

JESUS WAS TRIED AND CONDEMNED IN OUR PLACES

Luke 22:66-23:25

Key Verse: 23:25

“He released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, the one they asked for, and surrendered Jesus to their will.”

Today we want to think about Jesus who was tried, found innocent, and yet condemned and put to death. This event fills us sorrow and we want to cry or become angry over the injustice of what was done to Jesus. Recently, several high-profile shootings in America put a huge spotlight on our police and courts and made social justice a central topic of conversation and media. Suddenly, huge social movements started and people became outraged about injustice—this has led to a lot of things both good and bad. We may be tempted to look at Jesus’ trial humanly in the same way. Yet, Jesus knew all of this would happen and predicted it down to the last detail. He walked into it knowing full well what would happen and was determined to fulfill the will of God. Jesus was not a victim. His suffering was not meaningless but had an eternal purpose. Luke gives us a concise account of what happened to bring out the meaning of his trials and condemnation. Central is that Jesus was condemned as the Son of God and that he was innocent. Let’s think about why these things are important to us today.

First, Jesus is the Son of God, seated at the right hand of the mighty God (22:66-71)

As we studied last week, it had been a long and horrible night for Jesus. He already had several illegal night trials, and they had already clearly decided what they would do to him, yet ironically, they had to wait till day to hold a legal trial before the Sanhedrin¹. Verse 66 says, **“At daybreak the council of the elders of the people, both the chief priests and the teachers of the law, met together, and Jesus was led before them.”** Matthew states the purpose of this trial clearly, **“When morning came, all the chief priests and elders of the people conspired against Jesus to put Him to death”** (Mt 27:1) **“‘If you are the Messiah,’ they said, ‘tell us.’ Jesus answered, ‘If I tell you, you will not believe me, and if I asked you, you would not answer.’”**

¹ “as soon as it was day” The Oral Law decided that the Sanhedrin could only meet by daylight. *Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges & NIV Study Notes*

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Sometimes we can feel like Jesus on trial before a world that doesn't care and won't believe no matter what we say. Many times people try to pull us into endless human debates about the crusades or Catholic priests or some scandal or the latest Richard Dawkins argument, not to understand the truth but just to argue. Then we begin to defend our faith and get pulled into an endless heated argument. At the end no one knows what the other's point was and even if we "win" the argument we lose the person—so what was the point of arguing? Jesus didn't argue or defend himself, he just gave his good testimony. Jesus' testimony was meant as a sharp last call to repentance for those gathered. There was a great reversal revealed in Jesus' words. He said, **"But from now on, the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the mighty God."** Though it may seem that the world is putting Jesus on trial, it is in fact Jesus who is the judge, who is victorious and who will put all the enemies of the gospel under his feet. One question that comes up, is why even have a trial at all if they had already decided they would put Jesus to death? One reason is that not all of them agreed to this decision and action. One was Joseph of Arimathea (23:50-51) and at least another was Nicodemus (Jn 7:50-51). I have to believe that aside from these two there were others who were convicted by Jesus' testimony and repented.

Verse 70 says, **"They all asked, 'Are you then the Son of God?'"** Luke's account of Jesus' trials is by far the shortest. While Matthew and Mark bring out the hypocrisy of the trial and John focuses on how Jesus continued to tell the truth to the end, Luke condenses the whole affair down to two questions: **"Are you the Messiah?"** and **"Are you the Son of God?"** Luke helps us to see that Jesus was condemned as the Son of God. He was not condemned because of what he had done, or because he was trapped but because of who he is. Jesus replied, **"You say that I am."** This is a Greek expression that deflects responsibility back onto the one asking the question. In other words, "Yes. you understood what I said, you came to the right conclusion, now make up your own mind and consider carefully what that means." In fact, answering "is Jesus the Son of God?" is the most crucial question that we must answer in life. However, they did not care, they did not consider. This was the solid evidence they were looking for, **"They said, 'Why do we need any more testimony? We have heard it from his own lips.'" (71)**

We hope and wish beyond hope that there will be justice in our courts but often, they are determined to do evil. About a year ago, the state of North Carolina passed a measure restricting transgender people to use the bathroom corresponding to the gender on their birth certificate in government run facilities. The result was a year of demonstrations and boycotts of the whole state resulting in billions in lost revenue, and the Governor quickly being put out of office. Under the crushing

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financial burden the measure was repealed, amidst a public outcry to keep the bill². In courts all across the nation judges are making decisions in favor of an incredibly small minority of the population while ignoring the rights, privacy and sanctity of thousands of individuals even vulnerable children, based primarily on public opinion, political concerns and money. In this time, we are tempted to despair and believe that God is being defeated that the church will soon become irrelevant in America. But the fact is that Jesus is **“seated at the right hand of the mighty God.”** Whatever may happen in our world, we must know that God is allowing it for his good purpose. God is on his throne and is in control, he is not the victim of anyone, his purpose is never defeated. “His truth is marching on, Glory, glory, Hallelujah!” Jesus is at the right hand of the mighty God and we do not need to fear but continue to give our good testimony in a dark society.

Second, Innocent Jesus was condemned (23:1-25).

