphasizes that no matter what happens to Jesus, Jesus will be vindicated in the end, just as Jesus himself will vindicate his own people whenever they are persecuted because of their allegiance to Jesus. In other words, the very tragic story has a very happy ending.

With that in mind, we pick-up with verse 1 of chapter 15, as Mark sets the stage for all of what follows. *“Very early in the morning, the chief priests, with the elders, the teachers of the law and the whole Sanhedrin, reached a decision. They bound Jesus, led him away and handed him over to Pilate.”* It is important to know that the legal relationship between Rome and Israel was quite tenuous—local politics comes into play here. Israel was a “subject territory,” since the nation was under Roman occupation. The historical record seems to indicate that at the time of Jesus, Rome granted the Jews a great degree of freedom in terms of self-government. To the Jews, Jewish law was the law of the land, even if Caesar said otherwise. Since the Romans neither understood Jewish law, nor wanted to concern themselves with internal Jewish matters, they would almost always let Jews solve their own internal disputes whenever this was tied to religious matters—people accused of not observing the purely ritual aspects of the law.

Technically, Rome exercised the power of the sword over all criminal cases, even those covered by Jewish law. In those cases where Jewish law condemned a man to death on narrow theological grounds—i.e., blasphemy—the Romans generally stayed out of it. In those cases where a man committed a crime under both Jewish law and Roman law (like murder), the Romans allowed the Jews to conduct their own trial, if they subsequently surrendered the guilty party to Romans for a separate trial under Roman law. In such cases, the Romans allowed the Sanhedrin to present the prosecution's case before a Roman judge. Apparently, something like that happened here, because this fit Caiaphas' and the Sanhedrin's ultimate purpose.<sup>2</sup> But much of how these things were decided was strictly political, and

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<sup>1</sup> Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 546.

<sup>2</sup> See the discussion in Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 548; and France, The Gospel of Mark, 624-625.

whether the Romans got involved or not depended upon what was in their best interests. In this case, it was clearly in the Sanhedrin's best interests to turn Jesus over to the Romans for another trial, getting the Sanhedrin off the hook. And so appropriate charges were drawn up, and just as soon as a verdict was reached before Caiaphas under Jewish law, Jesus was on his way to the Romans for a separate trial.<sup>3</sup>

Mark doesn't say much about what happens, except to say that Jesus was "handed over" to Pilate. Pontius Pilate's official residence was in Caesarea, but during Jewish festivals Roman officials relocated their headquarters to the Praetorium in Jerusalem. This was done so that they could more effectively oversee efforts to keep the city calm. A number of scholars believe that the Praetorium was another name for Herod's palace.<sup>4</sup> Pilate held the rank of prefect, may have been a "knight" in the Roman army, and he was appointed directly to this post by Rome. As a "prefect," Pilate was one rung below that of Senator. A prefect served in an administrative capacity, was given land in exchange for service, and governed those areas where there was political trouble and unrest. Pilate arrived in Judea in 26 A.D. and remained in office for ten years. He was a harsh ruler and was known to despise the Jews and their law. Serving as prefect in Jerusalem was not a highly regarded appointment. Caesarea was a backwater city and no one liked dealing with the Jews. Pilate may have been given the job because he was good at it (stern and effective), but this was not the job he had worked his whole life to attain. He was clearly marking time until retirement, or a better post opened up elsewhere.<sup>5</sup>

In verse 2, the trial before Pilate opens with the Roman prefect asking Jesus about the charges presented to him by Caiaphas, "*Are you the king of the Jews?*" asked Pilate." Obviously, the charge on which Jesus was found guilty of blasphemy before the Sanhedrin (claiming to be the Messiah) is now tweaked a bit for Roman consumption (Jesus claiming to be king). Was Jesus seeking to overthrow the Sanhedrin? Was he seeking to undermine Rome's authority? Was Jesus attempting to orchestrate a violent overthrow of the Roman government? Clearly, that what Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin wanted Pilate to think Jesus was doing. Jesus' reply, "*Yes, it is as you say,*" indicates that he did indeed claim to be Israel's Messiah, but it is clear from Jesus' answer that Pilate does not yet have the whole story.

