

God on Trial – Injustice Upon the Just One

How often have you heard the words, "It's not fair!" When children are little, you hear it a lot. In the home, on the playground "It's not fair—he had two turns, and I only had one!" "He got a bigger slice!" "He didn't take his plate to the kitchen!"

As we grow older, we become more sophisticated in the ways we say "It's not fair!" We talk about prejudice and oppression, and lawlessness and nepotism, and corruption. But it's still the same thing – a desire that the world would treat us fairly. "He gets a bigger salary for less work!" "He just used his money to get out of that jail time!"

Where did we even get this idea of justice and fairness? Many would say that it is one of evidences for God, that humans have a sense of fairness, a judicial sentiment.

But the irony is, we are not very fair in our demand for fairness. It's very revealing about the sinfulness of our human hearts that from the earliest ages we expect and demand to be treated fairly, but are far less concerned with treating others fairly. If justice is really about fairness for all, then we'd complain if someone else got a smaller slice than we did. We'd complain if someone else was treated unfairly.

One of the greatest examples of the injustice of human justice was when mankind put God on trial. When Jesus was tried by human law, it was not a shining moment for fairness.

So how was Jesus treated when He stood before human justice? How was Jesus treated by the Law? What we see in the trials of Jesus is how the innocent Jesus was unjustly treated. Here in John 18, we read of how Jesus, Justice Himself was treated by a cowardly, dismissive Roman ruler, and declared guilty when He is innocent. This is the Just receiving injustice. Everywhere along the line, Jesus could have, and from a pure justice point of view, should have, shouted, "It's not fair. I don't have to go through with this! I am doing this world a favour, I am giving them unearned kindness, and not only are they not thanking me, they are abusing Me! I am not going to take this!"

But instead, we find that according to Peter, Jesus, "when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously; (1Pe 2:23)

Watching our Lord Jesus, we'll be reminded that it isn't fair, in a fallen world. We live in a world where evil is called good and good evil, where the just are condemned and the unjust are exonerated. And even though it is right to desire justice, to expect all to be fair in a fallen world is misguided. The books of Job and Ecclesiastes are there to remind us that life isn't perfectly fair. Suffering injustice is part of the pilgrim life.

One of the greatest paradoxes of all is this: God will bring justice to the universe, through His Son bearing our injustice. The Son of God was unjustly treated, unfairly treated, and ultimately bore on the cross all our injustice. He experienced treatment He did not deserve, so that we could avoid the treatment we did deserve. So as we study the passage, we once again admire and adore the only Just One experiencing injustice so that true justice might be done at the Cross. We watch Him bearing lawlessness so that He might justify the ungodly by faith.

Here the injustices poured on Jesus were illegality, injury, and intimidation.

I. The Injustice of Illegality

²⁸ Then they led Jesus from Caiaphas to the Praetorium, and it was early morning. But they themselves did not go into the Praetorium, lest they should be defiled, but that they might eat the Passover. ²⁹ Pilate then went out to them and said, "What accusation do you bring against this Man?" ³⁰ They answered and said to him, "If He were not an evildoer, we would not have delivered Him up to you." ³¹ Then Pilate said to them, "You take Him and judge Him according to your law." Therefore the Jews said to him, "It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death," ³² that the saying of Jesus might be fulfilled which He spoke, signifying by what death He would die.

After the three sham Jewish trials, the Sanhedrin now took Jesus to Pontius Pilate. They do this very early in the morning for two reasons. One, they still feared the people, and wanted to have this accomplished before the city was astir. Two, they needed to have this crucifixion over by the beginning of their Sabbath, which commenced at sundown on Friday (Jn 19:31). Notice the hypocrisy – they are busy falsely accusing Jesus, plotting His murder, but they are trying to keep themselves ceremonially clean by not entering a Gentile household.

Why didn't they just stone Jesus themselves? The answer is that the stonings we see in Acts were really mob justice, the Jewish people no longer had the legal right to put people to death. Since the year 6 A.D, Judea had been governed directly by Rome, which meant only Rome could put people to death. But that presented a problem. What Rome thought of as worthy of death was not the same as what Jewish law saw as worthy of death. The Sanhedrin gave the death penalty for blasphemy, and they claimed Jesus guilty of that. But Rome did not care about blasphemy. Rome typically cared about two things: pay your taxes to Rome, and admit that Caesar is the ultimate king.