“Then the whole assembly rose and led him off to Pilate.” (23:1) Only a short time after this, the Sanhedrin tried John and Peter and wanted to put them to death. Soon after they arrested Stephen, convicted him of blasphemy and stoned him to death. James was thrown off the tower of the temple and beaten to death in broad daylight. We don’t even know what happened to the hundreds or thousands rounded up under Saul. So, why didn’t they kill Jesus themselves? Luke 19:47-48 says, **“Every day he was teaching at the temple. But the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the leaders among the people were trying to kill him. Yet they could not find any way to do it, because all the people hung on his words.”** Here we see that they very much wanted to kill Jesus but they couldn’t because they knew they would lose the next election. So, they came up with a clever plan: get the Romans to do it. Of course, the charge of blasphemy wouldn’t do in Roman court, so suddenly the charges changed.

Verse 2 says, **“they began to accuse him, saying, ‘We have found this man subverting our nation. He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar and claims to be Messiah, a king.’”** In fact, the only thing that Jesus had been subverting was their religious authority and it was them who taught that paying taxes to Cesar was sin, while Jesus had just told them to **“give back to Cesar what is Cesar’s”** (20:25). Pilate was no one’s fool, he didn’t pay attention to the first two charges, but he perked up hearing that Jesus claimed to be Messiah, a king. Pilate had dealt with a number of uprisings and was very familiar with Jews claiming to be the Messiah and gathering followers for a revolt. His time as governor had been

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/30/us/north-carolina-senate-acts-to-repeal-restrictive-bathroom-law.html>

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marked with controversy and he was known as a greedy and cruel administrator who used excessively violent means to suppress many uprisings—it was eventually because of the mishandling of an uprising in Samaria that he lost his position just 5 years after this. In fact, the only reason he was in Jerusalem was to prevent rebellious activity during the Passover.

So, he asked Jesus **“are you the king of the Jews?”** Jesus again responded, **“You have said so”** (3b). Saying “yes” would mean being condemned but Jesus responded “yes”; yet he called Pilate to consider the answer for himself. After examining him it was clear that Jesus was no political threat to Rome—there is the saying, “it takes one to know one”. Verse 4 says, **“Then Pilate announced to the chief priests and the crowd, ‘I find no basis for a charge against this man.’”**

However, again trying to play on Pilate’s fear of an uprising they insisted that he was stirring up people all over Judea and now he has come here to start an uprising during the Passover (5). Pilate knew there was no truth that this gentle, noble teacher was the leader of a rebellion and yet hearing that he was a Galilean, he saw a chance to escape and sent an innocent man to Herod hoping he would condemn and kill him as he had John the Baptist.

Herod Antipas had, interestingly, been afraid some time before this, thinking Jesus was John come back from the dead (9:7-9) and had wanted to kill him according to the Pharisees (13:31). However, like Pilate he learned that Jesus was no threat but only hoped to be entertained by him. Jesus had stood trial before the religious society, then before the unbelieving Gentile world, and now before the king of the sinful society of his time. It seemed that everyone was given the chance to put Jesus on trial. It is so difficult to hear the accusations of others. We want to defend ourselves even when we know we are wrong, how much more when we are innocent. How difficult it is in our times to stand before the sinful world that doesn’t even want to understand and listen to their accusations. It is so easy to justify ourselves, argue and defend and be pulled down into the mire with them. Herod was plying him with many questions and the chief priests and the teachers of the law were vehemently accusing him, but Jesus gave no answer (9-10). And taking his silence for weakness Herod and his soldiers mocked him like bullies on the playground and sent him back to Pilate (11). 1 Peter 2:21b-23 says, **“Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. ‘He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.’ When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.”** Jesus stood and took trial after trial and accusation after accusation and all their humiliation

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because he had decided to obey the will of God for his life. He had the strength to remain silent, and not to fight because he had won the victory on his knees in prayer.

“Pilate called together the chief priests, the rulers and the people, and said to them, ‘You brought me this man as one who was inciting the people to rebellion. I have examined him in your presence and have found no basis for your charges against him. Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us; as you can see, he has done nothing to deserve death. Therefore, I will punish him and then release him.’” (13-16). This is now the second time that Pilate has announced Jesus’ innocence. The account of Jesus being sent to Herod is only found in Luke. The other gospels omit it, because nothing comes of it, but it is central to Luke’s point. Jesus was clearly innocent, everyone knew he was innocent and yet he was condemned. However, Pilate just to appease them was willing to punish him—which meant flogging him severely—though he was innocent.

“But the whole crowd shouted, ‘Away with this man! Release Barabbas to us!’ (Barabbas had been thrown into prison for an insurrection in the city, and for murder.)” (19) As you see in your footnote, some manuscripts tried to clarify here that Pilate used the custom of releasing one prisoner at the Passover to try again to free Jesus, offering what seemed like an obvious choice between an innocent man and a dangerous murderer. However, Matthew and Mark tell us that the chief priests riled up the crowd and persuaded them to shout for Barabbas instead. Luke, however, skips all these details to draw our attention to the fact that there was a complete disconnect between the evidence and the sentence that was carried out against him. There was no logic to it, there was no obvious cause for Jesus to be killed.

