

THE *PRINCIPLE* OF THE CROSS

Before we turn from the *Person* of the cross, to the *people* of the cross, we need to make a Biblical transition. We need to gradually shift our attention from *Him* to *them*. But before we go with Christ and His disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane where His passion begins in earnest, we must go back a few hours to the Upper Room, and the events leading up to Christ's last Passover celebration.

Often in a movie or theater production, there will be a brief flash-back to an earlier event. This little theatrical vignette is designed to help the audience more fully understand the dynamics of the moment at hand. This brief replay of an earlier scene helps the viewer fill in the blanks. They provide missing pieces of the puzzle that help the viewer see the bigger picture. So before we meet Christ in the Garden, we must briefly look at a pivotal event that took place before the Upper Room and His last Passover meal with His disciples.

Even though the primary actors in this divine-human drama are the *Jews* and *Romans*, we have a brief cameo appearance by some *Greeks*. Their brief debut is only recorded in John's Gospel – so you just have one chance to catch it. You will miss the significance of their brief encounter with Jesus unless you hit the pause button in your mind. To understand the full significance, you will need to rewind the film to an earlier scene. It is a very crucial event that takes place earlier in Passover week. We almost need to slow down the film and view it frame by frame to catch the importance of this brief encounter between Jesus and some *Greeks*. It is often overlooked by most readers. So carefully note this brief cameo of the *Greeks* on the stage of *The Passion of the Christ*.

“Now there were some *Greeks* among those who went up to worship at the Feast. They came to Philip...with a request. ‘*Sir,*’ they said, ‘*we would like to see Jesus.*’ Philip went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus.”

Now follow carefully Christ's response to this request by the *Greeks* – because it clearly reveals the *principle of the cross*. At first glance, it seems to be insensitive to their desire “...to see Jesus.” And it almost seems to be out of context with what Jesus says in response to their request.

“Jesus replied, ‘The *hour has come* for the Son of Man to be glorified. I tell you the truth, *unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.* The man who loves his life will lose it, while

the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves Me must follow Me...”

Do you understand what Jesus is saying? Do you see something of the spiritual significance of this response as Jesus stands in the growing shadow of the cross? You see, here was a very plausible way for Jesus to postpone the cross – or by-pass it altogether. *This was an enticing invitation for Jesus to escape Jerusalem and go minister to the Greeks.* If there was ever a time for Him to leave Palestine, it was now! The tide of popular opinion had increasingly turned against Him. The hostility of the Jewish leaders had intensified. Some of His own disciples were confused and bewildered. And the Romans were getting more and more concerned with this growing conflict.

Earlier Jesus had prophesied that He would soon leave this life and go back to His Heavenly Father. This only added to the confusion. **“I am with you for only a short time,”** Jesus said, **“and then I go to the One who sent Me. You will look for me, but you will not find Me; and where I am, you cannot come.”**

The Jews standing around listening to this statement did not understand what Jesus meant. **“Where does this man intend to go,”** they said, **“that we cannot find Him? Will He go where our people live scattered among the Greeks, and teach the Greeks?”** (Jn. 7:33-35).

You see, *The Passion of the Christ* would not have taken place if Jesus would have responded to the request of the Greeks at this time. If He would have responded and gone to minister to them – *Christianity would have become just another part of Greek Philosophy.* As a result, Jesus would have been numbered along with the many other famous Greek Philosophers. History would record Socrates, Plato, Euripides, Sophocles, Aeschylus, Aristotle, Zeno – *and Jesus!* One thing for sure, while the world would have revered and respected “Jesus the Philosopher” – they would not have had **“Jesus the Christ,”** the *Messiah and Savior of the world!*

So humanly speaking, this must have been an appealing invitation for Jesus! He was a consummate teacher – and the Greeks loved to listen to good teachers. After all, they too had come to Jerusalem **“...to worship at the Feast.”** So these Greeks were seeking for truth. They were hungry for authentic worship. They had sensed something in the Jewish Feast of Passover that they had not found in any of their Greek Philosophers. Perhaps this Jesus they had heard about was that missing key to knowing God. Perhaps He was indeed the incarnation of the pinnacle of divine wisdom that Greek philosophy longed for – but never could find. Perhaps it was this Jesus who would lift them above the limitations of human reasoning to the very mind of God!

Therefore, if Jesus would have followed the Greeks, no doubt He would have quickly gathered a great following in Greece. He would have quickly become one of their greatest teachers and philosophers of all time! Since He was so young, He would have had decades to teach them and build a reputation as a consummate Greek philosopher. Perhaps He would have even restored or surpassed the glory of the Classical Years of Greek Philosophy. So to *go with the Greeks* would mean that He would not have to *go to the cross*. He could take the path of *reason* rather than the path of *passion*. There would be no more conflict with the Jews. No arrest. No trial. No suffering. No cross. No death. But there would also be *no redemption!* There would be *no fulfillment of prophecy*. There would be *no hope*.

So in the face of this choice, Jesus clearly affirmed that **“The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.”** And that *glorification* would come only through His *passion* – not through His *preaching*. He would not just give the world a higher wisdom – He would give His very life. He would be *glorified through the cross* – not through teaching and philosophy. So in the face of this invitation by the Greeks, Jesus compared His physical life to that of a **“kernel of wheat”** that had to **“...fall into the ground and die.”**

Jesus therefore, made another firm resolve not to side-step His passion. Nor would He postpone it by spending time with the Greeks who were seeking after Him. It was *now or never!* And Jesus knew that *this was God’s perfect time*. **“Now is the time”** Jesus said. He was resolute about going all the way to the cross! So at this point *The Passion of the Christ* really begins. This can be clearly heard in the words of Jesus:

“Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save Me from this hour? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify Your name.’”

Jesus then was **“troubled”** in His soul at the growing anticipation of becoming the consummate sin-sacrifice. The word He used here for **“troubled”** is *tetaraktai*, and means to be “stirred and agitated.” It is the same word used to describe His inward *groaning* at Lazarus tomb (Jn. 11:33). It was the same word that He would use in the Upper Room as He discussed His imminent betrayal and death (Jn. 13:21). A few hours later He would again use it again in the Garden when He said: **“My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death”** (Mtt. 26:38).

So having expressed His deep sense of **“trouble”** in heart, Jesus turned away from the well-intentioned invitation by the *Greeks*. Earlier He had already **“...resolutely set out for Jerusalem”** (Lk. 9:51). Matthew gives us even more of Jesus’ dialogue with His disciples as He resolutely walked with them toward Jerusalem. It is one of the most specific prophecies spoken by Christ about the exact details of His betrayal, trial, crucifixion – and resurrection:

“We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be *betrayed* to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will *condemn Him to death* and will turn Him over to the Gentiles to be *mocked and flogged and crucified*. On the third day He will be raised to life” (Mtt. 20:18-19)

So Jesus would not be deterred by the *hostility of the Jews* or detoured by the *invitation of the Greeks*. He had resolutely set His face toward the cross. **“Now is the time,”** Jesus said, **“for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. *But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself.*”** John then gives this one sentence of commentary: **“Jesus said this to show the kind of death He was going to die”** (Jn. 12:23-33).

And all of this took place in the days and hours leading up to the Passover. So let's now go with Jesus to the Upper Room. According to the Gospel of John, this was the final of three Passover Feasts that Jesus celebrated during His three years of public ministry. This Feast was *the defining event* for every Jew spiritually, racially and nationally. And this last Passover held special significance for Christ and His disciples.

Therefore, just before the events of the passion begin, the disciples had been privileged to celebrate their last Passover with Jesus in the Upper Room. From the Christian perspective, this was the very *last Passover* God accepted. That's because the **“fullness of time had come”** (Gal. 4:4) for the long-awaited **“...Lamb of God who *takes away the sin of the world*”** (Jn. 1:29). Now that He was about to shed His blood and die for the sins of the whole world – *no more animal sacrifices would be necessary*. His shed blood and broken body would now supercede and replace the blood of animals. It was on that Thursday night in the Upper Room that Jesus inaugurated the **“new covenant.”** He had begun it by saying: **“I have *eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer*”** (Lk. 22:15). Having said that, Jesus then broke the bread and passed the cup to His disciples, He said to them:

“Take and eat; this is My body...This is My blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it anew with you in My Father's Kingdom” (Mtt. 26:26-27; Mk. 14:22-25; Lk. 22:13-23; I Cor. 11:23-26).

This then was the *last Passover Feast*, as well as the *first Lord's Supper*. It was that same night that *The Passion of the Christ* began to intensify. This was the night that the original Passover that liberated the Jews from Egypt, pointed to. This was the last act in the eternal drama that God had been preparing since before the world began. After this final act, *the curtain would literally come down*. Or to quote the historical account of Doctor Luke: **“...the *curtain of the temple***

was torn in two (Lk. 23:45; Heb. 10:20). And when that happened, the *principle of the cross* was fully revealed and fulfilled!

With a clearer understanding of the *Greeks* who came seeking Jesus, let's now look at some of the other key '*People of the Cross.*'

THE PEOPLE OF THE CROSS

Public executions have always drawn a crowd. There is something sinister and macabre about them that draw people to them. Whether it is death by beheading, stoning, hanging, firing squad, electrocution, gas chamber or lethal injection – a certain amount of people are always drawn to an execution. The same was true in antiquity with a crucifixion. It was a horribly fascinating event!

However, some means of execution are “cleaner” and “quicker” than others. Some forms of capital punishment are more “humane” and “dignified” than others. They are designed to minimize the pain and suffering of the victim. The purpose is to bring death as quickly and cleanly as possible. Such was NOT the case with *crucifixion!* Quite the opposite was true. It was specifically designed to bring maximum *pain* and *shame!*

Crucifixion then, was not only designed to bring maximum pain and suffering to the condemned – it was also meant to strike fear and terror into the hearts of those who witnessed it! Crucifixion was purposely carried out in the most public context possible so as to impact the masses. In some societies the entire community was required to watch the execution. That way it would be a graphic reminder of the price of breaking the law... rebelling against authority... or leading an insurrection. It always made an indelible and unforgettable impression upon those who witnessed it. And we will examine this “pain factor” in more detail in a later part of our study.

