

**Pilate's Problem** 18/04/14 (Good Friday) Alan Every

Pilate has a problem. It's the morning of what we call Good Friday. It's interesting that the words, 'Good Friday' may have come from the phrase, God's Friday'. With Lord Jesus before Pilate, it's certainly God's day. We could even call it God's day in court. For, this is the Son of God on trial. God's Son stands before Pilate, the chief priests of the Jews and the people (the crowd).

The second person of the Trinity, the Lord Jesus Christ, has humbled Himself. God became man. And now, before Pilate he refuses to defend Himself. He simply agrees with him. He is the ***"king of the Jews"*** (15:2). It seems that His enemies are about to have victory in their day in court. Jesus is about to be found guilty.

The Jewish leaders can sense their triumph. But, as we know, it's a victory only in theory. That the Lord Jesus should be on trial, suffer and die was God's plan for His Son. We read in 1 Peter 1:20, ***He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake.*** These words also recall Ephesians 1:3, 4a, ***Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.***

Is it a coincidence that the Lord stands before Pilate early on that Friday morning? Not at all! We read in Acts 2:23 how the apostle Peter (at Pentecost) describes that first Good Friday. ***"This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross."*** We'll come back to that verse again shortly.

Pilate and the men who hate the Lord Jesus are ignorant accomplices in carrying out God's plan. Even so, they're not innocent. In fact, neither are we. Peter makes that clear for us, when he says (Acts 2:23), ***"You, with the help of wicked men, put him to death..."*** And so we read the Jewish leaders' decision, in Mark 15:1, ***They bound Jesus, led him away and handed him over to Pilate.***

We can say without prejudice (or being racist) that the Jewish leaders were the first to condemn Christ. They had a history of growing opposition to Him. Mark 3:6, ***Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.***

Caiaphas was high priest in the year that Christ died. He made a prophetic statement when he called for our Lord's death. We have his words in John 11:50, ***"You do not realise that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish."*** Isn't it amazing! From the mouth of one who hated the Lord Jesus comes the gospel. Christ *did* indeed die for His people, so that we might live. The words of Caiaphas point us back to John 3:16, ***For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*** The world that hated Christ is the same world into which God sent His Son to save.

In Mark, the Lord Jesus only speaks once to Pilate. This is in response to Pilate's question in 15:2. ***"Are you the king of the Jews?"... "Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied.*** Even when the chief priests make accusations against Him He's silent. The Lord Jesus fulfils the prophecy of Isaiah 53:7, ***He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth, he was led like a sheep to the slaughter and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.***

That Lord Jesus offers no defence surprises Pilate. As you know, when many (if not most) criminals are in court they claim to be innocent. Even those in prison for their crimes will still claim to be innocent. Yet the Lord Jesus makes no complaint about the way that He's being treated. Nor does He protest His innocence. We read in 15:5, ***But Jesus still made no reply, and Pilate was amazed.***

This introduces Pilate's problem. What should he do with this innocent man? Clearly the Lord Jesus has impressed Pilate. He has no heart to sentence Him to die on a cross. In Matthew's account of the Lord Jesus before Pilate, Pilate's wife adds to his concern. Matthew 27:19, ***While Pilate was sitting on the judge's seat, his wife sent him this message: "Don't have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him."***

Before Pilate makes his decision, he has to consider the crowd. He gives them a choice. Mark 15:6, 7, ***Now it was the custom at the Feast to release a prisoner whom the people requested. A man called Barabbas was in prison with the insurrectionists who had committed murder in the uprising.*** Here is a possible way out for Pilate. Can he perhaps persuade the crowd to free the Lord Jesus? This would free his conscience. For, he knows that the Lord is innocent. And Pilate maintains this opinion about Christ, right to the end. 15:14a, ***"What crime has he committed?"*** he asks the crowd.

If anyone really deserved death, it was Barabbas. He's in prison with a group of rebels and murderers. Whether he actually committed murder during an uprising is uncertain. However, he's clearly associated himself with the insurrectionists [= rebels]. Today, we'd probably call him a terrorist.