So, when they bring Jesus to Pilate, they change the charge to something that Rome would regard as a capital crime: rebellion, treason. "And they began to accuse Him, saying, "We found this fellow perverting the nation, and forbidding to pay taxes to Caesar, saying that He Himself is Christ, a King." (Luke 23:2)

So, once Pilate can see that the Sanhedrin clearly wanted the Roman death-penalty for a Roman crime, he brings Jesus into a private interview with himself.

³³Then Pilate entered the Praetorium again, called Jesus, and said to Him, "Are You the King of the Jews?" ³⁴ Jesus answered him, "Are you speaking for yourself about this, or did others tell you this concerning Me?" ³⁵ Pilate answered, "Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered You to me. What have You done?" ³⁶ Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here." ³⁷ Pilate therefore said to Him, "Are You a king then?" Jesus answered, "You say *rightly* that I am a king. For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice." ³⁸ Pilate said to Him, "What is truth?"

Here is an incredible meeting between secular power and the Lord Jesus Himself. Pontius Pilate, the ultimate picture of a secular, pragmatic, unbelieving man of the world, interviewing the Lord of Life, the Truth Himself.

Pilate wants to know if Jesus really does think of Himself as a rival king to Rome. Jesus amazingly and deftly dodges the accusation, without denying that He is a king. He is a king, but not a rival king to political Rome, right now. His kingdom is not a secular power, vying for dominance over Rome. It's not a kingdom that needs soldiers, or force, or violence. His kingdom originates from beyond this world, a kingdom based on truth. Jesus is on earth as the truth-teller, for all those who have ears to hear.

Pilate's dismissive reply is a perfect summary of the way people respond to this kingdom. He asks rhetorically, not expecting an answer, not interested in the answer, "What is truth?" How many people do and say something similar as they encounter Jesus in the Word. They hear Him say "I am the way, the truth, and the life" and they say to themselves, "What is truth, anyway? Who can know the truth? Truth for who? My truth? Your truth? What is truth?" The answer is the the Truth was standing right in front of Him. Truth is a Person, before it becomes a proposition, truth is God Himself, before it becomes ideas about God. Jesus the Truth stood before Pilate. Pilate could have discovered the very meaning of life, the answers to the great mysteries, the solution to the perplexing puzzles of life. But he chose to dismiss Jesus with a wave of the hand, "What is truth?"

At this point, Pilate can tell that Jesus is no threat to Rome, no rebel, no traitor. So he tries to set Jesus free.

And when he had said this, he went out again to the Jews, and said to them, "I find no fault in Him at all." ³⁹ "But you have a custom that I should release someone to you at the Passover. Do you therefore want me to release to you the King of the Jews?" ⁴⁰ Then they all cried again, saying, "Not this Man, but Barabbas!" Now Barabbas was a robber.

Five times in the Gospel record, Pilate is going to state the innocence of Jesus. But when he does this, it enrages the Sanhedrin. They cast more accusations at Jesus, to which He remains silent. Pilate is going to try to release Jesus four times. The first is mentioned in the other three Gospels. Pilate heard that Jesus had taught in Galilee, and since Herod was the ruler of Galilee, he sends Jesus to be tried by Herod, who was in town for the Passover. Herod got nothing out of Jesus, so he joined in the mockery, clothed Jesus in a royal robe, and returned Him to Pilate.

Pilate now makes his second attempt to release Jesus. He invokes the Passover custom of one prisoner being released at the Passover. Pilate thinks that if he bypasses the Sanhedrin and asks the people who to release, they will choose Jesus. But the Pharisees and Sadducees had been using the days since Jesus rode into Jerusalem to turn the people against Jesus, to show them that Jesus was an upstart, someone who would overturn Jewish customs and ways, that following Him would overturn their lives. They had successfully persuaded the people that Barabbas should be released, and not Jesus. By the way, the other Gospels tell us that Barabbas was a true rebel. He was an actual traitor to Rome, someone already convicted of treasonous rebellion to Rome. So they want a convicted traitor to be released in the stead of an innocent man.