In this chapter and the one following, I want us to review the various other *People of the Cross*. In our previous chapter we looked at the most important *Person of the Cross*, the Lord Jesus, and the *principle of the cross*, or *dying to self*. In both cases, Jesus is certainly the central figure and fulfillment.

Even though Jesus is the One who was on trial, in reality His presence put everyone else on trial! The quiet and confident majesty of His presence forced everyone to react to Him and His claims of deity. No one could be neutral in the presence of His bold affirmation that He was indeed God’s Messiah. In the face of those claims, no one could be neutral. So both His *presence* and *proclamation* put everyone else on trail!

So let’s do a little “crowd survey” to see what we can learn from the many witnesses of *The Passion of the Christ*. Let’s try to view the events from their frame of reference and see what we can learn. In this chapter we will look at the people who were the *friends of Jesus* – His disciples. In the following chapter, we will examine the response of the *enemies of Jesus*.

Just as is the case with every great drama, there are a few key “stars” that the story revolves around. They are the ones who play major roles and appear in multiple scenes. They are the ones who have the longer scripts that are

interwoven throughout the drama. But there are also other key “supporting actors” who play a more secondary role in the background. They are the “extras” who serve only as a back-drop to the drama taking place on center stage. They are usually anonymous actors – faceless and nameless. These characters only play small “bit parts” and have only minor appearances in this divine drama.

But as we watch the drama unfold, all of us can find one or more actors we can personally identify with. So let’s look at each of them carefully. And we will generally examine them in the order of their appearance on the stage of this drama – *The Passion of the Christ*.

Christ’s Friends

After His last Passover, “**Jesus went with His disciples to a place called *Gethsemane***” (Mtt. 26:47). It was located east of Jerusalem, just across the Kidron valley at the foot of the Mount of Olives. It was a favorite place of rest and repose for Jesus and His disciples. It is highly significant and symbolic to note that *Gethsemane* comes from an Aramaic word for “oil press.” So presumably there was an oil press in this garden used to crush and mash olives in order to press out the oil from the fruit.

Therefore, it was in this very Garden that Jesus would be *pressed* and *crushed* under the weight of the sins of the whole world. So when Jesus entered *Gethsemane* – the “olive press,” His suffering and sorrow took on new intensity! From that moment on and from that place on, *The Passion of the Christ* began to unfold rapidly. And there in the Garden He became so pressed and crushed under your sins and mine that “**...his sweat was like *drops of blood* falling to the ground**” (Lk. 22:44). More about his “sweating blood” in a later chapter.

So in the Garden of Gethsemane, the combined weight of time and eternity pressed down on the Lord Jesus! What had been planned in the eons of eternity past by the Triune Godhead – and precisely predicted for several thousand years by the prophets, was being fulfilled and consummated in just a few hours of time. *Eternity would be compressed and fulfilled in about 12 hours of time!*

Peter, James & John

These three were the Apostolic triumvirate whom the Lord Jesus oftentimes gave special time and attention to. In some ways they were His “inner circle” of companionship that He gave more time, exposure and revelation to than the rest of the disciples. These three had been taken by Christ *up a high mountain* where they were privy to His *Transfiguration* (Mtt. 17:1-13). Now they were taken *deeper into the Garden* with Jesus where they could observe His passion. He literally took them *higher* and *deeper* than the other 10 Disciples. So during His

ministry, Jesus took Peter, James and John to revelatory *heights* – and to agonizing *depths*, not experienced by the other Disciples.

Now more than ever, Jesus desperately needed them close by His side to “**watch and pray**” with Him in His hours of agony in God’s olive press. But alas, *they slept through it all!* As Jesus said of them: “**Their spirit was willing, but their body was weak**” (Mtt. 26:41). How well every honest disciple of Christ today can relate to that diagnosis of the sleepy, slumbering condition of their own discipleship!

But they were suddenly shaken out of their slumber by the words of Christ as Judas and the arresting band of temple guards approached...

“Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour is near, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us go! Here comes My betrayer!” (Mtt. 26:45-56)

We will return to Peter shortly, but at these words of Jesus, let’s now turn our attention to “...**the betrayer.**”

Judas Iscariot

We all know this disciple as “*the Betrayer.*” He’s the “bad guy” in the drama! As a result of his role, the very name “**Judas Iscariot**” is infamous the world over. It has become synonymous with *betrayal*. His very name is the antithesis of everything a true friend should *not* be. The very utterance of his name is accompanied by guttural tones of disgust and distain! To call someone “*a Judas*” is the height of personal insult. But it was not always that way.

As we have often seen from the Bible, *name represents nature*. So while the name “*Judas*” has become synonymous with *betrayal*, that’s not what the name originally meant. You see, the name “*Judas*” is the Greek form of the Hebrew proper name “**Judah**” – which literally means “*praised.*” It was the name of the fourth son of Jacob – and from him we have the “**Tribe of Judah**” – which produced many Biblical heroes. It would be this tribe that the Messiah would come from as “...**the Lion of the tribe of Judah**” (Rev. 5:5)! So “**Judas**” and “**Jesus**” were from the very same tribe!

There was a time then, when the name “*Judas*” denoted “*praise and privilege.*” It was an honor to be called by that name. And even after the events of *The Passion of the Christ*, that name was still popular and respected among the Jews. Look at a few examples:

- It is the name of one of the ancestors of Jesus (Lk. 3:30).
- It is the name of one of the earthly brothers of Christ (Mtt. 33:55).
- It was the name of a leading citizen of Damascus (Acts 9:11).

- It was the name of one of the leaders in the church at Jerusalem (Acts 15:23).

So the name “Judas” was not always a name of disgust and distain. And for the “**Judas**” of our study, it was a name that meant “*chosen by Christ... a follower of Jesus... a disciple.*” How could the meaning of a name change so radically? How could that name become so inverted and perverted?!

Tragically, every great drama has a *villain* – and in *The Passion of the Christ*, Judas is it! As the drama unfolds, we see him gradually become the very personification of the evil one. His inward and selfish devolution is almost imperceptible at first. And while Jesus knew his true inner nature all along, the rest of the disciples did not have a clue!

No doubt Judas learned to play the role of disciple well. He was a “quick study.” He was just like many of us in America today who learn how to be good “cultural Christians” – rather than a true disciple of the Lord Jesus. Therefore, as we watch the saga of the “rise and fall of Judas” on the stage of the passion, it should be a very sobering story for all of us! His name has come to symbolize his nature as the ultimate *betray*er – who fell from *praise* to *perversion*.

The name “Iscariot” probably originates from *ish Kerioth*, or “a man of Kerioth,” which was a town in south *Judah* (remember his tribe?). So just like Christ was often referred to as “**Jesus of Nazareth**,” in the same way the betrayer is known as “**Judas of Kerioth**.”

Obviously then, Judas is the arch-villain in the *Passion of the Christ*. As we already noted, every good drama has a “good guy” and a “bad guy” – and this divine-human drama is the same. Jesus is not just a generic “good guy” – He is the incarnate “God-Guy!” And Judas is the arch “bad guy.”

Therefore, since Judas did not start out that way in this drama, let’s bullet the things we know about him for sure from Scripture.

- He was chosen by Jesus: Often when his name is listed, there is the accompanying phrase “...**Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve.**” And usually he is always listed at the *end* of the naming of the disciples – followed by this defining epithet: “...and **Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Him**” (Mtt. 10:4; Mk. 4:19; Lk. 6:16).
- He was the group *treasurer*: “**Judas had charge of the money...**” (Jn. 13:29). “**As keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it**” (Jn. 12:6). This fact reveals a lot about the confidence that the other disciples must have had in him. You just do not entrust your money to someone you do not trust! You do not let a

known thief hold your money, or carry the key to your safety deposit box.

- He pretended to love the poor. When Mary anointing Jesus with expensive perfume, we read this: **“But...Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, ‘Why wasn’t this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year’s wages.’ He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief...”** (Jn. 12:3-7).
- He increasingly became offended by the claims of Christ and his abrasiveness to the Jewish leaders: **“This is a *hard teaching*. Who can accept it? Aware that His disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to them, ‘Does this offend you?...There are some of you who do not believe.’ For Jesus had know from the beginning which of them did not believe and who would betray Him....Have I not chosen you, the Twelve? Yet one of you is a devil!’** (He meant *Judas*, the son of Simon Iscariot, who, though one of the Twelve, **was later to betray Him”** (Jn. 6:60-71).
- In disillusionment, he sought an opportunity to sell Jesus out: **“Then Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve, went to the chief priests to betray Jesus to them. They were delighted to hear this and promised to give him money. So he watched for an opportunity to hand Him over”** (Mk. 14:10-11).
- He ultimately sold out Jesus for 30 pieces of silver: **“Then one of the Twelve – the one called Judas Iscariot – went to the chief priests and asked, ‘What are you willing to give me if I hand Him over to you?’ So they counted out for him 30 silver coins...”** (Mtt. 26:14-16).
- Judas left the Passover celebration early in the evening to betray Jesus: **“I tell you the truth, one of you is going to betray Me.’ His disciples stared at one another, at a loss...One of them asked: ‘Lord who is it?’ Jesus answered, ‘It is the one to whom I will give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish.’ Then dipping the piece of bread, he gave it to *Judas Iscariot*, son of Simon. As soon as Judas took the bread, *Satan entered into him*. ‘What you are about to do, do quickly,’ Jesus told him. But no one at the meal understood why Jesus said this to him. Since *Judas had charge of the money*, some thought Jesus was telling him to buy what was needed for the Feast, or to give something to the poor. As soon as Judas had taken the bread, he went out. And it was night”** (Jn. 13:21-30).

- Jesus made a final reference to Judas in His high priestly prayer before His passion in the Garden: **“I protected them and kept them safe by that name you gave me. None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction so that Scripture would be fulfilled”** (Jn. 17:12).
- After Jesus is arrested and beaten, Judas tries to reverse his betrayal: **When Judas, who had betrayed him, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty silver coins to the chief priests and the elders. ‘I have sinned,’ he said, ‘for I have betrayed innocent blood.’ ‘What is that to us?’ they replied. ‘That’s your responsibility.’ So Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself”** (Mtt. 27:1-5). We further read from Doctor Luke that when he hanged himself **“...he fell headlong, his body burst open and all his intestines spilled out”** (Acts 1:18).
- After Christ’s resurrection and before Pentecost, Peter said this about Judas: **“He was one of our number, and shared in this ministry”** (Acts 1:17).
- Before Pentecost, Matthias was chosen to take Judas’ place: **“Peter said, ‘For it is written in the book of Psalms: ‘May his place be deserted, let there be no one to dwell in it.’ And, ‘May another take his place of leadership’ Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from John’s baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection... Then they cast lots, and the lot fell to Matthias; so he was added to the eleven apostles”** (Acts 1:20-26).

