

Mark 15:1-20
June 23, 2024

Open with Prayer

HOOK:

Q: How do you react when you are accused of something? [Let people engage]

Transition: In a few hours, Jesus goes from enjoying the Passover meal with his disciples to being betrayed, arrested, deserted, and tried. His trial continued into Friday morning when the religious leader bound and delivered him to Pilate, accusing him of many things. Yet Jesus remains silent. His quiet amazes Pilate, yet Pilate passively releases a murderer, Barabbas, due to the anger and rage of the crowd. Jesus takes Barabbas's place and is given a crown of thorns, mocked, spit on, and beaten, leading to his crucifixion.

BOOK:

Jesus Before Pilate

15 Very early in the morning, the chief priests, with the elders, the teachers of the law and the whole Sanhedrin, reached a decision. They bound Jesus, led him away and handed him over to Pilate.

²“Are you the king of the Jews?” asked Pilate.

“Yes, it is as you say,” Jesus replied.

³The chief priests accused him of many things. ⁴So again Pilate asked him, “Aren’t you going to answer? See how many things they are accusing you of.”

⁵But Jesus still made no reply, and Pilate was amazed.

⁶Now it was the custom at the Feast to release a prisoner whom the people requested. ⁷A man called Barabbas was in prison with the insurrectionists who had committed murder in the uprising. ⁸The crowd came up and asked Pilate to do for them what he usually did.

⁹“Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?” asked Pilate, ¹⁰knowing it was out of envy that the chief priests had handed Jesus over to him. ¹¹But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have Pilate release Barabbas instead.

¹²“What shall I do, then, with the one you call the king of the Jews?” Pilate asked them.

¹³“Crucify him!” they shouted.

¹⁴“Why? What crime has he committed?” asked Pilate.

But they shouted all the louder, “Crucify him!”

¹⁵Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.

The Soldiers Mock Jesus

¹⁶The soldiers led Jesus away into the palace (that is, the Praetorium) and called together the whole company of soldiers. ¹⁷They put a purple robe on him, then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on him. ¹⁸And they began to call out to him, “Hail, king of the Jews!” ¹⁹Again and again they struck him on the head with a staff and spit on him. Falling on their knees, they paid homage to him. ²⁰And when they had mocked him, they took off the purple robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.

Process Observations/Questions:

Q: What did you most like about this passage? What resonated with you? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you least like about this passage? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you find in this passage that you didn't understand? [Let people engage]

Q: What do we learn about Jesus in this passage? [Let people engage]

LOOK:

Mark challenges us, his readers, to open our eyes and see Jesus for who He really is. Mark dares us to follow the example of this suffering, dying Servant of the Lord. Our discipleship will be costly. It may call for leaving families, giving up hoarded resources, even giving up life itself. All too often we, like those first disciples, will fail Jesus. We too misunderstand; we too lack faith; we too retreat under pressure; we too remain silent and comfortable while others wait to hear that we have been with Jesus. Our stories of discipleship, like Mark's story, are incomplete. But Jesus' promises stand sure. Like those first disciples, Jesus will forgive our failures and make us into what He desires—bold witnesses and followers in His way of costly discipleship.

Close in Prayer

Commentaries for Today's Lesson:

Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). The Bible Exposition Commentary (Vol. 1, p. 163). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

In Pilate's Hall—Condemned (Mark 15:1–20)

As soon as their early morning meeting was over, and the verdict officially recorded, the Jewish leaders delivered Jesus to the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. The governor usually resided at Caesarea, but it was his custom to be in Jerusalem each year for the feast. His presence pleased some of the Jews, and he could be on hand if any problems arose among the thousands of people crowded into Jerusalem. Roman governors held court early in the morning, so he was quite prepared when they brought the prisoner to him.

The Jewish council had to convince Pilate that Jesus was guilty of a capital crime and therefore worthy of death (John 18:31–32). In spite of their political corruption, many Roman officials had an appreciation for justice and tried to deal fairly with prisoners. Furthermore, Pilate had no great love for the Jews and was not about to do them any favors. He knew that the Jewish leaders were not interested in seeing justice done; what they really wanted was vengeance (Mark 15:10).

John gives us the most details of the Roman trial, and when you combine the Gospel records, you discover that Pilate repeatedly stated that he found no fault in Jesus (John 18:38; Luke 23:14; John 19:4; Luke 23:22; Matt. 27:24). His problem was that he lacked the courage to stand for what he believed. He wanted to avoid a riot (Matt. 27:24), so he was “willing to content the people” (Mark 15:15). Pilate did not ask, “Is it right?” Instead, he asked, “Is it safe? Is it popular?”

The council had only one capital crime that they might be able to present to Pilate: Jesus claimed to be a king and He stirred up the people. They tried to pass Him off as a dangerous revolutionary who was undermining the authority of Rome. As Pilate questioned Jesus, the Lord said nothing, but the chief priests kept accusing Him and trying to wear down the governor's resistance.

