



7 Last Steps to the CROSS

Jesus' Path to the Crucifixion in the Gospel of LUKE

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Audio Text - Step 5

Step 5 - Luke 23:1-6 - Trial Before Pilate

This is the fifth of a series of eight articles on the theme, *7 Last Steps to the Cross*. Jesus was betrayed by Judas Iscariot, denied by Peter, mocked by the Roman soldiers, and condemned to death on a cross by the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Council. Now He was sent to be tried by Pontus Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea for sentencing.

Luke 23:1-6 (ESV)

¹Then the whole company of them arose and brought him before Pilate. ²And they began to accuse him, saying, “We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ, a king.” ³And Pilate asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” And he answered him, “You have said so.” ⁴Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, “I find no guilt in this man.” ⁵But they were urgent, saying, “He stirs up the people, teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee even to this place.” ⁶When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean.

This passage follows immediately after the trial before the Jewish Council, which we covered in Step 4, the previous message. It was this Jewish Council that form the “whole company”, mentioned in verse 1, that arose and brought Jesus to Pilate.

The Plot of the Jewish Council

Why did they do this? Why did they not sentence and execute Him themselves? Based on Luke's account, and that of the other Gospels, they wanted Jesus to be executed by Pilate on the ground that He claimed to be a king who was fomenting rebellion against the Roman emperor. It was not within the power of the Sanhedrin to try and execute a rebel against the Roman Empire. It is not entirely clear, from existing historical evidence, whether the Sanhedrin could carry out execution against false teachers and false prophets. It seems likely that they could, since they were the top religious and civil court over Jewish matters and the Jewish community. But the point of note, based on all the Gospel accounts, suggest that they chose not to take this path because they were always afraid of serious unrest, if not revolt, from their own people, many of whom accepted Jesus as a true prophet, if not their Messiah. We see this in Luke 19:47-48 (ESV)

⁴⁷And he was teaching daily in the temple. The chief priests and the scribes and the principal men of the people were seeking to destroy him, ⁴⁸but they did not find anything they could do, for all the people were hanging on his words.

And again in Luke 22:1-2 (ESV)

¹Now the Feast of Unleavened Bread drew near, which is called the Passover. ²And the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to put him to death, for they feared the people.

It was the betrayal of Judas Iscariot who gave them the means to do so.

In the light of these evidence in the Gospels, it becomes clear that the Jewish Council presented Jesus to Pilate as a rebel king so that they did not have to kill Him themselves. They wanted to avoid the possible repercussion of unrest or rebellion against them from those who saw Jesus as their prophet or Messiah. In the Council's mind, Pilate would surely have Jesus executed if they can present Him as a rebel king who was plotting to revolt against Rome. In this way, so they think, their hands would be clean and their own people cannot blame them for executing a prophet.

This charge, however, was a total lie because Jesus' message was the Gospel of salvation for all who would repent of their sins and surrender to Him as their Lord and their God. It was a spiritual message, a call, for all to respond to God and be saved. It was not a political or military rallying call. It was never a preparation for war against Rome, or any earthly power. But this was the one charge the Council could fabricate that could sent Jesus to His death at the hands of Rome, as represented by Pilate. This was an act of human cunning. It was their plot to eliminate one who was seen as a threat to their authority, position, and self-interest, the object of their hatred, by committing murder by proxy.

Pilate's Dilemma

Pilate, as we noted above in Luke 23:4, pronounced that he found no guilt in Jesus. He knew that Jesus was innocent. Yet he had to face the Council and the mob they stirred up to their cause. This was a serious situation for him. He had to contemplate the possible use of force against the Jews whom he governed as a Roman official. He chose to appease them. Historical evidence outside of the Bible suggests that Pilate was quite capable of violence, and can be erratic. So it seems that he did not regard Jesus as important enough to his self-interest to uphold His innocence. It was too much to risk facing a possible rebellion he had to quell by force for the sake of protecting an innocent man. When he heard that Jesus was from Galilee, he thought that he had found a way to pass the buck to Herod, who was the Roman governor of Galilee. He sent Jesus to Herod for his judgement. If Herod chose to execute Jesus, he did not have to do so. He would not be facing any rebellion because of Him. The trial before Herod is the next step, Step 6, of Jesus' walk to the cross. We will pick this up in the next message. But in the meantime, there is more for us to learn from Pilate's action.

Human Expediency

Pilate's way of dealing with Jesus showed another sinful aspect of our fallen human nature - expediency and self-interest. Truth and justice are secondary, if not irrelevant, when they stand in the way of expediency and self-interest. It is the universal role of all in leadership and of all governing authorities to determine the facts, to be fair and to uphold justice. This is especially so for those whose role included the judiciary. This was the case for Pilate. As the Roman governor of Judea, Pilate was responsible to uphold justice and determine the truth. Among his many roles was that of being a judge over his jurisdiction. He did, in fact, establish quite correctly that Jesus was innocent of the charges leveled against Him. Yet he did not set him free. He was much more interested in solving his own problem of avoiding social unrest and the risk of having to use military force against those instigating Jesus' death. He knew that although Jesus was innocent, if he released Him, he would, very likely, face a riot, if not a rebellion. So justice had to be set aside to avoid an unwanted cost. This is the logic and cost of human expediency and self-interest. In the face of which, justice and truth are often thrown out and sacrificed.

Sadly for us all, this dilemma is all too common a situation we face in this life. How would we respond? How firm are we to affirm the truth and uphold justice? If there is no cost involved, most of us would probably say, "Yes!" What if there is a cost to pay? What would we do if, to protect the innocent and upholding justice for him, we have to face a storm from his the accusers or enemies who only seek his penalisation? This was Pilate's situation. It is one that plays out very frequently in daily life. We may have a colleague, a neighbour, a friend, whom we know is falsely or wrongly accused of something. Would we step up to say so? Or is it easier to say its none of our business? We are in a leadership position to sort out some accusation made against someone under our oversight which we know is wrong. Among his accusers and enemies are his superiors, and his colleagues, who are stirring up a big disturbance at the work place, and insist that he is wrong and seek his penalisation. Would we stand up for the person's innocence or

penalise him to please his accusers to keep the peace? What if among his accusers are some of your peers, and some of your superiors, who insist that he is wrong and seek his penalisation? Is it not easier just to agree and penalise the innocent? If it is not known whether the person is wrong, would we take the time and make the effort to make a proper investigation? Or is it easier to just agree with the accusers and set the penalty? What if truth and justice are against you? You are the one who did wrong and have to pay. You are the one who made the mistake. Would you admit it? Would you pay? The challenge that Pilate pose to us is whether anyone of us will do any better if we were in his shoes.

The Story Continues

What we can learn from the story of Pilate and what he did does not end here. We noted that Pilate decided to send Jesus to Herod for Herod to decide His case. This is our next message, which is Step 6 of Jesus' 7 last steps to the cross. However, the worst outcome of Pilate's expediency comes in Step 7, when he sent Jesus to the cross. We will deal with that in the message after next.

In the meantime, can we admit that we may fare no better than Pilate if we were in his shoes when Jesus was sent to him to be tried? If so, we can see our desperate need for the grace, enabling and moulding of our God to enable us to uphold truth and justice above our own self-interest and fleshly expediency. We need to know to turn to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, for our transformation in Christ. Only then can we be like Christ to put the things of the Kingdom of God over and above the things of the kingdoms of this world. Only then will we uphold His truth and justice over our own our fleshly self-interest and the expediency to protect it. Only in Him and by Him, can we defeat our sins, the fallen world around us, and the lies and attacks of the devil that enslave us to sin.