*They rise and needs will have
My dear Lord made away;
A murderer they save,
The prince of life they slay.
Yet cheerful He to suffering goes,
That He His foes from thence might free.*

All of this is illegal, unfair and slanderous: trying to get Jesus accused of being a traitor. But now the injustice went to another level.

II. The Injustice of Injury

¹ So then Pilate took Jesus and scourged Him. ² And the soldiers twisted a crown of thorns and put it on His head, and they put on Him a purple robe. ³ Then they said, "Hail, King of the Jews!" And they struck Him with their hands. ⁴ Pilate then went out again, and said to them, "Behold, I am bringing Him out to you, that you may know that I find no fault in Him." ⁵ Then Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple

robe. And *Pilate* said to them, "Behold the Man!"

Now in the meantime, Pilate had received an urgent letter from his wife, who warned him to do anything against Jesus, because she had had a dream about Him. So Pilate tries to get Jesus released a third way.

Pilate's next method is that he thinks if Jesus is badly brutalised by Roman scourging, that it will satisfy the bloodthirsty crowd. Pilate no doubt told his centurion, "see that this man comes out looking like Roman justice has taught Him a lesson."

Roman scourging was not like the Jewish lash. Jewish Law only allowed thirty-nine lashes, to prevent it being more than forty. Rome had no such law. Rome also used a different instrument. What was called the cat-of-nine-tails was composed of a short handle, to which were attached nine strands of braided rope. At the end of each braid was either pieces of metal or bone. It was meant to inflict extreme pain, and cause extreme laceration and bruising, if the ends were blunt, or to cause massive injury if the ends were sharp. A skilled Roman soldier could use the cat, as it was called, to peg into the flesh, and tear and pull out skin and flesh. A Roman scourging could result in enough blood loss to lead to death, though they did not use it as a form of execution.

Once the Roman soldiers had scourged Jesus, they went a step further. They braided a crown, out of thorns, and then pressed this into the head of Jesus, causing both pain and shame – a deliberate a public mocking of the idea that He was a king. A king with a paper crown, a king whose crown could only be composed of the throwaway and ugly part of the plant, the thorns.

To that, they placed on him the purple robe, probably the one supplied by Herod. And now the cohort of Romans took turns simply assaulting Him, brutalising Him.

Think of it: what has Jesus done to deserve a Roman scourging, a crown of thorns, or to be abused by the cohort?

Having done that, Pilate brings Jesus out, essentially saying, "Behold the Man you say is such a threat to Rome! Behold the man you say is a rebel king! What sort of threat is He really? How does He look to you?" Pilate thinks the crowd will have sympathy on a wounded, injured, clearly battered man.

But this attempt to placate the people by violence backfires.

⁶ Therefore, when the chief priests and officers saw Him, they cried out, saying, "Crucify *Him*, crucify *Him*!" Pilate said to them, "You take Him and crucify *Him*, for I find no fault in Him." ⁷ The Jews answered him, "We have a law, and according to our law He ought to die, because He made Himself the Son of God." ⁸

The leaders see Jesus and they more vehemently cry out for His crucifixion. Pilate again, for the fifth time in the Gospel records says that he finds no crime, no wrongdoing in Jesus. Pilate knows this man is innocent; he knows the Jewish leaders have a vendetta against Jesus. But at this point the Jews mentioned that the accused had claimed to be the "Son of God" (Jn 19:7). This struck such fear in the heart of Pilate (Jn 19:8) that he called Jesus inside once again to question Him.

Therefore, when Pilate heard that saying, he was the more afraid, ⁹ and went again into the Praetorium, and said to Jesus, "Where are You from?" But Jesus gave him no answer. ¹⁰ Then Pilate said to Him, "Are You not speaking to me? Do You not know that I have power to crucify You, and power to release You?" ¹¹ Jesus answered, "You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above. Therefore the one who delivered Me to you has the greater sin."

