

Bi123 The Gospels 2

Lesson Bi123-20 Trials before Pilate and Herod

Since the sixteenth century, most countries have used a solar calendar with 12 months and 365 days. Jewish groups, however, use various calendars. They are based on the cycles of the moon or agricultural events, such as the ripening of the barley in Israel. Some years a month is added. Even in the first century, the time of Christ, different factions of Jews used slightly different calendars. The Passover festival celebrated the Exodus of the children of Israel from Egypt. But in the centuries between the first Passover and the Passover of the Gospels, different Jewish calendars had the festival falling on different days. Because of this, different parties of Jews would celebrate the Passover on different days.

The accounts of the Crucifixion are given to us by four different Gospel writers, some 30-60 years after the event occurred. We discussed earlier that each writer had a particular audience in mind and a different emphasis in their book. This is the nature of recalling history after some time. It could be that one remembered the events according to one calendar and another recalled them according to a different calendar. This lesson explains mainly how John remembered it.

The arrest of Jesus had resulted from the fear of Jewish religious leaders about his influence over the common people. He was taken first before Annas, a previous high priest, highly regarded by the people. Then they led him to the ruling high priest, Caiaphas, and the convened Sanhedrin, the highest Jewish court. They found Jesus guilty of blasphemy, a sin deserving death. Their problem was then to convince Pilate, the Roman governor, that he was guilty of a crime. They did that by changing the charge to treason, saying Jesus claimed to be a rival king to Caesar. Pilate was the Roman governor appointed over southern Palestine from A.D. 26 to A.D. 36. King Herod was a Jew, who had inherited authority over Galilee and Perea in northern Palestine. In this lesson, Jesus is brought before two different rulers. Neither of them found Jesus guilty of any crime.

At daybreak, after an all-night meeting, all the chief priests, with the elders, the teachers of the law and the whole Sanhedrin reached a decision. They would put Jesus to death. They bound Jesus and took him from Caiaphas to the palace of the Roman governor, Pilate. By now it was early morning, and to avoid ceremonial uncleanness, they did not enter the palace. They wanted to be able to eat the Passover.

So Pilate came out to them and asked, "What charges are you bringing against this man?"

"If he were not a criminal," they replied, "we would not have handed him over to you."

Pilate said, "Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law."

"But we have no right to execute anyone," they objected. This took place to fulfill what Jesus had said about the kind of death he was going to die (John 18:28-32).

Jesus had already predicted three times that he would die at the hands of the Romans, not the Jews. A Jewish execution used stoning. Only the Romans executed using crucifixion.

Pilate understood the motive of envy that prompted them to have Jesus condemned. Pilate also knew about their customs and the feast, so had agreed to meet them outside his residence. Pilate had his official residence in Caesarea, on the Mediterranean coast. He and his soldiers were in Jerusalem during Passover to prevent trouble from the large numbers of Jews assembled for the occasion. But this trouble had come to him anyway.

The priorities of the jealous priests were wrong. They prized observing the Passover more than giving justice to Jesus. They honored the historical activities of religion, but ignored its substance. They had hoped Pilate would agree with their judgment. Instead he denied their demands.

So, the Jews decided on a new approach. They decided to accuse Jesus of being a rival king—the charge of treason instead of blasphemy. They began to accuse him with lies, saying, “We have found this man subverting our nation. He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar and claims to be Messiah, a king” (Luke 23:2). Large crowds followed Jesus, but he was not turning them against Rome. He had taught the disciples to pay their taxes to Caesar. He claimed to be Messiah, but not a political king, the kind Rome would oppose. But this charge caught Pilate’s attention. He did not care about a religious issue, but he was interested in a political one.

Pilate then went back inside the palace, summoned Jesus and asked him, “Are you the king of the Jews?”

“Is that your own idea,” Jesus asked, “or did others talk to you about me?” In asking this question Jesus wanted to clarify the meaning of the word ‘king’ for Pilate. Would it be the Jewish or Roman definition? Would it deal with a heavenly kingdom or an earthly one?