The “rise and fall of Judas” is a sad saga in *The Passion of the Christ*. As we watch his various brief stage appearances, we see him gradually move from *discipleship* to *denial*... from *belief* to *betrayal*... from *opportunity* to *offense*... from *thanksgiving* to *theft*... from *devotion* to *disillusionment*... from *serving* to *suicide*. And it did not happen all at once. *It happened gradually over a three year period*. The story of Judas reminds us of the cardinal spiritual principle: *“No person falls suddenly.”* Every “fall from grace” is slow, gradual and almost imperceptible. It does not happen all at once. It is the result of a thousand small compromises and concessions to the “world, the flesh and the devil.” And in the process, we too “sell out” the Lord Jesus for a pitiful handful of the world’s silver and gold!

Truly, the story of Judas is a sobering reminder of the deceit and deception that lurks in each of our heart! There but for the grace of God go each of us!

Simon Peter

Just as we know Judas as the *Betrayer*, we know Peter as both the *defender and denier*: As we know from the Gospel narratives, Judas did not come alone to the Garden. We are told that he “...**came guiding a detachment of soldiers and some officials from the chief priests and Pharisees. They were carrying torches, lanterns and weapons**” (Jn. 18:3).

However, from a careful reading of the passion events, it is clear that some of the disciples were also armed with swords. It was not like they were soldiers ready for battle – it is just what most men normally carried on their belts during that time. Much like many men carry pocket knives today. But note what they said when the arresting crowd approached: “**Lord, should we strike with our swords?**” And with his usual impulsiveness, Peter did not wait for an answer! “**And one of them struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his right ear**” (Lk. 22:49-50).

It is only from John’s account that we know for certain that it was Simon Peter who was the first disciple to unsheathe his sword to defend Christ. And no doubt when he pulled out his sword, he was seeking to split the man’s head wide open! But for whatever reason, Peter got only a glancing swipe that cut off his ear instead of his head! Jesus stayed Peter’s hand with these words: “**Put your sword back in its place...for all who draw the sword will die by the sword**” (Mtt. 26:52). Jesus further said: “**Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?**” (Jn. 18:10-11). And with those words Jesus submitted to their arrest.

Now, contrary to all of their previous confident boasts that they would *die for Him* rather than ever *deny Him*, we read: “**Then all the disciples deserted Him and fled...But Peter followed Him at a distance, right up to the courtyard of the high priest**” (Mtt. 26:56-58).

We really have to hand it to Peter at this point. He is the only disciple that followed Christ after He was arrested in the Garden – even though he did so “...**at a distance.**”

We are all painfully aware of Peter’s story from this point on. They are some of the most familiar parts of the passion story. While we cringe in horror at the betrayal of Judas, we squirm in conviction as we watch Peter’s three denials of Christ! That’s because we’ve all been there. We’ve all stood by the fire of compromise with him. We’ve all found ourselves trying to get warm at the world’s fires. We’ve all cursed out loud or under our breath. We’ve all broken an oath or vow we’ve made to God. We’ve all felt deeply ashamed of our deceit and cowardice. We’ve all felt our face flush with the fugitive fear of being caught. We’ve all felt our pulse race in anxiety. We’ve all felt our fearful heart pound so

hard that we were afraid that everyone around could hear it. We've all felt the uneasiness of looking people in the eyes for fear of being seen through. We've all feared discovery and exposure after some secret sin. We've all experienced the desire to run away and hide – forever!

So as we watch Peter's painful drama on the stage of life – we all see ourselves. His fear is our fear. His weakness is our weakness. His failure is our failure. His denials are our denials! His shame is our shame! And his tears fill our eyes. The crowing of his rooster also heralds our own sin of denial!

All it took was the accusations of a couple of small servant girls to cause big tough Peter to have an emotional "melt-down!" The verse summarizes it all: "**He went outside and wept bitterly**" (Mtt. 26:75). I've been there! Haven't you?

THE PERPETRATORS OF THE CROSS

We move now from the *friends of Christ* to the *foes of Christ*. At this point in the passion narrative, Jesus has now been *betrayed* by a false friend, and *abandoned* by His true friends. All have fled in fear to “save their own necks.” As we make this brief transition from Gethsemane to the trial of Jesus, only Mark’s Gospel gives us a brief two verse summary of how one of Christ’s followers fled. He literally makes a very quick “streaking debut” across the stage of the passion! Watch quickly...

“A young man, wearing nothing but a linen garment, was following Jesus. When they seized him, he fled naked, leaving his garment behind” (Mk. 14:51-52).

That’s a graphic description of real terror in action! This young disciple literally “ran out of his clothes” because of fear! Many Biblical scholars believe that this is a veiled reference to Mark himself.

Three things we quickly notice about this anonymous person: He was a **“young man.”** He was wearing a **“linen garment.”** And he was **“following Jesus.”** The very fact that the narrator mentions that this young man was **“...wearing nothing but a linen garment,”** would strongly suggest that he was from a wealthy prominent family in Jerusalem (Acts 12:12). *Linen garments* were a fashion statement for the well-to-do men in that day! They were not the clothing materials of the peasants and “blue color workers.”

So this could indeed be the same young man who would later become the temporary traveling companion of Paul and Barnabas (Acts 12:25). This incident may also be an early insight into the life-long struggle that John Mark had with the problem of “fear and flight.” Just as he fled from Jesus in the Garden, he would also later flee from Barnabas and Paul in the midst of the difficulties of missionary service (Acts 13:13; 15:36-39).

So after this fleeting stage appearance – presumably by John Mark, Jesus is now left totally alone. He is at the mercy of the club-yielding-blood-thirsty mob – and *mercy* is definitely not on their minds! They are not interested in justice or mercy – only revenge and murder.

Let’s follow Jesus then, as He is forcefully **“...led away...to the house of the high priest”** by this *mixed mob of Romans and Jews* (Lk. 22:54). John specifically tells us that this vigilante action was carried out by a **“...detachment of soldiers with its commander and the Jewish**

officials.” Together they had “...*arrested Jesus...bound Him and brought him first to Annas...*” (Jn. 18:12).

But before we leave Gethsemane altogether, we must pause to consider one final act of mercy performed by Jesus. It was directed toward one of His enemies. Even though no mercy was extended to Him, He extended it to others. At first we only know this person as “...**the servant of the high priest.**” Let’s briefly look at this last healing miracle of Jesus before He is led off of the stage of Gethsemane.

The Servant of the High Priest

Being the Jewish high priest brought a lot of power and perks – not the least of which were a number of soldiers and servants to do your bidding. We saw above how a couple of his servant girls were among Peter’s accusers. But we need to hit the pause button for a moment and rewind the tape. We need to go back and replay in slow motion Peter’s attempt to defend the Lord Jesus when He was being arrested. Let’s carefully look at this scene frame-by-frame. Let’s pay close attention to the encounter between Peter and the “**servant of the high priest.**”

As we read this narrative, we see how most of the people who came to help arrest Jesus were armed with “...**swords and clubs**” (Lk. 22:52). So they came *prepared to fight!* All four Gospels record how Peter drew his sword and “...**cut off the ear of the servant of the high priest**” (Mtt. 26:51; Mk. 14:47). However, only Luke and John specifically tell us that it was the man’s “**right ear**” that Peter cut off (Lk. 22:50; Jn. 18:10). But it is only John’s Gospel that gives the man’s name as “**Malchus.**” And only Doctor Luke records this significant fact: “**Jesus...touched the man’s ear and healed him**” (Lk. 22:51) – a detail that a doctor would certainly take note of!

So by weaving these four Gospel accounts together, we see a more complete tapestry of this “**Malchus...servant of the high priest.**” And through this little side-bar story, he steps out of anonymity. He becomes the only other person in Gethsemane that night who is specifically named – other than Jesus, Judas and Peter. So through this little historical vignette we also see the incredible preciseness of God’s Word!

The few lines that describe this momentary three-way encounter would forever mark the spirit and psyche of Malchus. From that moment on he would either have to dwell on what Peter did *do Him* – or on *what* Jesus did *for him!* That fateful night, one hand lashed out against him with a sword. The other hand reached out to him in compassion. One hand resulted in *hurt*, the other hand resulted in *healing*. I wonder which man impacted him most? Peter or Jesus? Which one left the most lasting

marked on his memory? Was it the *sword of Peter* – or the *touch of Jesus*?

Perhaps we can better understand Malchus' response by honestly looking at our own responses to those who hurt us. How do we respond when people lash out against us in anger or rage? Which do you remember? Do you dwell on the cutting, piercing words that people have said against you? Do you constantly brood over the way people have intentionally hurt you and abused you – whether physically, emotionally or sexually?

What we usually do is this: *We nurse it...rehearse it...and curse it.* And it is only the healing touch of the Lord Jesus that will allow us to *reverse it!* We can't undo the things that have been said and done against us. But through *unconditional forgiveness*, we can *reverse* rather than *curse!* We can be healed and released from its negative impact upon our lives.

Perhaps like Malchus, you too need to reflect on Jesus' words to Peter at that moment: **“Put your sword away!”** That's the *cursing* response to the hurts against us. We all want *revenge* against our enemies. We want to “lash out!” We want to *hurt those who hurt us.* And so we *rehearse* in our minds a thousand scenarios in which we inflict pain back on those who have hurt us! Jesus then reminded Peter of this principle: **“Those who live by the sword will die by the sword”** (Matt. 26:52). Anger is always *a double-edged sword!*

This desire for *revenge* is very human. It's in all of us. It is our *natural response* to hurt and harm. But it is also very destructive. That's because it begins a lifestyle that is *very deadly.* It is always true: *hurt people – hurt people. Damaged people – damage people. Wounded people – wound people!* It's a destructive cycle that goes on and on! And sadly, it often passes from one generation to the next.