Verses 20-21 say, **“Wanting to release Jesus, Pilate appealed to them again. But they kept shouting, ‘Crucify him! Crucify him!’”** Crucifixion was the highest punishment given. Roman citizens could never be crucified except in the one case of being charged as a traitor against Rome. This is why insurrection was the charge the Sanhedrin brought to Pilate. How was it even possible for them to cry out for an innocent man to receive crucifixion? Because behind the crowd were the chief priests. Yet, behind the chief priests was Satan working constantly to kill the Son of God and stop the plan of salvation right there (Lk 22:3). However, behind Satan was the perfect will of God who so loved the world that he had planned to allow the serpent to strike his son’s heel, so that he could crush his head once and for all (Gen 3:15). He allowed Satan to kill Jesus, so that in fact, he

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could defeat Satan entirely. Then, let us consider what is the meaning of God allowing Jesus to be condemned here.

Third, innocent Jesus was condemned in our place (22-25).

Verse 22 says, **“For the third time he spoke to them: ‘Why? What crime has this man committed? I have found in him no grounds for the death penalty. Therefore I will have him punished and then release him.’”** For an unprecedented third time Pilate had to reassert that they had no evidence and there were no grounds to condemn Jesus, that he was completely innocent. **“But with loud shouts they insistently demanded that he be crucified, and their shouts prevailed. So Pilate decided to grant their demand.”** (23-24)

Verse 25 says, **“He released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, the one they asked for, and surrendered Jesus to their will.”** (25) This verse clearly sums up the meaning of Jesus’ trial: the innocent took the place of the guilty. Jesus was brought to Pilate with the charge of insurrection. He was found completely innocent of the charge. However, instead of being released he took the place of the vile man who had in fact committed insurrection and would presumably do it again. Barabbas was a violent bandit who had committed murder. What is more he was in prison with the insurrectionist who had committed murder in the uprising (Mk 15:7). These other insurrectionists are probably the very ones crucified on Jesus’ left and right and Barabbas was their leader but he was set free. Jesus literally took his place. Someone came into the prison and said, “Barabbas get up and go free, Jesus took your place.”

In fact Jesus took our place. 2 Corinthians 5:21 says, **“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”** This is why Luke goes to such great lengths to emphasize that Jesus was innocent. His point is not that we should become angry or pity Jesus because of the injustice done to him but to establish how Jesus could become our substitutionary sacrifice. If he was guilty of even the smallest charge, then he suffered for what he did. But in fact he was innocent in every sense of the word as confirmed over and over again. He suffered not for his own sin but for our sin. Like Barabbas we were completely guilty and stood accused awaiting death. We deserved this, the charge was correct, the evidence too great to refute, the sentence just. But innocent Jesus stepped in and took our place. He allowed himself to be unjustly accused, condemned and sentenced though he had done no evil. In this way we have been completely set free. Romans 8:1 says, **“Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”**

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Yet, condemnation is a huge problem in people's hearts both in and out of the church. People who claim not to believe in God still feel condemned in their heart and indulge in many distractions to assuage their conscience. For those who believe, at the moment of our conversion we accepted that though our sins were like a mountain, Christ threw it into the sea. Our sins were blotted out of God's book (Isa 43:25), they were put as far as the east is from the west (Ps 103:12), they were not only forgiven but forgotten (Heb 8:12). This was something that we could never do for ourselves, it is the gift of God that is received only by faith and not by anything we did (Eph 2:8-9). Yet, after accepting this, the reality is that we continue to sin. We begin to feel that we will be condemned for our sins and thrown into hell. Though we were saved only by what *Christ* has done, we feel that our salvation must be maintained by what *we* do. This is the work of Satan. Revelation 12:10 calls him, **“the accuser of our brothers and sisters, who accuses them before our God day and night.”** But we must have confidence that Jesus was condemned in our place. He who had no sin took upon himself: everything that we have done and ever will do and was condemned for what we had done. Therefore Romans 8:34 says, **“Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.”**

In the 4th century AD in Korea a man had two sons. The elder rose to become Chief Justice in the land and the younger became an infamous bandit. The elder brother loved his younger brother but was unable to persuade him to change his ways. Eventually the younger son was caught and brought before his brother, the Chief Justice. Everyone in the courtroom thought the younger brother would get off because it was well known that the Chief Justice loved his brother. But at the end of the trial, the Chief Justice sentenced his brother to death. On the day of the execution, the elder brother came to the prison and said to his brother “Let's swap places”. The younger brother agreed thinking that once they realized that it was the elder brother, the execution would not go forward. On he went up on the hill to watch proceedings. His brother was brought out at dawn and to his horror executed. Filled with remorse, he ran down the hill and told the guard his name and that he was the criminal who should be executed. The guards said to him. “There is no sentence outstanding on anyone with that name.” The slate was wiped clean.

Jesus was the perfectly innocent Son of God. As such he has taken all our sin upon him and was condemned. Because of Christ's condemnation we do not need to be condemned any more, we do not need to condemn ourselves but we can be set free and live a life of victory. Praise Jesus for what he has done for us!