“Am I a Jew?” Pilate replied. “Your own people and chief priests handed you over to me. What is it you have done?” Pilate wanted to clarify whether Jesus had been arrested for inciting violence in the land against his forces. We can see this in Jesus’ response to his question.

Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place.”

“You are a king, then!” said Pilate. He was intrigued by the possibility of Jesus being more than he appeared to be at the moment. The peace of Jesus’ presence perhaps made this a real possibility.

Jesus answered, “You are right in saying that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.” In this statement Jesus clarifies several issues. Yes, he is a king, a very special king. His birth indicated his humanity; but that he came into the world, indicated heaven as his place of origin. He came to reveal the truth of God to all humanity. He even invited Pilate to follow him, for he alone was the source of truth.

“What is truth?” retorted Pilate. He knew teaching truth was not a crime, so he went out again to the Jews gathered there and said, “I find no basis for a charge against him. But it is your custom for me to release to you one prisoner at the time of the Passover. Do you want me to release ‘the king of the Jews?’”

They shouted back, “No, not him! Give us Barabbas!” Now Barabbas was a rebel and a murderer. He had taken part in an uprising (John 18:28-40). His name is Aramaic and means, ‘son of the father.’ In place of this man, Jesus, the true Son of the Father, died.

Like most sinners, Pilate was suspicious about the idea of “truth.” Seeing so much falsehood, he rejected a holy God who was the source of truth. To keep from having to make a decision, he tried to change the subject. He suggested releasing Jesus if he was indeed their king. In response, the chief priests incited the crowd to shout for the release of Barabbas. His release would only make keeping order in the region more difficult.

The Jewish leaders insisted, “He stirs up the people all over Judea by his teaching. He started in Galilee and has come all the way here” (Luke 23:8). When Pilate learned Jesus was from Galilee and therefore under Herod’s jurisdiction, he sent him to Herod. Though they were rivals, Pilate did not want to handle this embarrassing prisoner. This King Herod was the son of Herod the Great. His main home was in Tiberias on the Sea of Galilee. As a Jew he was obligated to be in Jerusalem for the feast. This same Herod Antipas had executed John the Baptist. He believed that Jesus was, in fact, John raised from the dead!

When King Herod saw Jesus, he was greatly pleased. For a long time he had wanted to see him. He had wanted to kill him while Jesus was in his region. From what he had heard about him, he also hoped to see him perform a sign or miracle. He asked many questions, but Jesus gave him no answer, nor did he perform any signs. The chief priests and the teachers of the law were standing there, strongly accusing him. They hoped Herod would condemn Jesus or at least help their case with Pilate. But Herod and his soldiers only ridiculed and mocked him. Dressing him in an elegant robe, they sent him back to Pilate. That day Herod and Pilate became friends—before this they had been enemies (Luke 23:5-12). Pilate’s gesture of recognizing Herod’s rulership relieved the tension of jealousy between the two officials.

This story is **important** because it demonstrates that Jesus did not receive justice from the legal system of his day. We should not be surprised when people experience injustice today in our fallen world. What Jesus did see was the working of God’s plan during his trial.

The **main truth** of this story is that as believers we should always speak the truth as Jesus did at his trial. This is important even when unbelievers want to harm us and the cause of Christ.

Let’s **review** this lesson—

1. What crime did the religious leaders accuse Jesus of, before Pilate?
A. [Pause] If you said they accused Jesus of being a rival king to Caesar, you are right.
2. What specific question did Pilate ask Jesus concerning his identity?

- A. [Pause] If you said Pilate asked Jesus, “Are you the king of the Jews?” you are correct.
3. What did Jesus say to Pilate about those who listened and believed in him?
- A. [Pause] If you answered that he told Pilate, “Everyone on the side of truth listens to me,” you are correct.

Your **assignment** for this lesson is to learn the story of Jesus before Pilate and Herod so you can tell it from memory. After you tell the story to someone, ask them this question, “What testimony would you share if you were brought before a governor where you live, to explain who you are?” Answer: You should talk about Jesus. Tell people he is God’s son. Explain what he came to do and that he will soon come again.