In fact, there were many charges brought against Jesus. "*The chief priests accused him of many things.*" Mark doesn't tell us what these additional charges were, but Luke does. In Luke 23:2, the chief priests were claiming that "*We have found this man subverting our nation. He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar and claims to be Christ, a king.*" Jesus did not urge overthrow of the government of Israel, or of Rome for that matter. Jesus insisted that Jews pay their taxes to Caesar. He claimed to be the Messiah of Israel, but made it plain that his kingdom was not political. Thus the charges were clearly fabricated by the very same men who claimed to be champions of the sanctity of the Jewish law. So they bear false witness against the Son of God, seeking to have him put to death because it suits their own purposes.

When these additional charges were read, in verse 4, we read that "*So again Pilate asked [Jesus], 'Aren't you going to answer? See how many things they are accusing you of.'*" Without having been there it is

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<sup>3</sup> A. N. Sherwin-White, a noted expert of Roman law, notes that Mark's account fits well with what is known of Roman legal procedure. See Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament (Oxford, 1963), 24.

<sup>4</sup> Cranfield, The Gospel According to Mark, 449.

<sup>5</sup> Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 547-549.

impossible to say what exactly, but there must have been something amazing about Jesus' demeanor and person which alerted Pilate to the fact that Jesus had done nothing wrong—he was the victim, not the perpetrator. Jesus certainly didn't have a halo and was not strikingly handsome—the biblical data from Isaiah's prophecy of the suffering servant says as much. *“He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.”* But Pilate was a tough soldier and no fool, and obviously could see what was going on in terms of the dynamic between Jesus and the Sanhedrin. According to Josephus, Pilate distrusted and disliked the Sanhedrin immensely.<sup>6</sup> He knew that Jesus was being railroaded. Pilate does not want to put an innocent man to death.

Yet as we read in verse 5, *“But Jesus still made no reply, and Pilate was amazed.”* While Pilate grows frustrated with Jesus' refusal to defend himself from what are obviously trumped-up charges, Pilate cannot possibly understand that Jesus is God's suffering servant, foretold in Isaiah 53:7 (part of our Old Testament lesson). Isaiah says of the coming one, *“He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.”* Isaiah was referring to Jesus and to this very moment in redemptive-history. But if Jesus would not respond to the charges brought against him—no matter whether it was apparent that he was innocent or not—Pilate was forced to rule against him. In Mark 8:31, Jesus had plainly said the Son of Man must suffer and die. That time has now come and Pilate will be immortalized in history.<sup>7</sup>

Since Pilate did not believe that Jesus was guilty, he tried something else to allow Jesus to escape the death penalty. As Mark reports in verse 6, *“Now it was the custom at the Feast to release a prisoner whom the people requested.”* Pilate will let Jesus go free, if that's what the people who packed into the Praetorium wanted. But they didn't. Jesus had gone from being the hoped-for Messiah (on Palm Sunday) to someone completely rejected and scorned by the people by the time of his trial at first light on Friday morning. The situation is now completely reversed. On Sunday Jesus was revered as the hope of Israel. By Friday he is an object of scorn.

The attempt by Pilate to release Jesus played itself out as follows. According to verses 7-9, *“A man called Barabbas was in prison with the insurrectionists who had committed murder in the uprising. The crowd came up and asked Pilate to do for them what he usually did. ‘Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?’ asked Pilate.”* Barabbas was clearly a trouble-maker, and was part of a group actively plotting against Roman rule. Barabbas had been tried and found guilty of murder. Certainly, Pilate would rather have Barabbas in jail (because he was trouble) than Jesus (who was obviously innocent). But to Pilate's great surprise, the Jews who packed the hall thought otherwise.

Pilate knew that *“it was out of envy that the chief priests had handed Jesus over to him.”* What he didn't know was that *“the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have Pilate release Barabbas instead.”* Some have argued that Pilate had a guilty conscience about putting Jesus to death, and knowing about Jesus' great popularity among the people when he entered the city, simply assumed that the people would want Jesus released, not Barabbas. Others argue that since Pilate hated the Jews, he offered to spare Jesus only because Pilate despised the Sanhedrin and knew that Jesus was really upsetting them. But the chief priests had convinced the crowds otherwise and Pilate never expected the crowd's reaction to his offer.

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<sup>6</sup> Lane, [The Gospel According to Mark](#), 553-555.

<sup>7</sup> Lane, [The Gospel According to Mark](#), 551-552.

