

Live: Gospel Hope – Now and Forever

Are You the King of the Jews?

John 18:28-19:16

Mark Vroegop

²⁸Then they led Jesus from the house of Caiaphas to the governor's headquarters. It was early morning. They themselves did not enter the governor's headquarters, so that they would not be defiled, but could eat the Passover. ²⁹So Pilate went outside to them and said, "What accusation do you bring against this man?" ³⁰They answered him, "If this man were not doing evil, we would not have delivered him over to you." ³¹Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law." The Jews said to him, "It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death." ³²This was to fulfill the word that Jesus had spoken to show by what kind of death he was going to die. ³³So Pilate entered his headquarters again and called Jesus and said to him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" ³⁴Jesus answered, "Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?" ³⁵Pilate answered, "Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done?" ³⁶Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world." ³⁷Then Pilate said to him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "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." ³⁸Pilate said to him, "What is truth?" After he had said this, he went back outside to the Jews and told them, "I find no guilt in him." ³⁹But 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?" ⁴⁰They cried out again, "Not this man, but Barabbas!" Now Barabbas was a robber. ¹Then Pilate took Jesus and flogged him. ²And the soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head and arrayed him in a purple robe. ³They came up to him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" and struck him with their hands. ⁴Pilate 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" (John 18:28–19:4 ESV).

As we navigate this cultural crisis with the coronavirus, it's been interesting to make some observations. I'm sure that you are witnessing some amazing acts of kindness and generosity. It's been enjoyable to walk around our neighborhood. When the sun is out and people are walking around, they are unusually friendly.

But it is also eerie when you go to the grocery store as people keep their distance and limit the time they're looking for items based upon the space between us. It's uncomfortable.

This crisis is also unusual because it has affected everyone. Previous crises (like 9-11 or the Great Recession) were traumatic, but the scope wasn't nearly as large. Plus, those cultural crises didn't strike

as many cultural “systems.” The coronavirus is having a massive impact on the medical systems, economic systems, government systems, and even our church systems. One of the humbling effects is the realization that the brokenness of our humanity not only affects us personally (e.g. relationship conflicts, sin issues, etc.), but it also affects the things that human beings create.

Romans 13 tells us that governing authorities are part of God’s common grace in the world. Governments, medical systems, institutions, and the like are part of God’s plan for bringing order to a chaotic world. But the Bible tells us that we have all fallen short of the glory of God (Rom. 6:23) and that the entire creation groans (Rom. 8:22). Part of the effect of the fall is that brokenness and limitations saturate every part of our humanity.

The Bible often refers to these systems and power structures with the word “authority.” It means the right to rule, govern, and bring justice.

This week in our study of John’s Gospel, we see the collision of earthly authority with Jesus’s authority. We witness the contrast between Jesus’s kingdom and an earthly kingdom. We see the brokenness of religious and political people and the systems that they create.

Our passage today shows us the moral train wreck of the religious leaders and Pilate as they deal with Jesus. And this text becomes a way for every one of us to look at our lives and the world around us. It’s a passage that asks this question: “What do we do with Jesus’s authority?”

I’d suggest four words for how we improperly deal with Jesus’s claim as Lord: (1) Manipulation, (2) Interrogation, (3) Corruption, and (4) Rejection.

Manipulation

We left our text last week with Jesus’s arrest in the garden, Judas’s betrayal, and Peter’s denial. These are dark days for the disciples. Hopefully, you’ll also remember that Jesus was brought to the house of Annas, a politically powerful Jewish man.

According to verse 18, they left the home of Caiaphas and went to the “governor’s headquarters.” This was the temporary residence of Pontius Pilate, the appointed Roman governor for the province of Israel. During this time in Israel’s history, they were under the control of the Roman Empire. The system of governance across the empire was to allow some level of local control and religious expression. But it was under the careful and brutal hand of Rome.

Pontius Pilate had been appointed to this political position four years earlier. His role was to advance the cause of Rome and keep the peace. But there were frequent altercations. The Jewish historian Josephus tells us that when Pilate arrived as the new governor, he brought ensigns into Jerusalem bearing the image of Caesar. A group of Jews traveled to Caesarea (the Roman capital of Israel) to protest. Pilate called in troops, but the Jews were ready to die. And he was forced to relent. Additionally, Josephus tells us that Pilate used temple funds to construct an aqueduct for Jerusalem. During a protest, Roman soldiers disguised themselves and infiltrated the crowd. Under orders from Pilate, many Jewish

protestors were beaten and killed. Luke 13:1 records another incident where a group of Galileans were killed as they were worshipping.¹

Pilate was a brutal, stubborn, and arrogant ruler. Being a governor over Israel was not likely a very popular role. Previous leaders had been called back to Rome for a lack of leadership. So, Pilate is under enormous pressure.