Perhaps Pilate thought that the crowd would ask for Christ's release. For, less than a week ago the people had welcomed the Lord Jesus into Jerusalem with praise. Mark 11:9b, 10, ***Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted, "Hosanna!"***

***"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"***

***"Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!"***

***"Hosanna in the highest!"***

This seems to be great praise from the mouths of the people in Jerusalem. Yet, they're also a little confused about Him. They haven't called Jesus the *Son of David*. If they'd used that title for Him, then it would clearly refer to Him coming as the Messiah. But they don't. So, perhaps it's not surprising that the Lord's triumphant entry into Jerusalem isn't mentioned at His trial.

In Mark 15:8 the crowd enters the scene of Christ's trial. Perhaps it's a different crowd from the one that earlier one that had sung His praise. This crowd has no words of praise. They want Pilate to free a prisoner. ***The crowd came up and asked Pilate to do for them what he usually did.*** 15:6 has already told us what Pilate usually did. ***Now it was the custom at the Feast to release a prisoner whom the people requested.***

Hoping for a solution to his problem, Pilate has a question for the crowd. 15:9, ***"Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?" asked Pilate, knowing it was out of envy that the chief priests had handed Jesus over to him.*** See how Pilate gives the crowd the opportunity to have the Lord Jesus released. He knows that Barabbas deserves to stay in prison. Whether or not he'd have been executed for his crime we'll never know. Once again, we see that Pilate thinks that the Lord Jesus is innocent. Pilate is still seeking His release.

But crowds are all too easily influenced in their opinions. There's a kind of mob psychology that affects a group of people. You only have to attend a football match to see that. For, when football fans get angry with a player they'll often call out, 'Kill him!'

It's no surprise that a flock of sheep is often called a mob. Sheep are stupid. They just follow a leader. And now, in Jerusalem, the prophecy in Isaiah 53:6 is about to come true. True for the crowd and for us. ***We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*** We see this clearly in the cries for Christ to be crucified.

The chief priests certainly know how to stir up a crowd. In fact, you'd be surprised how little it takes. With a few words in the right ears a crowd can quickly turn ugly. And so we read in Mark 15:11, ***But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have Pilate release Barabbas instead.*** Thus the crowd becomes the second group to call for the death of Christ. 15:12, ***"What shall I do, then, with the one you call the king of the Jews?" Pilate asked them. "Crucify him!" they shouted.***

But still, Pilate hopes to set Christ free. He tells them that the Lord is innocent. 15:14, ***"Why? What crime has he committed?" asked Pilate. But they shouted all the louder, "Crucify him!"***

Pilate gives in to them. Morally, Pilate is weak. He cannot do what he knows to be the right thing. 15:15, ***Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.***

Pilate is the third party to call for the death of the Lord Jesus. He's a pawn in the hands of the chief priests and the other Jewish leaders. Yet we've seen that this plan to execute the Lord Jesus was part of God's plan for His Son. Listen to Acts 2:23 once more, ***"This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross."*** This was Peter speaking to the people on the Day of Pentecost. The crowd, on that day, was made up of people from all over the known world. They'd come to celebrate a harvest festival, Pentecost. Many of them may not have been present when the crowd called for Christ's death. Yet, Peter accuses them of crucifying Christ. ***"You, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross."***

How can he accuse them of crucifying the Lord? Many of them wouldn't have been in Jerusalem at the time. Surely it's stretching a point too far to say that they'd nailed the Lord Jesus to the cross.

But Peter has something far more important in mind. Yes, Pilate was responsible for ordering Christ's death. Only the Romans could give the order for execution. The Jews could not. But that doesn't take away the latter's guilt. The chief priests simply used Pilate for their own end. So too, they used the crowd. They had only one end in mind, the death of the Son of God: the death of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Peter's words on the Day of Pentecost ring down through the centuries to you and to me. Yes, it's your sin and mine that crucified Christ. Without exception, the world, in rebellion against God, crucified the Lord Jesus Christ.

'But', you say, 'How have I sinned with this rebellion?' Our sin can be simply summed up in failing to

keep Christ's two great commandments to love. Matthew 22:37, 39, **“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.”... ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’”**

Just like Barabbas, we're rebels. We've rebelled against our holy and righteous God and against His Word. Like sheep (as Isaiah calls us), we've gone astray. We even love our sin, the fact that we disobey God's call to be like Him. And, like many a naughty child, we expect that He'll just pick us up, give us a cuddle and ask us not to be naughty again. How wrong that kind of thinking is. Without question we deserve eternal separation from our holy and righteousness God.

