



John 18:29–32

29 So Pilate came out to them and asked, ‘What charges are you bringing against this man?’ 30 ‘If he were not a criminal,’ they replied, ‘we would not have handed him over to you.’ 31 Pilate said, ‘Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law.’ ‘But we have no right to execute anyone,’ they objected. 32 This took place to fulfil what Jesus had said about the kind of death he was going to die.

Reflection

John's account of Jesus arrest and trial so far has been a whirlwind. After five long chapters of farewell in the Upper Room in barely half a chapter Jesus has been subjected to a secret, late night arrest in the garden of Gethsemane, an interrogation by Annas, and a grilling by a midnight session of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council presided over by Caiaphas the high priest. Quick as a heartbeat Jesus has been found worthy of death.

Just think about that for a moment. After being secretly arrested in a secluded location in the middle of the night Jesus, under the cover of darkness, has been rushed to a speedy trial in a private residence. He

hasn't slept, it's well into the early hours of the morning, Jesus has no legal representation, and false witness after false witness are being brought forward to accuse him. Just one slip up and it will mean the death penalty. But in the end the witnesses' testimonies don't agree and it takes the high priest himself to turn Jesus' own words back on himself and pronounce the death penalty (Matt 26:63–66).

Perhaps John rushes over these events to highlight the wicked speed at which they unfolded. Certainly, our modern sensibilities scream out at these failures of due process, let alone the injustice of what is occurring. How can the high priest and the seventy-member Jewish ruling council, the earthly representatives of a God who is characterised by justice and mer-

cy, act in a way that is so contrary to the nature of the God they profess? What's more, they were experts in the Old Testament law, a law since its inception that has been universally recognised as setting the very standards of justice. The Old Testament law became the envy of nations and its guiding principles have gone on to become foundational to almost every international law code. Innocent until proven guilty. The punishment must fit the crime. The superiority of eyewitness testimony over circumstantial evidence and hearsay. These pillars of our judicial system come from the Bible. But what is going on here in this midnight hearing makes a mockery of both the Old Testament law and almost any law code of any land since.

Even more damning is the historical record

which suggests that this 'trial' was also likely in direct contravention of the Sanhedrin's own laws. Documents that survive from the period suggest that under the Sanhedrin's own laws: entrapment was illegal, night trials were forbidden, capital cases had to span at least two consecutive days, trials could only be conducted in the temple courts, defendants must be provided with a defense attorney and the high priest could not intervene in proceedings. But what does this matter to bloodthirsty men who've already concluded in their hearts that Jesus must die? Their hate is so great, they're only just barely going through the motions before making their death-penalty recommendation to the powers that be, in this case, the Roman governor Pontius Pilate. After their wicked haste, yesterday's passage concluded

with these words,

28 Then the Jewish leaders took Jesus from Caiaphas to the palace of the Roman governor. By now it was early morning, and to avoid ceremonial uncleanness they did not enter the palace, because they wanted to be able to eat the Passover.

And the travesty continues in today's passage, reading from John 18:29–32,

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law.’ ‘But we have no right to execute anyone,’ they objected. 32 This took place to fulfil what Jesus had said about the kind of death he was going to die.

To set the historical scene there is no love lost between the Jewish ruling elite and the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate. Pilate had a thinly disguised hatred of the Jews which had been evident in his public policy from day one. As Roman Governor Pilate’s main responsibility to Caesar was to keep the peace in Roman territories which usually meant working hand in hand with indigenous authorities like the Jewish aristocracy. Typically, a conquered people’s governing authorities were left in charge of occupied territories as long as they openly deferred to the Romans in matters

of taxation and military affairs. Pilate however had refused to play ball right from the outset. Ancient Romans worshipped Caesar as god, highly offensive to Jews in Jerusalem. On his initial visit to Jerusalem Pilate's soldiers had carried banners and shields bearing Tiberias' image as god, incensing the Jews; something all the governors before him had had the good sense not to do. He went on to violently quell several uprisings, mint coins bearing Tiberias' divine image, and even raid the temple treasury for funds to build an aqueduct. Pilate's acts strained Jewish-Roman relations to breaking point and he was ultimately stood down from his position by Caesar due to his heavy hand in AD 36. Perhaps in Pilate's conduct in the gospels we see a man who's begun to realise that his situation has become tenuous. But we

can hear from his voice that there is no love lost between himself and the Jewish ruling elite who've called him out of his palace at daybreak because they viewed his habitation as unclean,

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

The question is clear enough. If they are seeking the death penalty Pilate would like to know the charge. Only the Roman governor could order a person crucified and so Pilate dispenses with any pleasantries and asks bluntly,

'What charges are you bringing against this man?'

The Jews' reply offers us a window into the disdain they held for the man.

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

There's irony here as well as disrespect. They have no real charge against Jesus. Certainly nothing substantiated in court. Pilate returns in kind, again his words heavy in irony,

'Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law.'

The law that they'd just made a farce of. And to add insult to injury Pilate's words force the Jews' hand. No doubt through clenched teeth they reply,

‘But we have no right to execute anyone,’

Arguably the Jews could have stoned Jesus, much like they will later do to Stephen. The Romans wouldn't have liked it, but as Jesus was not a Roman citizen they probably would have turned a blind eye as long as the general populace didn't object too much. But the Jews wanted Jesus crucified because of the stigma associated with crucifixion. Deuteronomy 21:23 says of crucifixion that ‘anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse’ – surely having Jesus crucified would put an end to this talk that he was the Messiah.

But even as the events seem to spiral out of control John reminds us of the only one

who was truly in control of this moment. You see, Jesus had predicted these events way back in John 3. John wants to make sure that we remember, so he reminds us in verse 32.

This took place to fulfil what Jesus had said about the kind of death he was going to die.

In John 3:14–15, right before the most famous verse in all of Scripture, Jesus had predicted the way in which he would die,

14 Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, 15 that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.

As the Jewish ruling elite and Pontius Pilate deliberate over the death of Jesus John reminds us that this is God's saving plan set in place before the beginning of time, not theirs.

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. John 3:16

All who look on the cross of Jesus Christ in faith will be saved.

Think & Pray

Meditate this morning over this great injustice that brought ultimate justice into our world. Reflect over the sovereignty of

God working in dirty human history to enact his great salvation of the human race. Marvel again at his unlikely plan that saw a thirty-three year old carpenter executed by Jew and Gentile alike, the world wiping their hands of the son of God, only for their heinous act to be the God-ordained means of the salvation of billions. And praise God however you are led by his Holy Spirit this morning.