Remember that all of this is happening during the Passover Feast when thousands of Jewish people were flooding the city for the annual celebration. Pilate left the headquarters in Caesarea in order to be on the ground in Jerusalem to quell any uprising. Needless to say, the relationship between Pilate, the Jewish people, and the religious leaders was always on shaky ground.

Pilate used the religious leaders, and they used him. Manipulation leaks from this text.

The religious leaders bring Jesus to Pilate's Jerusalem residence early in the morning. But notice the first twist of irony: the religious leaders refused to enter Pilate's home because they were worried about being defiled for the Passover. So, Pilate has to come outside to meet him. You can imagine his annoyance. And John wants you to see the sinister display of religious hypocrisy. The Son of God is under arrest, and the religious leaders are concerned about their ceremonial purity.

But that's not all they are worried about. Back in John 11:48, they expressed the fear that Jesus would stir up a revolt in which Rome would sweep in and take over. In their minds, Jesus has to be stopped. The protection of the nation—and their power—is on the line.

Before I show you more in this text, I trust that you know how prone human beings are to manipulate circumstances to their own advantage. We do it all the time. In fact, that is part of the stress of this season with COVID-19. Everything feels out of our control. Or maybe a better way to say it is "we realized how out of control our lives really were."

Well, these religious rulers are trying to find any way to get rid of Jesus. In verse 29, Pilate asks what accusation they are bringing against Jesus. He must have known about the deployment of the troops to the garden of Gethsemane.

But notice their answer. It's evasive and arrogant (v. 30). They push back on Pilate's question as if he has no right to ask them about Jesus's crime. These religious leaders are trying to manipulate Pilate to do their bidding. They want Jesus dead, but they can't kill him on their own. They need Pilate to get on board.

¹ Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, "[Pilate, Pontius](#)," *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 1694.

Pilate tells them to handle Jesus “by their own law” (v. 31). Under Roman occupation, the Jews were allowed certain levels of jurisdiction. Pilate doesn’t want to get involved. Additionally, I’m sure he senses that something isn’t right about all of this. And he’s correct.

The Jews respond by telling Pilate what is “lawful” for them to do (v. 31). It’s another ironic statement that John adds here. The religious leaders are conveniently quoting the law, making themselves seem like they are genuinely concerned about “law-keeping” when they are actually interested in manipulating the circumstances to get what they want.

John wants us to feel the outrage. He wants us to see the brokenness of these leaders as they try to navigate their way around Jesus. And yet, John also wants you to know that there’s a sovereign plan at work. Verse 32 identifies that Jesus had prophesied about his death.

So even with the manipulation by powerful people with powerful systems, the sovereign hand of God is still over every detail—even the crucifixion of Jesus.

Interrogation

The next human response to Jesus is to ask some questions, to investigate. You may know people who are curious. But often our line of questioning becomes very revealing—both about us and about Jesus.

In verse 33, Pilate brings Jesus into his headquarters and begins to question him. He asks him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” All four gospels record this question. It was the charge that the Jewish leaders used to arouse Pilate’s interest regarding the nature of Jesus’s threat to stability.

Jesus wants to clarify Pilate’s understanding regarding the situation. He asks Pilate about the source of his question (v. 34), and this was not well received by Pilate. You can detect a tone of arrogance and dismissiveness, “Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done?” (v. 35). Pilate’s questions and responses are revealing. He wants to be done with this situation.

Then Jesus makes a very important statement. It represents the central theme of this passage and the essence of the collision happening:

Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world” (John 18:36).

What is Jesus saying here? He’s telling Pilate that there’s more to the story than he realizes. Pilate sees the world through the lens of political opportunism, military might, and “us versus them.” He sees the world through Rome verses the Jews and “do what I can to keep the emperor happy.” But Jesus’s kingdom is otherworldly.

Pilate is not able to see behind the veil of his humanity. He doesn’t realize the divine agenda underneath his personal agenda. Pilate doesn’t know about the words of Daniel: “He changes times and seasons; he

removes kings and sets up kings; he gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding” (Dan. 2:21).

Pilate doesn’t know about Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount where he said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven... Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth... Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy” (Matt. 5:2-10). Pilate only thinks in terms of diplomacy, troops, and taxes. He doesn’t know about love, forgiveness, atonement, and being born again.

Jesus identifies here the dual reality for every believer. We live in two worlds or two kingdoms. We are under the authority of an earthly government but our king is Jesus. We are citizens of an earthly country while longing for a heavenly one. We call this city home yet we are spiritual exiles (1 Pet. 1:17-18).

Pilate seeks further clarification: “So you are a king?” (v. 37). And when Jesus replies with an explanation about his ministry and its connection to the truth, “Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice,” Pilate responds sarcastically, “What is truth?” (v. 38).