And so Pilate asked, “*What shall I do, then, with the one you call the king of the Jews?*” At this gracious offer, the crowd shouted, “*Crucify him!*” Pilate asked them “*Why? What crime has he committed? But they shouted all the louder, ‘Crucify him!’*” Pilate seems to be taken aback by the crowd’s reaction and the hatred they now show toward the same Jesus they had cheered five days before. What Pilate could not understand is that Jesus had failed to meet the false messianic expectations that the Jewish people had for him. The Jews thought Jesus would be their king. He might have been a prophet and even Israel’s Messiah. Clearly they thought that Jesus had the power of God (like Elisha) and that he might be the great king (like David) who would lead them to a military victory over Rome. But here Jesus stood, humbled, weak, and helpless before the power of Imperial Rome. Some Messiah he turned out to be. Pilate had no choice but to give into the crowd’s demands. As we read in verse 15, “*wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them.*”

The brutality of what happened next is beyond our comprehension. A Roman flogging is one of the worst punishments imaginable. The person to be flogged was stripped to the waist and tied to a post. The whip which is used was made of multiple straps of leather with pieces of bone or of lead imbedded. It was so brutal that many who were sentenced to death, died from the flogging before they ever made it to the cross.<sup>8</sup> The effect of the flogging was to remove large chunks of skin from the back causing blood to flow profusely so that the one who was flogged was too weak to resist what was to come and too weak to survive long upon the cross. Mark spares us the gory details and simply says, Pilate “*had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.*” It would soon come to an end—but not before Jesus experienced the ultimate humiliation and suffering upon the cross.

Condemned, beaten and flogged, Mark writes that “*the soldiers led Jesus away into the palace (that is, the Praetorium) and called together the whole company of soldiers.*” It was important to protect the prisoner from the surprisingly angry crowds who now derided Jesus as a false Messiah and one who betrayed their mistaken expectations. Mocking the now-helpless Jesus whom everyone had heard so much about, and probably egged on by the crowd which had now assembled, the soldiers “*put a purple robe on him, then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on him. And they began to call out to him, ‘Hail, king of the Jews!’ Again and again they struck him on the head with a staff and spit on him. Falling on their knees, they paid homage to him. And when they had mocked him, they took off the purple robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.*” It is all pretty self-exclamatory and there is not much to add.

As we conclude then, what can we say by way of summation?.

**A**The sad fact is that God had come to his people (Israel) in the person of Jesus to save them from their sins. Instead, the people of Israel wanted to be rescued from Rome and have a great nation again, with a Davidic king ruling from Jerusalem. Blinded by their personal sinfulness and their resentment of oppressive Roman rule, the people could not see that true messianic glory can come only after the cross and the empty tomb. Self-righteous, oppressed and bitter, they people wanted the kingdom to come right then and there, not realizing that the kingdom Jesus came to bring was not of this world. His kingdom didn’t have a flag, an army, or a capital city. When Jesus didn’t bring the kingdom the people wanted, he was rejected and despised for having raised their hopes so high and then disappointing them so deeply.

Without the eyes of faith, the Bible remains a closed book not matter how well you know it or how many

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<sup>8</sup> Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 557.

times you read it. When viewed against the backdrop of human sin, our fallen nature and God's gracious promise to save sinners through the merits of Jesus Christ, it is clear that Jesus must do all of this in order to fulfill all righteousness and turn aside God's righteous anger toward our sin. But if you think you are already righteous (and that you obey the law of God) like the average Jew of Jesus' day (and just as many of our own contemporaries do), then the Jesus who stood before Pilate will look to you like yet another defeated messianic pretender, exposed for all to see. He will have no appeal to you whatsoever. He is weak, bloodied, shamed and despised. What can he do for Israel? What can he do for us?

But if you see in Jesus, God's promised redeemer, unjustly sentenced to death, beaten and flogged and spit upon, then this horrible scene will mean only one thing. Jesus did all of this for us and in our place, bearing that shame and humiliation we deserve because of our sins. Even though completely innocent, Jesus took those guilty verdicts from Caiaphas and Pilate so that he might go to the cross and do for us what we could never do for ourselves—offer to God a sacrifice that forever removes the guilt and stain of our sin. He became weak so that we might become strong. He was shamed, beaten and mocked, so that we might be justified through faith. He was humiliated before men so that we not be humiliated before God. He did all of this for us, and in our place.