This final private interview that Pilate has with Jesus now has Pilate's pulse racing. Who does he really have in front of him, that his wife had had a dream about Him, that the jealous religious leaders wanted to kill Him, who calmly and with majestic authority went through all these things without resistance or rebellion? And now Pilate hears Jesus had claimed to be the Son of God. So now he asks, "where are You from?" But Jesus has no answer for Pilate because Pilate has shown contempt for the truth. He is only interested in expediency. He wouldn't believe the answer Jesus gave Him.

Pilate is annoyed with His silence and vaunts his authority over Jesus – how dare you not reply to the one who has the power to let you live or die! But Jesus is so far above Pilate's petty world that He calmly responds: "Actually, any power you have over Me is delegated power from a power far greater than you – my Father." In other words, Pilate is simply part of a plan much greater than himself, and the ones who now put this matter in Pilate's hands are the ones with the greater guilt.

Now Pilate is alarmed. He knows the Man in front of him is not a normal Man, not the average. He knows even this scourging has been illegal. So he tries to release Jesus, but a third injustice is on the way.

III. The Injustice of Intimidation

¹² From then on Pilate sought to release Him, but the Jews cried out, saying, "If you let this Man go, you are not Caesar's friend. Whoever makes himself a king speaks against Caesar."

When the Jewish leaders see that Pilate is going to release Jesus, they begin to basically threaten Pilate, blackmail him. Remember that the basic responsibilities of a Roman procurator were to collect the taxes and keep the peace. Here looms a real danger that the Jews will take their case to Tiberius Caesar and accuse Pilate of allowing rebellion. And there was some history to grow Pilate's fear. The man who had sponsored and supported Pilate in Rome had actually been executed a few months earlier. Pilate was in a precarious situation.

¹³ When Pilate therefore heard that saying, he brought Jesus out and sat down in the judgment seat in a place that is called *The Pavement*, but in Hebrew, Gabbatha. ¹⁴ Now it was the Preparation Day of the Passover, and about the sixth hour. And he said to the Jews, "Behold your King!" ¹⁵ But they cried out, "Away with Him, away with Him! Crucify Him!" Pilate said to them, "Shall I crucify your King?" The chief priests answered, "We have no king but Caesar!" ¹⁶ Then he delivered Him to them to be crucified. Then they took Jesus and led Him away. (John 18:28–19:16)

Pilate brings Jesus out into the public judgement place. It is Friday morning, about 6am in the morning. And now Pilate tries one more time to release Jesus, by again trying to mock or scorn the idea that Jesus was a true rebel. He says, "Behold Your King" In other words. "Are you seriously trying to say that this, broken, bleeding man is a military leader, a rival to the Emperor?"

But this only inflames their rage and hatred. They feel patronised and insulted – their king would not look like this. And they respond with words both idolatrous and true, "We have no king but Caesar".

But it is Pilate, and only Pilate, who can order a crucifixion. And so as much as he protested that he found no fault in Jesus, it is by Pilate's decree that anyone is crucified in Judea. So when Pilate gives the nod for his soldiers to proceed with the execution, he is doing nothing less than capitulating to mob justice, a coward who gives in to a murderous mob to save his own political career.

He has been intimidated by political blackmail, and has given in to it.

¹⁵ He who justifies the wicked, and he who condemns the just, Both of them alike *are* an abomination to the LORD. (Proverbs 17:15)

How did Jesus respond to this? Just as the prophet Isaiah had predicted 800 years before.

Isa 53:7 He was oppressed and He was afflicted, Yet He opened not His mouth; He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, And as a sheep before its shearers is silent, So He opened not His mouth.

As we face some forms of injustice in the world, the writer of Hebrews tells us, “**Heb 12:3** For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls.

It's not fair. No it isn't. A world in which innocent Jesus gets treated that way isn't fair. But if He hadn't, then there would be no mercy for us, only justice. And every sinner would get what every sinner deserves, which is eternal death. Instead, because the Just suffered unjustly for the unjust, the unjust can be declared just by Him.

The hymnwriter reminds us that it was our injustice that brought this about.

Ah, holy Jesus, how hast Thou offended
That man to judge Thee hath in hate pretended?
By foes derided, by Thine own rejected,
O most afflicted!

Who was the guilty? Who brought this upon Thee?
Alas, my treason, Jesus, hath undone Thee!
'Twas I, Lord Jesus, I it was denied Thee,
I crucified Thee.