So when we have been hurt, this drive to “get even” increasingly poisons our mind and emotions. And over time it destroys all of our relationships. We have a “cutting edge” to our lives... to our tone of voice... to our behavior. We live with an “attack mode!” We are always ready to *fight.* Since we cannot always get even with the person who hurt and harmed us, we lash out at everyone else who gets in our path. As Jesus warned Peter, we **“...live by the sword!”**

So my loving exhortation to you is what Jesus *commanded* Peter: **“Put your sword away!”** That night both Peter and Malchus were armed. Both men had swords they were more than ready to use. But because of Jesus, both men put their swords away that night. So while you may not be able to make other people put their swords away – you can resolve to

put yours away! You can make a commitment to quit “...**living by the sword.**”

The story of Joseph in the book of Genesis is a wonderful example of this principle. It is the greatest foreshadow of Christ’s words of forgiveness from the cross that is found in the entire Old Testament. As you recall, because of jealousy and hatred, his brothers sold him as a slave in Egypt. This resulted in great hurt and loss in his life. From a human perspective, Joseph was an “innocent sufferer.” His brother’s hostile actions cost him *everything* that was near and dear to him. Their sins against him radically altered his entire life. Their antagonism caused him to go through what must have seemed like endless “wasted years.” None of it seemed to make sense. “*Where was God in all of this?*” – Joseph must have often cried out as he *nursed* and *rehearsed* these events in his mind. But it was only many years later that Joseph could say to his brothers:

“You intended to *harm me*, but God intended it for *good* to accomplish what is now being done, the *saving of many lives*”
(Gen. 50:20).

This story reminds us that we live in a world that is totally under the control of a sovereign God. Even though the world is filled with sin and rebellion, God still accomplishes everything according to the good purposes of His own foreordained will. So we must never forget that we live in a *moral universe* that reflects God’s justice and mercy. Therefore, He can take everything that happens to us – even evil, and work it for *our good* and for *His glory*. That’s the great message of Romans 8:28 - 29 that has brought comfort and healing to millions across the centuries:

“And we know that in *all things* God works for the *good* of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose. For those God foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of His Son...”

You know, the ear is a marvelous part of the human body. It catches all of the sounds around us and funnels them into our brain for decoding and proper response. Deftness is such a debilitating problem because it audibly cuts us off from the world around us. But there is something worse than *physical deftness* – and that is *spiritual deftness*. It is bad enough when we cannot hear and discern the sounds around us. It is even worse when we cannot hear and discern the voice of God within us!

Since we are all sinners, we are born with *deaf ears* and *damaged ears*. Because our ears are *deaf to God*, we cannot hear or discern his “...**still small voice**” (I Kings 19:12). And because our ears are *damaged*, we often *filter* the messages spoken to us by others. We hear and interpret

their voices through the earlier voices of those who hurt us. Because of damaged ears, we so often interpret what other people say through what was earlier said *to us* and *about us*. So we tend to *deflect all compliments* and *record all criticisms!* As a result, our minds have a natural tendency to *retain the negative* and *reject the positive*.

That's probably how Malchus went into Gethsemane that night. But then he met Jesus! And like so many others, Malchus had believed lies about Jesus. So he went into the Garden with an *ear problem!* He went there with a terminal case of *spiritual deafness*. But I think he left the Garden that night with both his *physical ears* and *spiritual ears* healed! I don't think he ever heard the same way again. The compassionate voice of Jesus opened his ears to the voice of God. As a result, he could never dwell on what Peter did *to him*. From that moment on he would forever dwell on what Jesus did *for him!*

What about you? Do you need Jesus to heal your spiritual ears? Do you need him to heal and silence those hurtful voices that are forever speaking pain and lies into the inner ears of your heart? If so, let Him do for you what He did for Malchus. If you do, you will never *hear* the same way again! As a result of His healing touch, *The Passion of the Christ* will forever resonate in your ears!

Jewish Leaders

Now that we have witnessed the healing of this “...**servant of the high priest,**” lets look further at the prominent Jewish leaders that servants like him were subservient to. In reality they were a pretty diverse and divided lot – just like most religious groups are. It is often said that “religion and politics make strange bedfellows.” If that is true, then *The Passion of the Christ* is a classic example of that odd coalition. In this drama we find a number of otherwise diverse Jewish leaders unified on one thing – their opposition to Jesus Christ.

There are several key Jewish leaders and religious groups that we need to pause and identify as *The Passion of the Christ* continues to unfold. It is impossible to understand the *people of the cross* without clearly identifying the role of these *Jewish religious leaders*. While their role was pivotal, it cannot be isolated from the immediate wider context of people – which included both Romans, Gentiles and Greeks.

Most importantly, *Christ's passion cannot be separated from the entire human race*. No single people group can be exclusively blamed for the death of Christ. The Scripture is very clear in assigning guilt for the death of Christ to the entire human family because “...**all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God**” (Rom. 3:23). Therefore, since there is *universal sin* there is

also *universal culpability*. As we will continue to see throughout this study, *all people* are responsible for the death of Christ – *not just the Jews or Romans*. So to isolate them from the wider context of humanity is to be guilty of a myopic Biblical perspective and truncated theological reasoning.

Therefore, it has been a *misunderstanding* and *misinterpretation* of the Bible – with a corresponding *misplaced emphasis* on the role of the Jews, that have sometimes led to *anti-Semitism*. Through the centuries, some overly zealous and under informed people have accused the Jews of *deicide*, or of “*God-killing*.” As a result of this false label of “*God Killers*” and “*Christ Haters*,” many Jews have been vilified, persecuted and murdered across the centuries – oftentimes in the name of Christ! This has only further alienated the Jews from *The Passion of the Christ*, and widened the chasm of suspicion and hostility between the Jews and Gentiles.

So while it is *historically inaccurate* to separate the Jews from the events of the passion, it is *theologically inaccurate* to make them the sole culpable agents of Christ’s crucifixion. If one approaches the Gospel narratives with that kind of anti-Jewish racial bigotry and bias, then the conclusions of *deicide* is inevitable – along with its corollary of *anti-Semitism*. But if one reads the Gospels within the wider context of the Bible – along with even an ounce of personal spiritual honesty, then he will know *objectively* and *subjectively* that every member of Adam’s race has the blood of Christ on his hands!

Most importantly, we have already seen that the Bible clearly assigns ultimate responsibility for the death of Christ to God Himself. As we saw in an earlier section, this is a clear revelation of both the Old and New Testament. Isaiah the prophet said this about the Messiah: “...**it was the Lord’s will to crush Him and cause Him to suffer**” (Isa. 53:10). That’s why Peter preached to the Jews on the Day of Pentecost: “**This man (Jesus) was handed over to you by God’s set purpose and foreknowledge...**” (Acts 2:23). So who was responsible for the death of Christ? *God Himself!* This is part of the *mystery of The Passion of the Christ*.

Having carefully laid that historical and theological foundation, let’s examine briefly the primary *Jewish actors* in this drama.

As individuals or theological groups, the Jewish leaders are variously referred to in the passion narratives as follows:

- “**Chief Priests**”: Mtt. 26:14, 47, 59; 27:1, 6; Mk. 14:43, 53; 15:31, etc.
- “**Elders**”: Mtt. 26:48, 57; 27:1; Mk. 14:43, 53; Lk. 22:66, etc.
- “**Teachers of the Law**” (NIV) or “**Scribes**” (KJV & NASV): Mtt. 8:19; 13:52; 26:57; Mk. 12:32; 14:43, 53; 15:31; Lk. 22:66, etc.

- **“Sanhedrin”**: Collectively, the above group of Jewish religious leaders are referred to as the *Sanhedrin*, or “*The Council*,” which is what the Greek word *sunedion* means. Even though their precise formation is lost in antiquity, the Jews generally trace the origin of this governing body to Numbers 11:16-17, where God instructed Moses:

“Bring me seventy of Israel’s elders who are known to you as leaders and officials among the people. Have them come to the Tent of Meeting, that they may stand there with you. I will come down and speak with you there, and I will take the Spirit that is on you and put the Spirit on them. They will help you carry the burden of the people so that you will not have to carry it alone.”

In the Third Gospel, Luke refers to them as “...**the Council of the elders of the people**” (Lk. 22:66). Most probably, they came into being during the Hellenist, or Greek period, when Palestine was almost given complete autonomy. So it was during this period that this council of aristocratic Jewish elders emerged as powerful and authoritative. However, under the Roman rule, their power was restricted – and limited primarily to theological issues rather than legal matters. But as we saw from the Book of Numbers, we do know that the Sanhedrin was specifically composed of *seventy-one members* -- and they were presided over and dominated by the “**High Priest**.”

Like all religious bodies, the Sanhedrin was divided ideologically between *conservatives* and *liberals*. So there were two primary “theological parties” within the Sanhedrin. Let’s look at them briefly.

- **Sadducees**: This group of Jewish leaders primarily adhered to the *Pentateuch*, or 5 books of Moses. Therefore, they largely rejected the “...**tradition of the elders**” that were so emphasized by the Pharisees (Matt. 15:1). They were the more *theological liberals* of the Sanhedrin. As a result of their *theological liberalism*, they were basically anti-supernaturalists, and did not believe in *miracles* or the *resurrection of the dead* (which is why Paul would later clash with them!). They were largely from the higher socio-economic priestly class of Jewish aristocracy – and had the power and influence that usually goes along with that position in society. During the Hellenist period, they had increasingly become influenced by Greek philosophy. As a result, they wanted to broaden Judaism to accommodate Greek thought and culture. So they were more *pluralistic* and *tolerant*. Therefore, the Sadducees would have felt comfortable in much of American liberal and leftist society today! So in spite of their theological liberalism, their education and wealth made them a powerful part of the Sanhedrin.