For, God requires that all sin, all rebellion against Him, must be punished. We read in Romans 1:18, ***The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness...*** Romans 3:23, ***For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*** Romans 6:23, ***For the wages of sin is death...*** Rebellion against God deserves death, both physical (we shall all die) and spiritual (eternal separation from God).

But, we don't like to think that God hates sin. We don't want punishment. We don't want a holy God who's perfect in His justice. Rather, we want a God who tolerates rebellion, who accepts us just as we are. But a god like that is wishful thinking. It's god made in our image. It's not a correct picture of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. *Instead*, God has given us His Son. The Lord Jesus took your place, and mine, on the cross. He died so that you and I might live.

We read in 1 Peter 2:24, ***He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.*** It's only through trusting in Christ's death that your relationship with God (and mine) is healed.

2 Corinthians 5:21, ***God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*** Here, in this verse, is another summary of the gospel (the good news of Jesus Christ). The perfect Son of God took our sin. It's as if an exchange of clothing takes place at the cross. Our filthy rags (our sins) are exchanged for the pure and perfect clothes of Christ. For, Christ took our sin. Without earning it, we receive His innocence.

Listen to Romans 6:23 in full. ***For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*** God's gift to us is His Son. But as in all gifts, two people are involved. First, the giver: God. Second, the receiver: you and me. Only when we receive God's gift, through faith in Him, can we be certain that we're saved. To be saved is to enter into a right relationship with God. It is to know peace with God. It means that your sins—past, present and future—are forgiven. Only in a right relationship with God can you and I have eternal life, a future that's safe and secure with God.

It's not a good idea to think that the Bible is all about you and me. But, this case is different. For, we're here in this picture of salvation that Mark paints for us. So, where are you in this scene? Are you with the chief priests, and all who hate the Lord Jesus? You may be. But if that's so, then Peter's words in Acts 2:23 speak to you, indeed to all of us. ***“You, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.”*** For, we were all once like them.

Or, are you in with the crowd? Are you easily persuaded that the Lord Jesus isn't worth receiving as your Saviour? When someone stirs you up, you deny Christ. You follow the teachings of those who deny that the Bible is the word of God. Or, maybe you think the account of Jesus' death and resurrection is a myth. Then again, maybe you're with Pilate. You just can't make up your mind. You know that Christ is the Son of God, but you just can't quite accept Him as Saviour and Lord.

Are you with these three? Then pray that God will open your eyes to see Jesus as your Saviour and Lord. Pray for God's gift of faith.

Or, are you Barabbas, a sinner, a rebel set free by Christ's death for you on the cross?

This scene with Christ before Pilate, the chief priests and the crowd pictures the gospel for us. Barabbas (a name which means *son of the father*), a rebel, is set free. Christ, (the true *Son of God*) goes to the cross instead of Barabbas. These two, who make no accusations and who don't defend themselves, are silent: Jesus and Barabbas. In fact, Barabbas plays no part in his salvation (from death). The Lord Jesus, who refuses to defend Himself, takes his place on the cross.

But this is more than just a picture of the gospel. The Lord Jesus isn't just illustrating it for us. He is the gospel. Christ came to die for us and to take our place on the cross. You and I, and all who trust in Christ, are Barabbas. As rebels we deserve death. But now, through faith in Christ we truly become sons of the father. And united to Christ by faith we're true sons of God.

The Lord Jesus has died in our place. United to Him, by faith, we're set free. Our sins are forgiven and we have peace with God.

We often think of Christmas and Easter as God's gifts to His church. And yes, that's true. But they're

not separate from the Giver: God.

Philip Hallie in his book, *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*, writes: 'When you give somebody a thing without giving yourself, you degrade both parties.' The receiver of the gift is utterly passive. Meanwhile, you as the giver, stand there to receive thanks for the gift. Your thanks is a kind of repayment. But when you give yourself, nobody is degraded. For when you give yourself, your gift bears fruit and creates new and vigorous life.

That's what God has done for us. The gift of His Son is the gift of God Himself. God's gift to us is more than forgiveness of our sins and eternal life. It is Christ Himself. And He's the gift that we treasure most of all. Amen