Pilate doesn’t want to listen to Jesus. His questioning has only led to more questions because he doesn’t know Jesus.

Corruption

What follows next is a series of attempts on the part of Pilate to extricate himself from the situation. He attempts to creatively use his power to bring an end to this standoff.

After he tells the Jews, “I find no guilt in him” (v. 38), Pilate should have released Jesus, but instead he offers them a solution. He suggests a pardon for Jesus since that was part of the Roman custom during Passover. The religious leaders reject this offer and instead choose Barabbas who was likely considered a terrorist² by the Roman authorities. The Jewish leaders call for the release of a man who was convicted in exchange for a man who was innocent. The corruption is awful.

Since Pilate’s suggestion of pardoning Jesus didn’t work, Pilate tries to punish Jesus to the satisfaction of the Jewish leaders. Chapter 19 tells us that Pilate “flogged him.” This was a brutal form of punishment that involved a whip with pieces of bone and other fragments embedded in the leather. I’ll spare you the additional details. But suffice it to say, many prisoners have died from the trauma of such a beating.

While Jesus is away from the view of the crowd, the Roman soldiers mock Jesus. Showing their hatred for the Jewish people and the corruption of their power, they put a crown of thorns on Jesus’s head and a purple robe around his shoulders. They taunt, “Hail, King of the Jews” as they beat him.

Then Pilate comes out to tell the Jews that he is bringing Jesus back out to them, affirming that he finds no fault in Jesus (v. 4). “Behold the man!” is what Pilate says as Jesus is brought before the crowd with

² The word “robber” means “one who seizes plunder” - D. A. Carson, [*The Gospel According to John*](#), The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 595–596.

his crown of thorns, purple robe, and beaten body. It's as if Pilate is saying, "This is what I think of your country and your king!"

Pilate is desperately and corruptly using any authority he has to get Jesus out of his court. But nothing is working.

Rejection

The final engagement with Jesus is outright rejection. When the crowds see him again, they cry out, "Crucify him!" (John 19:6). And when Pilate again tells them that he finds no guilt in him, the Jews tell him that Jesus claims to be the Son of God (v. 7). Remember this is a change from what they said before.

This new information is deeply concerning to Pilate. John says that Pilate is afraid (v. 8). He questions Jesus again, asking him where he is from (v. 9), and when Jesus refuses to answer, we get two very important verses:

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" (John 19:10–11).

When Pilate heard this, he sought even further to release Jesus (v. 12). But the Jews knew Pilate's political vulnerability. They threaten him with not being a friend to Caesar if he released Jesus. Pilate gives in. He brings Jesus to the official place for legal judgments. In yet another twist of irony, here is the human empire of Rome offering judgment on the promised Messiah, the one to whom the Father has entrusted judgment (see John 5:22).

Once again, Pilate mocks the Jewish authorities. He says, "Behold your king!" (v. 15). And when they shout, "Away with him, away with him, crucify him!" Pilate presses them further, "Shall I crucify your King?" And our study ends with these stunning words of spiritual rejection: "We have no king but Caesar."

The rejection of Jesus is now complete. Pilate rejects him as an innocent and falsely accused man. The Jews rejected Jesus as their Messiah. It's the ultimate example of the waywardness of a world broken by the effects of sin.

Hopeful Conclusions

John wrote everything in his gospel not merely to provide a record of what happened in the life of Jesus but so that we might consider some important truths. What can we learn from this text?

1. Jesus has come to rescue us from every effect of the fall.

This text shows us the way that sin slithers into every aspect of our humanity. He comes to save us individually from our transgressions but also to restore everything affected by the curse of sin. "For God

so loved the world..." (John 3:16). This text shows us how sinful humanity and our systems can be and how much we need saving.

2. Jesus saves people who reject him.

The power of the gospel is the way it changes your story. This gospel begins with these hopeful words: "He came to his own and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, he gave the right to become children of God" (John 1:11-12). At Peter's sermon after the resurrection, three thousand people were saved.

3. Jesus is king and he's coming back!

This passage is a dark moment in human history. The sinless Son of God is falsely accused, beaten, mocked, and rejected. Human authority is used to manipulate, interrogate, and corrupt God's common grace. Jesus has more authority and power than Pilate or the Jewish leaders could ever imagine. No wonder Jesus tells his disciples at the end of his earthly ministry: "All authority in heaven and in earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples... behold I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:19-20).

Friends, we live in a world deeply reminded that our most powerful human systems are frail. What are you trusting in today? Where are you placing your hope?

*My faith has found a resting place,
Not in device nor creed;
I trust the Ever-living One,
His wounds for me shall plead.*

*On Christ the solid Rock I stand
All other ground is sinking sand
All other ground is sinking sand.*

My Hope is Built on Nothing Less by Edward Mote

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