However, Jesus warned His disciples about the dangers of the “...leaven of the Sadducees” (Mtt. 3:7; 16:1-6; 11-34; Mk. 12:18; Lk. 20:27-39; Acts 4:1; 5:17; 23:6-8)

- **Pharisees:** By contrast to the Sadducees, this group comprised the *theological conservatives* of the Sanhedrin. They were the *Jewish Fundamentalists* who took the Mosaic Law *literally* – as well as enforced a strict obedience to the *Jewish Traditions of the elders*. By the time of Christ they had increasingly become a powerful party within the Sanhedrin – and Jesus often found Himself in conflict with them over their strict interpretation of the Law. Paul was a Pharisee before his conversion to Christ. Nicodemus also was a member of the party of the Pharisees. But just as He had done with the Sadducees, Jesus also warned His disciples of the “...leaven of the Pharisees.” And because He had more encounters and conflicts with this Jewish Party of legalists, there are some 79 references to them in the New Testament – too many to list (Mtt. 5:20; 9:11-14; 16:1-12; 19:3; 22:15-41; 23:2-13; Lk. 6:7; 11:39-44; Jn. 3:1; 12:19 Acts 23:6; Phil. 3:5). Virtually all of the “*Seven Woes*” spoken by Christ were aimed at the Pharisees – which only deepened their hatred of Jesus! In this bold encounter Jesus variously refers to them as the “**Pharisees and teachers of the law**” followed by these very scathing descriptions: “...hypocrite...blind guides...blind fools...whitewashed tombs...snakes... brood of vipers” (Mtt. 23:1-36). Not very complimentary descriptions in anyone’s book! However, we do know from Acts that some of them later became believers and followers of Christ after His resurrection (Acts 15:5).

Collectively then, the *Sanhedrin* was the highest authority in Judaism. It was what we might call the “Supreme Court of Israel.” The pronouncements they made were final when it came to the Mosaic Law. There was no higher authority than them. Once they had rendered a judgment, there were no higher appeals one could turn to. Theirs was the “last word” in matters concerning the Law of Moses. They literally had the power of “life and death” in their hands. And, they exercised this authority against Jesus.

But until about 40 years prior to the destruction of Jerusalem, the Sanhedrin clearly had the power of capital punishment. However, by the time of Christ things had changed. The rule of Rome greatly limited their judicial power, but left their theological power in place as a means to appease them. So while they could *decree* a sentence of death – they could not carry it out. That could only be done by the Romans as the final judicial authority in the land. That is precisely why the Sanhedrin had to refer Jesus to Pilate for execution (Jn. 18:31-32).

Finally, we know that Jesus did have some personal friends and “secret followers” on this Council – like *Nicodemus* and *Joseph of Arimathea* (Jn. 19:38-39). We will see them again later after the events of the crucifixion.

Now that we have made a general overview of the Judaism and the Sanhedrin during Christ’s day, let’s take a closer look at the powerful “**High Priests**” who ruled this Council of Elders.

Annas & Caiphas

Since Jesus was *first* taken to the *House of Annas* after His arrest in Gethsemane, we need to examine him as the fountain-head of Jewish power and influence. Even though his time on the stage of *The Passion of the Christ* was relatively brief, his *behind-the-scene* role was dominant and determinative.

What the Bible infers by a few brief references, older Jewish writings clearly confirm – that Annas was indeed one of the most powerful men of Jewish antiquity! He had power, wealth and influence – both among the Jews and Romans. And he cunningly used his wealth to manipulate the Jews to his own ends. He also used his power and position to court favor with the Roman authorities. And his spacious and palatial palace was a known landmark all over Jerusalem! Hardly the lifestyle of a servant-leader.

Annas had originally been appointed high priest in A.D. 6 by Quirinius, Governor of Syria – whom we read about in the birth narrative of Jesus. He is also mentioned in the early ministry of John the Baptist (Lk. 2:2; 3:1-2). Annas had held this powerful position of high priest for between 6 and 7 years. According to Jewish law, the high priesthood was for life. However, the Romans forcefully mandated a change in this policy because they did not like that great of a concentration of power in one person for a long period of time. So they frequently changed the high priest. As a result, the high priesthood increasingly became a pawn of Rome. Even though Anna was officially out of power at this time, he was so influential that he was able to pass the high priestly office to 5 of his sons, a grandson, and now to his son-in-law, Caiaphas (Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, Vol. 2, p. 547). In reality then, Annas had set up a priesthood dynasty! But spiritually speaking, his priestly dynasty was a travesty to the Aaronic priesthood that God had ordained through Moses!

So while Caiaphas was the official high priest at this time, it appears that Annas continued to be the real “power behind the throne.” His son-in-law may have worn the robes of the high priest – but Annas was the real power broker! No doubt that is the reason that Jesus was briefly taken to him first. It was a revealing demonstration of Annas’ power. But it is only John’s Gospel that

records this crucial information: **“They bound Him and brought Him *first* to Annas, who was the father-in-law of Caiaphas the high priest that year”** (Jn. 18:12-13). And interestingly, from a close parallel study of the Four Gospels, we are given no specific information about what took place between Jesus and Annas in this brief encounter.

One thing for sure, a “Jewish Messiah” like Jesus was claiming to be was totally unacceptable to Annas! A “Suffering Messiah” was anathema to everything Annas stood for. So Jesus had to be eliminated as quickly as possible. No doubt it was Annas who influenced his high priestly son-in-law to **“...advise the Jews that it would be good if *one man died for the people*”** (Jn. 18:14). We can see in this statement that both Annas and Caiaphas were motivated by *theological relativism* and *politically expediency!* Sound just like many of our religious and political leaders today, doesn't it?!

We see how this decision to have Christ killed was not just a snap decision on the part of Annas and Caiaphas. It had been growing for a long time. There is a revealing example of this after Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead – a prelude to His own resurrection.

“Many of the Jews...had seen what Jesus did (raising Lazarus from the dead), ***put their faith in Him***. **But some of them went to the *Pharisees* and told them what Jesus had done. Then the chief priests** (probably the *Sadducees*) **and the *Pharisees* called a meeting of the *Sanhedrin*.**

“What are we accomplishing?” they asked. **Here is this man performing many miraculous signs** (Notice how even His enemies acknowledged his miracles). **If we let Him go on like this, everyone will believe in Him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our *place*** (religious identity) **and our *nation*** (political identity).

Then one of them, named *Caiaphas*, who was *high priest* that year, spoke up, ‘You know nothing at all! You do not realize that *it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.*’

We then have this brief, but crucial commentary by John, who relates this to *prophecy*:

“He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year *he prophesied* that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one. So from that day on *they plotted to take His life.*”

John also tells us that this plot to kill Jesus caused Him to change His ministry strategy: **“Therefore Jesus no longer moved about publicly among the Jews. Instead He withdrew to a region near the desert...where he stayed with His disciples”** (Jn. 11:45-54).

Now back to *The Passion of the Christ* where Annas moves off of the stage, and his son-in-law Caiaphas takes center stage...

We have seen that after Christ's brief time at the Palace of Annas, He is then taken to the House of Caiaphas, who is the “official” high priest. This hastily called meeting of the Sanhedrin was illegal from start to finish as far as Jewish Law was concerned! It totally went against all norms for the gathering of the Sanhedrin. This clearly reveals their *a priori* agenda to eliminate Christ. In their minds this had been a foregone conclusions ever since the raising of Lazarus and the resulting conversion of a lot of Jews. As we already saw, from that moment on **“...they plotted to take His life.”** At this point the only question about Christ's death was *when* and *where*? In today's world, this mock trial of Christ would be referred to as a “Kangaroo Court.”

One other crucial matter about the Sanhedrin. No judicial proceedings could take place on a *Sabbath* or on a *Feast Day*. So with the *Feast of Passover* immediately at hand, they were really under the press to get this matter dealt with as swiftly as possibly so they would not be ceremonially unclean. So after a brief appearance before Annas, they took Jesus **“...to Caiaphas, the high priest...where the teachers of the law and the elders had assembled...”**

It was at the House of Caiaphas that Jesus was subjected to His first “official trial” – which was anything but legal or fair. The legal stage now becomes frenetic at this point as one witness after another is brought in to testify against Jesus. So once Jesus is inside of Caiaphas's house, the mock trial begins. We read:

“The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus so they could put him to death. But they did not find any, though many false witnesses came forward.

Finally, two came forward and declared, ‘This fellow said, ‘I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.’

Then the high priest stood up and said to Jesus, ‘Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these man are bringing against you?’ But Jesus remained silent.

So after the failed testimonies of a number of **“false witnesses,”** Caiaphas pulls out his final theological trump card. He backs Jesus into a theological corner where He will either remain silent and deny His previous claims of deity by saying

nothing. Or, He will affirm His Messianic claim – and be guilty of blasphemy. So Caiaphas puts Christ under an oath and asks Him:

“I charge you under oath by the living God, ‘Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.’

‘Yes, it is as you say,’ Jesus replied.

But Jesus does not stop there. He not only clearly and unambiguously claims to be the Messiah “...**the Christ, the Son of God,**” He further affirms His deity with quiet dignity and authority:

“But I say to all of you; in the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.”

At that moment Jesus sealed His fate with the Sanhedrin. There was not a shadow of a doubt in their minds about what Jesus was guilty of. **“Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, ‘He has spoken blasphemy! Why do we need any more witnesses? Look, now you have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?’** And they all responded with unanimity: **“He is worthy of death!”**

And with that verdict, they began to intensify their vilification and persecution of Jesus: **“Then they spit in His face and struck Him with their fists. Others slapped Him and said, ‘Prophecy to us, Christ, Who hit you?’”** (Mtt. 26:57-68).

While this mockery of a trial has been taking place, there is another very important part of the drama taking place in the wings. It is the several denials of Peter, which all took place in the courtyard of the Palace of Caiaphas.

When Jesus was taken bound in chains from the Palace of Annas to the Palace of Caiaphas, we read that **“...Peter followed Him at a distance, right up to the courtyard of the high priest. He entered and sat down with the guards to see the outcome”** (Mtt. 26:58). So the spotlight shifts from Jesus and Caiaphas on center stage, to this side-scene in the courtyard. Apparently only Caiaphas, the members of the Sanhedrin, Jesus and various witnesses were allowed inside. So Peter has to stay outside with the servants and guards. And there he experiences the worst night of his life! He repeatedly denied His Lord!

Since Jesus clearly affirmed His deity, and committed *blasphemy* in their sight, He was condemned to die. But as we saw, the Sanhedrin could give a death sentence – but they could not carry it out. This execution was something that only Pilate could give the orders for. So we read:

“Early in the morning, all the *chief priests* and the *elders* of the people came to the decision to *put Jesus to death*. They bound Him, led Him away and *handed Him over to Pilate, the governor*” (Mtt. 27:1).

So now *The Passion of the Christ* shifts from the Palace of Caiaphas, to the Governor’s Palace. And as the stage shifts from the Sanhedrin to Pilate, the debate shifts from a theological one to a judicial one.

Pilate

Just like Annas was one of the most influential Jews of antiquity, Pilate was one of the most notorious of Roman Procurators. History tells us that he was the fifth Procurator, or Governor, for Rome in Palestine. He was appointed in AD 26, and ruled for about 10 years. So we know that Pilate was in office when both Jesus and John the Baptist began their respective public ministries (Lk. 3:1).

He is officially known to us through the Bible and secular history as “**Pontius Pilate.**” *Pontius* was what we would call his “family name.” The name *Pilate* probably comes from the Latin word *pilatus*, meaning: “one armed with a *pilum* or javelin.” No doubt this Roman Procurator had a piercing element to both his personal life and political life!

Generally Palestine was what we might call a “hardship assignment.” It was a long way from Rome – the “Eternal City” and center of Latin civilization. Palestine was also hot and dry. Most importantly, it was peopled by the Jews – who were known for being zealously religious, peculiar, obstinate and hard to rule! They tested the leadership metal of every Procurator sent by Rome to rule this remote outpost of the Roman Empire.

Herod the Great had established his Governor’s residence in “Caesarea by the Sea” – not to be confused with Caesarea Philippi in Northern Israel. Herod was a great builder and shrewd politician. So he originally built Caesarea as his seaport capital, which I have visited many times on Holy Land Tours. It was situated on the beautiful Mediterranean Sea with its cool breezes and beautiful seashore. So the Roman Governors normally resided in Caesarea.

However, during important Jewish Feast days, the Procurator would leave his normal residence in Caesarea and go up to Jerusalem with a contingency of Roman soldiers to maintain order. The Jews were noted for riots and uprisings during their feast days and festivals when their religious fervor and nationalism was especially intensified. So during this time, the Governor would usually stay at one of the two palaces in Jerusalem, which had also been built by Herod the Great. That is why we would expect to find Pilate in Jerusalem during the Feast of Passover, immediately followed by the week-long Feast of Unleavened Bread.

From the very first moment that Pilate steps on the stage of *The Passion of the Christ*, we can sense a seething antagonism between him and the Jewish leaders. They had a mutual distain for each other. The Jewish leaders felt the same hostility and resentment toward Pilate that he had for them. There was definitely no love lost between him and his cantankerous Jewish subjects in Palestine! And this was especially the case with those living in and around Jerusalem. It seemed to him that they were a particularly troublesome lot who were always stirring up dissent against him and Rome. He never seemed to really understand them – or their religion. They were the “briar in his political saddle” – and he was the “pig in their parlor!”

To better understand this lingering tension between Pilate and the Jews, let me fill in a little more historical background. It will help you fit their mutual animosity into *The Passion of the Christ*. As you will see, this conflict surrounding the trial of Jesus was not an isolated event. It was the logical result of years of antagonism and hostility between Pilate and the Jews.

According to the Jewish Historian, Josephus, Pilate started off on the wrong foot with the Jews from the get-go. When he was first assigned to be Governor of Palestine, he immediately offended the Jews by bringing into their holy city the famous Roman Standards. Emblazoned on them were silver eagles and images of the emperor – both offensive and idolatrous in the eyes of the Jews. At another time he even hung golden Roman shields in the Temple proper – inscribed with the names and images of Roman deities. This was obviously anathema to the Jews – an unforgivable spiritual atrocity! And in order to fund the building of a water aqueduct into Jerusalem, he “appropriated” Temple money – known as *Corban*, to fund this project. So Pilate already had 3 strikes against him as the Roman Procurator of Palestine!

Luke records another incident that was brought to Jesus’ attention for commentary concerning Pilate. It was about a bloody conflict that had occurred sometime earlier between some Jews from Galilee and Pontius Pilate. Luke briefly recounts the story of “...**the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices**” (Lk. 13:1). Apparently there had been an earlier uprising in Jerusalem led by a group of Galileans – which Pilate ruthlessly suppressed by mingling their blood with the blood of their sacrifices in the Temple! This was yet another unforgettable and unforgivable offense by Pilate against the Jewish people.

So just as his name would imply, Pilate was known for his swift and deadly javelin-like attacks upon any enemies. And the Jews were a particular favorite target for his piercing verbal and physical assaults! And these acid insults echo all through the trial of Jesus before Pilate.

As Jesus is forced onto the stage of the Governor’s residence, the theme shifts from a theological debate to a political one. The Jewish leaders begin by

accusing Jesus of three offenses: **“We have found this man *subverting our nation. He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar, and claims to be Christ, a king*”** (Lk. 23:2). So Jesus is accused of *subversion against Caesar* by reputedly not paying his taxes. He is accused of *subversion against the Jews* by claiming to be both the *Messiah* and their *king*. In the face of those accusations, Pilate asks Jesus: **“Are you the *king of the Jews?*”** To that question Jesus clearly responded: **“Yes, You are right in saying I am a king”** (Jn. 18:37).

With that clear affirmation from Jesus, Pilate then **“...went back inside the palace”** where he **“summoned Jesus”** for a private interrogation. **“Are you the king of the Jews?”** Pilate asked Jesus. With that question, Jesus turns the tables and briefly interrogates Pilate: **“Is this your own idea...or did others talk to you about Me?”** This apparent lack of a clear answer by Jesus further irritates Pilate. So he sarcastically answers Jesus: **“Am I a Jew? It was your people and your chief priests who handed you over to me.”** So Pilate clearly seeks to again lay the full blame at the feet of the Jews – Jesus very own people!

But in affirming that He was indeed a King, Jesus took away any of Pilate’s fears that He was also an insurrectionist against Rome. He allayed any fears that Pilate may have had about whether or not He was another Jewish zealot or revolutionary guerilla leading a secret rebellion. **“My kingdom,”** Jesus said, **“is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now My kingdom is from another place...In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to Me”** (Jn. 18:36-37).

The moment that Jesus said: **“Everyone on the side of truth listens to Me,”** the tables turned. Jesus was no longer on trial – *Pilate was!* Pilate was no longer the judge – Jesus was! He was now face-to-face with *truth Incarnate*. What would he do? What would he decide? Would he listen to the *truth of Christ* – or would he capitulate to the *lies of the Jews?* Pilate then asked Jesus a question that has echoed down through the centuries: **“What is truth?”** Not even waiting for a further response from Jesus, Pilate turned away and **“...went out again to the Jews and said, ‘I find no basis for a charge against Him’”** (Jn. 18:38).

So from Pilate’s perspective, this may be a case of megalomania – but not a case for capital punishment! Therefore, he sought to dismiss the case. But when the Jewish leaders said that Jesus had started His ministry in Galilee – which had now spread all the way to Jerusalem – Pilate referred the case to Herod. Since there had been “bad blood” between Pilate and Herod politically, this was Pilate’s way of appeasement – which pleased Herod.

Since Herod had heard of Jesus and His miracles, he was more than glad to have an audience with him. But he was not looking for truth and justice. He was

motivated by curiosity about the miracles he had heard that Jesus had performed. So Herod wanted *entertainment* – not *enlightenment*.

However, to all of Herod's questions, "**Jesus gave him *no answer***" (Lk. 23:9). In the face of this silence, "**The chief priests and the teachers of the law were standing there, *vehemently accusing Him.***" Still no answer or response from Jesus. So in frustration, Herod and company had some spontaneous entertainment of their own – all at the expense of Christ. They only further ridiculed and humiliated him through their political parlor games. "**Herod and his soldiers *ridiculed and mocked Him.* Dressing Him in an elegant robe, they sent Him back to Pilate.**" Then Luke gives us this one sentence of political commentary: "**That day Herod and Pilate became friends – before this they had been enemies**" (Lk. 23:1-12).

Once Jesus is sent back to Pilate by Herod, he again seeks to release Him. So Pilate convened the Jewish leaders together again and gave them his verdict:

"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" (Lk. 23:13-17).

Once again, Jesus' innocence is clearly established by no less than two Roman officials – Pontius Pilate and Herod. Neither could find in Jesus any valid political grounds for insurrection or rebellion against Rome. But in the mind of the Jews, Jesus' real crime was not against Rome – for they too were against Rome. And they could certainly care less about whether or not Jesus had paid taxes to Caesar – even though they accused Him of this civil crime! Just as long as Jesus paid the "Temple Tax" they were happy. His crime was a spiritual one – not a political one. He claimed to be the long-awaited *Jewish Messiah*. He unequivocally claimed to be "**ho Christos**" or "**the Christ.**" And at the same time Jesus also claimed to be the "**King of the Jews.**" So in their minds, He clearly had *blasphemed* by claiming *equality with God!*

But none of these religious issues were concerns to Pilate. These were not capital offenses in the laws of Rome. From Pilate's perspective, these were nothing more than petty theological squabbles based upon religious jealousy! He was discerning enough to clearly see that the Jewish religious leaders resented the growing popularity Jesus had with the masses of common people. And that was an intolerable threat to their power and authority. As a shrewd politician himself, Pilate could easily see through their deceit. He could smell the stench of their jealousy – "**For he knew it was out of *envy* that they had handed Jesus over to him**" (Mtt. 27:18).

So they find themselves at a legal stalemate with Pilate. Jesus stands center stage. Pilate stands on one side viewing this whole mess through the jaundiced eye of a hardened politician. For a decade he had managed to maintain his authority by cunning ruthlessness and political expediency. He could care less about these claims and counterclaims about who the Messiah is – or whether Jesus was really the **“King of the Jews.”** He just wanted to bring closure to this whole mess as quickly as possible – and get back to his beach resort in Caesarea by the Sea! In his mind this conflict had already gone too far too quickly. So he tersely concluded: **“I will have him punished and then release Him”** (Lk. 23:22).

This was not the verdict that the Jews were counting on. And with Passover rapidly approaching, time was running out. So when they heard of the pending release of Jesus, things intensify on their side of the stage. They see that they have gotten no where with their theological arguments and spiritual accusations. Pilate is unmoved and unimpressed. In fact, he seems to have enjoyed rubbing their noses in this whole mess – especially at the time of their highest Feast! And the fact that this “Messiah conflict” would cast a dark and dampening pale over their entire week-long celebration, probably brought Pilate a secret sinister satisfaction!

Pilate seemed to have enjoyed throwing back in their faces the offensive claims of Jesus that He was **“the Christ”** the **“King of the Jews.”** Those were the last things the Jewish leaders wanted to believe or accept about Jesus. In fact, it was for those very claims that they were seeking to have Him crucified. But since their theological arguments had no sway over Pilate, they must go back to the political accusations. For them, time was rapidly running out. It was already the **“Day of Preparation”** for the Passover. So whatever they could do to get Jesus condemned to death – they had to do quickly! Their only hope was to move away from the theological arguments – and press forward with their political accusations. So in their desperation, they bring up their trump accusation against Jesus to Pilate: **“If you let this man go,”** the Jews kept shouting, **“you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar”** (Jn. 19:12).

With that political accusation, they had Pilate in a corner. There had already been more than enough complaints sent to Caesar about the “Palestinian Problem.” Through the years, there had been a steady stream of complaints and accusations against Pilate by the Jews for his removal. So this was the ultimate threat against Pilate! But in making it, the Jews had to stoop to their lowest level of political and spiritual compromise. Led by the chief priests, they all affirmed: **“We have no king but Caesar”** (Jn. 19:15). And with those words, they denied everything they stood for as a people living under the Kingship of God. The Jewish leaders now became guilty of *blasphemy* and *apostasy* – the very sins they were condemning Jesus for! But in their blind hatred, it was a price they were willing to pay to eliminate Jesus.

So both Pilate and the Jewish leaders make dangerous and deadly compromises. Their interaction again shows that successful politics is based upon the “art of compromise.” Pilate compromised his own personal integrity, as well as the integrity of the Roman justice system, by “...**surrendering Jesus to their wills**” (Lk. 23:25). The Jewish leaders compromised their religious and spiritual integrity by affirming “**We have no king but Caesar**” (Jn. 19:15).

But just before Pilate seeks to “wash his hands of this whole mess,” he receives one final warning from his wife. She was apparently in the wings watching this whole drama unfold. Finally she could keep silent no longer. So she “...**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**” (Mtt. 27:19).

Since we have no clear Scriptural insight into the nature of her dream about Jesus, we cannot make further speculations. However, in earlier centuries some religious writers speculated that Pilate’s wife was a secret disciple of Jesus. But there is no clear Biblical or historical support for this position. All we know from the Gospels for sure is that she had some kind of alarming dream about Jesus that caused her to “...**suffer a great deal.**” Regardless of the content of her dream, she somehow concluded that Jesus was indeed an “**innocent man**” that Pilate should not condemn to death. Her intervention shows that women often have an *intuitional* knowledge that men do not have through their reasoning. Sadly, Pilate did not heed this timely advice of his wife.

However, Pilate did try one last political maneuver and compromise. One that he was sure would get him off of the hook – and keep Jesus off of the cross. He offered the angry Jewish crowd a choice between two men. It was a political choice that was so obvious that even a blind man could see the right thing to do!

First was Jesus, the itinerant preacher, teacher and healer whose only crime was that “...**He went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil because God was with Him**” (Acts 10:38).

Then there was *Barabbas* – who had a long “rap sheet” of a life of crime and evil doing. He was a well known revolutionary against Rome who had recently been captured and was also condemned to die. Pilate was sure that the crowd would see the stark contrast between these two men – and make the obvious choice. Surely they would condemn Barabbas and have pity on Jesus! So let’s examine his brief fateful appearance by Barabbas on the stage of *The Passion of the Christ* – and see if Pilate’s political gamble paid off.

Barabbas

While Jesus was totally innocent of any and all charges of insurrection, Barabbas was already guilty and condemned for that very crime. Matthew simply calls him

“...a notorious prisoner” (Mtt. 27:16). Luke tells us that “**Barabbas had been thrown into prison for an insurrection in the city, and for murder**” (Lk. 23:19). Mark reports that “...**Barabbas was in prison with the insurrectionists who had committed murder in the uprising**” (Mk. 15:7). John simply says that “**Barabbas had taken part in a rebellion**” (Jn. 18:40).

So any way you interpret the facts, Barabbas was clearly a notorious revolutionary who had tried to lead a rebellion against Rome. For a while he had been at the very top of the “Most Wanted” list of criminals in Palestine. In the process of leading his sedition and rebellion, he and his fellow “**insurrectionists...had committed murder.**” But they had been captured, tried and condemned to death. So when we first see Barabbas on the stage of *The Passion of the Christ*, he is a condemned man awaiting his execution.

It is interesting to pause a moment to look at his name. As we have already seen in this study, names in the Bible are often very significant. They generally represent the *nature* of a person. So the name “**Barabbas**” literally means “*son of the father.*” A more correct way to transliterate it into English would be **Bar-Abbas**, or *Son of Abba*. That is an intriguing name – especially in light of the trial of Christ. It is a very unusual name to say the least. It does not sound like most Jewish or Aramaic names. So in all probability, that was not his real name. Perhaps it was an *alias name* that he assumed, or others gave him.

Since Barabbas had obviously been trying to lead an “**insurrection in the city,**” he was most probably a *religious revolutionary*? With a name like “*Son of Abba*,” could he have been a *false Christ*? Many had already arisen among the Jewish people, and Jesus Himself repeatedly warned of the appearance of “**false Christs**” (Mtt. 24:24; Lk. 21:8). Is it possible that this **Bar-Abbas** had claimed to be a messiah for the Jews – and had committed “...**murder in the uprising**” to try and prove himself to the people?

Mark’s Gospel gives us further insight into this situation. He says that “...**it was the custom at the Feast to release a prisoner whom the people requested.**” So on the basis of this custom, “**The crowd came up and asked Pilate to do for them what he usually did.**” Apparently this custom was something that Pilate had initiated in years past to appease and placate the Jews. So now the crowd of people came and “...**asked Pilate to do for them what he usually did.**” In all probability the Jewish leaders instructed them to make this request.

There is hardly any doubt that Pilate saw this as his last opportunity to set Christ free. If his intentions were to just follow his custom and set a condemned prisoner free – why would he not release one of the two thieves who were condemned along with Christ? The very fact that Pilate chose the most notorious criminal in his prison as the alternative choice to Christ, would seem to indicate the obvious. When confronted with the choice of setting Christ or Barabbas free – there could be little doubt in his mind who the crowd would

chose! And so Pilate asked the crowd: **Which one do you want me to release to you; Barabbas or Jesus, who is called Christ?**" (Mtt. 27:17).

Any rational or sane group of people would chose to set the innocent man free, and condemn the one who was clearly guilty! But this crowd was not operating on logic or reason. By this time they were motivated by blind hatred and inflamed passion!

In any case, we clearly know that the crowd was prompted and provoked by the Jewish leaders throughout this whole trial. They had become the willing pawns in the hands of the Sanhedrin. Mark gives clear testimony to this: **"But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have Pilate release Barabbas instead."** (Mk. 15:6-11).

In response to the crowd's clamor for the release of Barabbas, Pilate asked: **"What shall I do, then, with the one you call the king of the Jews?"** In response the people cried out for Christ's blood. **"Crucify Him!" they shouted.** But again Pilate protested: **"Why? What crime has He committed?"** By now they could "smell blood," and could not be reasoned with. Mob psychology had taken over their senses. As a result, **"They shouted all the louder, Crucify Him!"**

So Pilate caves in to crowd pressure. **"Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged, and handed Him over to be crucified"** (Mk. 15:15).

The crowd on that Friday morning had a clear choice: **"Barabbas or Jesus?"** Would they chose the *"Son of Abba"* or the *"Son of God?"* Would they ask Pilate for the *"false messiah"* or the *"true Messiah?"* Would they chose *"the Christ"* or the *"anti-christ?"* Would they ask for the *"murderer"* or the *"Messiah?"* Would they chose an *"insurrectionist"* or the *"Incarnation?"* Would they ask for **"Barabbas or Jesus?"** It was an incredulous choice! But we all know which man they chose to be **"...released to them."**

Down through the centuries, the choice has always been the same: **"Barabbas or Jesus?"** The choices have not changed. Will we chose the *true Messiah* or the *false messiah*? Will we embrace the counterfeit *"Son of Abba"* or the authentic *"Son of God?"* What a sad commentary on the human heart that we are so often more comfortable with a **Barabbas** than we are with **"the Christ."** History has proven over and over again that people will often choose a **Barabbas** over **Jesus Christ**. In country after country and culture after culture, *Jesus is condemned* – while *Barabbas is chosen*. Christ is rejected – and Barabbas is embraced!

In America today millions have increasingly chosen Barabbas over Jesus. From the lowest courts to the Supreme Court, we have banished Jesus from every

public forum – just as certainly as Pilate did 2,000 years ago! Jesus is no longer allowed in the classroom... the court room... the board room... the locker room... the ball room... or the bed room!

Most of the media moguls and leftist commentators today have also condemned the authentic historic **“Jesus the Christ,”** from the public platform. Just like Pilate, *they never give him a fair trial!* Their “evidence” against Jesus is always biased, contrived, partial, prejudiced. Because of their *a priori* conclusions about Jesus Christ, they seriously entertain “false evidence” and “false accusations” as though they were true, historic and scientific. They present their “conclusive evidence” as though they were universally accepted facts of history. And just like the biased Jewish religious leaders did before Pilate, they parade their **“false witnesses”** in the media as “true scholarship.” Almost all of their statements about Jesus Christ begin with the blatant generalization: *“Most scholars today agree that...”* Then they put forth the most fanciful interpretations of Christ imaginable – and have the audacity to call it “history” and “science!”

Once again we see the truth of the statement: *“The more things change, the more they remain the same.”* Down through the centuries, mankind has continued to make the same fatal choices that Pilate and the people made. In the place of the true historic Christ, they clamor for Barabbas! While rejecting the truth of Christ, they exalt and extol the **“false messiahs”** of science, humanism, naturalism, secularism, materialism, agnosticism, atheism and nihilism! While condemning the authentic Christ of the Bible, they embrace the Barabbases of lawlessness, lewdness, crudeness, sexual perversion, homosexuality, adultery, abortion. Truly we are just as *biased* and *blind* as Pilate, the Jewish leaders and the deceived crowd two millennia ago!

Therefore, like the Apostle Paul, we must ask: **“Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?”** (I Cor. 1:20).

So the masses of humanity today continue to replicate the deadly choice that the crowd made 2,000 years ago as they stood before Pontius Pilate. Prompted and egged on by the **“rulers of this age”** and the **“wisdom of this age”** (I Cor. 2:6-8), they still loudly clamor **“crucify Christ”** – and **“...release to us Bar-Abbas!”** We loudly applaud the media, the entertainers, the sports figures, the politicians, the educators, the economists – as they **“release to us”** every Barabbas they can create and glamorize. And when they are turned loose into our cultures and societies, they incite *insurrection, murder, alcoholism, drug addiction, sexual immorality* – and a legion of other sinful social ills! They create the same kind of societal mayhem that Bar-Abbas created in Jerusalem!

So once again *The Passion of the Christ* confronts us with the choice: **“Christ or Barabbas?”** Which will you chose? Which will you follow? Which one will you condemn in your life – and which one will you release to live his life in and

through you? **Christ and Barabbas** continue to be on trial. Your life is the courtroom – and you are the judge! Choose wisely. Your earthly life and eternal destiny hangs on whom you choose.

Post Trial Briefing

It is customary after every important trial to have a briefing. This is the time when the lawyers give their legal summary briefs of the case. The Four Gospel writers do the same thing after the conclusions of Christ's mock trial before Pilate. Here are their legal briefings:

- **Matthew: "When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. 'I am innocent of this man's blood,' he said. 'It is your responsibility!'" (Mtt. 27:24).**

When the crowd heard Pilate shift the responsibility from himself to them, they cried out: **"Let His blood be on us and on our children!"** (Matt. 27:25). And with those words, they not only sealed Christ's fate – they sealed their own fate also!

Pilate therefore sought to absolve himself of personal responsibility in the death of Christ. To dramatize this, he did something very familiar to the Jews – which further rubbed their noses in the guilt of Jesus' conviction to die. **"Pilate...washed his hands..."**

When Pilate did this before the crowd, he reenacted something that the Jewish leaders were all very familiar with. It came right out of their own Scriptures. It had to do with the absolution of guilt in the case of an unsolved murder. In such cases, Moses had instructed that a "virgin heifer" would be sacrificed as an atonement:

"Then all the elders...nearest the body shall wash their hands over the heifer whose neck was broken...and they shall declare: 'Our hands did not shed this blood... And the bloodshed will be atoned for. So you will purge from yourselves the guilt of shedding innocent blood...'" (Deut. 21:6-9).

We can hear echoes of this when the Psalmist Asaph cried out: **"Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence"** (Ps. 73:13).

We do not know how Pilate knew these portions of the Jewish Scriptures. But we can almost be sure that it was his final act of disdain and disgust

toward the Jewish leaders. So before turning Jesus over to them – He would “rub their noses” in their own Scriptures!

From that time on, this act of “**hand washing**” to absolve guilt has been associated with Pilate. But regardless of his *use* and *abuse* of Scriptures, he could not shirk his legal and moral responsibility concerning the execution of Christ. He could not shift the blame to the Jewish leaders or the crowd. Even though he dramatically proclaimed: “**I am innocent of this man’s blood,**” God and history still hold him accountable! No amount of water and hand washing can absolve him of his responsibility in *The Passion of the Christ!*

- **Mark: “Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged, and handed Him over to be crucified”** (Mk. 15:15).

While Matthew emphasizes Pilate’s attempt to absolve himself of all guilt concerning the death of Christ, Mark emphasizes his capitulation to the crowd. In caving in to the wishes of the crowd, Pilate did what most political leaders and politicians do – he let the crowd set the agenda. It was their inflamed passions that were in control – not truth or justice. So while Pilate had the power and authority to do the right thing – he chose not to exercise it. He folded to the crowd!

How often we do the same today. It is what the “crowd wants” that wins the day. It is the pressure of the clamoring masses that sweeps us along like a tidal wave. When we realize that “everybody believes this” and “everybody is doing it” – we fall in line! So how easy it is for us to identify with that out-of-control crowd 2,000 years ago.

- **Luke: “Wanting to release Jesus, Pilate appealed to them again. But they kept shouting, ‘Crucify Him! Crucify Him!’ 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.**

But with loud shouts they insistently demanded that He be crucified, and their shouts prevailed. So Pilate decided to grant their demands” (Lk. 23:20-23).

Doctor Luke has always proven himself to be an astute observer and accurate historian. He is the kind of witness that every good lawyer wants to call to the stand. In his Gospel account, we often notice how he records and recounts little details that the other Gospel writers did not include. So we read one important thing in his account that we have not seen in the others. Luke tells us that Pilate spoke to the crowd “**three times**” about

Jesus. And each time he came back with the same clear legal verdict: **“Not guilty!”** This is important in Jewish understanding because the Law of Moses said that:

“One witness is not enough to convict a man accused of any crime or offense he may have committed. A matter must be established by the testimony of two or *three witnesses*” (Deut. 19:15; II Cor. 13:1).

So the innocence of Christ was clearly affirmed by more than **“...the testimony of two or three witnesses.”** The *many* false witnesses could not prove Him guilty of any crime – although they desperately tried to do so. Pilate examined him several times privately and publicly, and found Him completely innocent of all charges trumped up against Him. Finally, Herod also interrogated Him, and found Him guilty of no crime – especially of any deserving the death penalty.

So there can be no doubt in the court of divine or human justice that Jesus was absolutely *innocent* – morally or legally! Christ’s absolute innocence was a necessary prerequisite for Him to be the *guiltless sacrifice* for the sins of the world! And Doctor Luke testifies that Christ’s innocence was declared no less than **“three times.”**

- *John*: The Fourth Gospel writer gives a longer account of the drama between Pilate, Jesus and the religious leaders. He tells us that Pilate tried one last desperate attempt to placate and appease the Jews: **“Then Pilate took Jesus and had Him flogged.”** We will look at this Roman **“flogging”** or **“scourging”** in a later chapter. But after this **“flogging,”** Pilate turned Jesus over to his sadistic and harden soldiers. They made a further mockery of Jesus, and did everything possible to humiliate Him as the **“King of the Jews.”** We read this familiar account of their mockery:

“The soldiers twisted together a *crown of thorns* and put it on His head. They clothed Him in a purple robe and went up to Him again and again, saying, ‘Hail, king of the Jews!’ And *they struck him in the face.*

Pilate felt that this public scourging and humiliation would certainly satisfy the crowd’s desire to see Christ suffer. So once more he comes out and presents the beaten and blooded Christ with these words:

“Look, I am bringing Him out to you to let you know that *I find no basis for a charge against Him.*”

When Jesus came out wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe, Pilate said to them, ‘Behold the man!’

The Latin phrase that Pilate used when he said: “**Behold the man!**” is *Ecce homo*. Little did Pilate realize that this phrase would become famous and echo down through the centuries! Along with “**washing his hands,**” this phrase *Ecce homo* has become synonymous with Pilate himself.

But as the blood-thirsty crowd “**Beheld the man**” in His “**crown of thorns**” and “**purple robe,**” they became even more enraged! They cried out all the more: “**Crucify! Crucify!**”

Once again Pilate sought to shift the blame: “**You take Him and crucify Him. As for me, I find no basis for a charge against Him.**” At this point they again accused Jesus before Pilate of claiming to be deity, and therefore deserving of death. “**We have a law,**” they said, “**and according to that law he must die, because he claimed to be the Son of God.**” This claim by Jesus startled Pilate. Even the Romans had beliefs about the gods who would inhabit a human being. As a result, “**When Pilate heard this, he was even more afraid, and he went back inside the palace.**”

Once Pilate was back inside his palace, he further interrogates Jesus about His claims of deity. But Jesus remained silent. This silence greatly frustrated Pilate, so he said to Jesus: “**Do you refuse to speak to me? Don't you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?**”

At that point Jesus set the record straight. “**You would have no power over Me if it were not given to you from above.**” Jesus then went on to say: “**Therefore the one who handed Me over to you is guilty of a greater sin.**”

No doubt this quite confidence and authority on the part of Christ deeply impressed Pilate. He had never seen this kind of calm and control in the face of such hatred, injustice and suffering. So we read: “**From then on, Pilate tried to set Jesus free.**” But when the Jewish leaders saw this resolve on Pilate's part to free Jesus, they began to shout: “**If you let this man go you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar.**” For Pilate this was the final straw. Now that Caesar was invoked, Pilate's fears took over his reason and sense of justice. And so we read: “**Finally Pilate handed Him over to them to be crucified**” (Jn. 19:1-16).

We can see then from the cumulative testimonies of the Four Gospel writers that Jesus was clearly innocent, and yet unjustly condemned to die. But before we leave this chapter, we must at least list the other references to Pilate in the rest of the New Testament.

- This is the testimony of Peter after God used him to heal a cripple beggar:

“The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified His servant Jesus. You handed Him over to be killed, and *you disowned Him before Pilate*, though He had decided to let Him go. You disowned the Holy and Righteous One asked that a murderer be released to you. You killed the author of life, but God raised Him from the dead. We are witnesses of this” (Acts 3:13-15).

- In their prayer and praise to God after their release from the Sanhedrin, Peter and the disciples prayed:

“The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against His Anointed One. Indeed *Herod and Pontius Pilate* met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen” (Acts 4:26-28).

- Paul preached about Pilate at Pisidian Antioch on his First Missionary journey:

“Brothers, children of Abraham, and you God-fearing Gentiles, it is to us that this message of salvation has been sent. The people of Jerusalem and their rulers did not recognize Jesus, yet in condemning Him they fulfilled the words of the prophets that are read every Sabbath. Though they found no proper ground for a death sentence, they asked *Pilate* to have Him executed. When they carried out all that was written about Him, they took Him down from the tree and laid Him in a tomb. But God raised Him from the dead...” (Acts 13:26-30).

- Finally, Paul spoke of Pilate in his letter to Timothy:

“In the sight of God, who gives life to everything, and of Christ Jesus, who while testifying before *Pontius Pilate* made a good confession...keep this command without spot or blame until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ...” (I Tim. 6:13-14).

Since Jesus then, gave a **“good confession”** when He was being interrogated by Pontius Pilate, may we also give a good and Godly confession when we are “on trial” in our lives – as we will all be from time to time. And as the hostile crowds and lesser Pilates of this world examine us, may we too be found **“without spot or blame”** as we await the **“appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ.”**