Pilate thought he could avoid making a decision by sending Jesus to Herod, the ruler of Galilee (Luke 23:6–12), but Herod only sent Jesus back after mocking Him. Then the governor offered the people a choice—Jesus the Nazarene, or Barabbas, the murderer and insurrectionist—thinking that surely sanity would prevail and they would ask to have Jesus released. But the chief priests had prepared the crowd carefully (Mark 15:11), and they asked for Barabbas to be set free and Jesus to be crucified.

The governor then tried a third ruse: he had Jesus scourged, hoping that the sight of the suffering prisoner would somehow arouse their pity (Mark 15:15; John 19:1ff). But the plan did not work. The governor gave in and delivered Jesus to be crucified.

Then followed the disgraceful mockery by the soldiers, as they beat Him, spat on Him, and bowed in mock homage. Roman soldiers would certainly laugh at a Jew who claimed to be a king! “We have no king but Caesar!” (John 19:12–15) Our Lord quietly suffered and did not fight back, a lesson that Mark's readers would need to learn as they faced official persecution (1 Peter 2:21–24).

But men had not yet done their worst to God's Son. Now they would lead Him outside the city and nail Him to a cross, and the Servant would die for the sins of the very people who were crucifying Him.

Grassmick, J. D. (1985). *Mark*. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 2, pp. 185-187) Wheaton, IL: Victor Books

b. Jesus' trial before Pilate and the Roman soldiers' abuse (15:1–20)

Jesus' trial before the Roman political authorities also had three hearings: (a) an initial interrogation by Pilate (cf. Matt. 27:2, 11–14; Mark 15:1b–5; Luke 23:1–5; John 18:28–38); (b) an interrogation by Herod Antipas (cf. Luke 23:5–12); (c) a final arraignment before Pilate, Barabbas' release, and the crucifixion verdict (cf. Matt. 27:15–26; Mark 15:6–20; Luke 23:13–25; John 18:39–19:16).

Before the Sanhedrin Jesus was condemned for blasphemy under Jewish law, but here He was tried for treason under Roman law. On both occasions He was sentenced to die, in conformity with God's will (cf. Mark 10:33–34).

(1) Pilate's interrogation and Jesus' silence (15:1b–5; Matt. 27:2, 11–14; Luke 23:1–5; John 18:28–38). 15:1b. The Sanhedrin had Jesus **bound** and led through the city from Caiaphas' residence (cf. 14:53) probably to Herod's palace where they **handed Him over to Pilate** for execution of the death sentence.

Pontius Pilate, the fifth Roman prefect (a title later changed to "procurator," i.e., imperial magistrate) of Judea held office A.D. 26–36. He was a harsh governor who despised the Jews (cf. Luke 13:1–2). Normally he resided in Caesarea by the Mediterranean Sea, but he came to Jerusalem on special occasions such as the Passover festival to help maintain order. Presumably he stayed in Herod's palace as was customary for provincial governors rather than in the Antonia Fortress near the temple. If so, Jesus' civil trial was held there.

15:2. **Pilate** had sole responsibility for the Roman court's decisions. The proceedings, usually held in public, opened with an indictment by the plaintiff followed by the magistrate's interrogation and further testimony from the defendant and other witnesses. When all the evidence was in, the magistrate usually consulted with his legal advisers and then pronounced the sentence, which had to be carried out immediately.

Instead of confirming the Sanhedrin's death sentence (cf. John 18:29–32) Pilate insisted on hearing the case. Only one of three accusations that had already been made (cf. Luke 23:2) merited Pilate's attention, namely, Jesus' alleged claim to be "a king." So Pilate **asked** Jesus, **Are You** (emphatic) **the King of the Jews?** To Pilate such a claim was tantamount to treason against Caesar, a crime punishable by death.

Jesus gave a cryptic reply, literally, **You** (emphatic) **say** (so), that is, "The designation is yours." It is best understood as a **yes** answer but with a qualification attached. As Messiah, Jesus is the King of the Jews but His concept of kingship differed from that implied in Pilate's question (cf. John 18:33–38).

15:3–5. Since Jesus' initial response provided no solid basis for a capital conviction under Roman law Pilate returned to His accusers to gain more information. **The chief priests** (cf. v. 1a) seized the opportunity to bolster their case by pressing multiple charges against Jesus.

Again, Pilate tried to get Jesus to respond to His accusers and defend Himself against their charges **but** to his utter amazement **Jesus** remained absolutely silent (cf. Isa. 53:7; lit., "He answered no longer nothing"; *ouketi ouden*, emphatic negative). Such silence was rare in a Roman court. It seemed to confirm Pilate's initial feeling that Jesus was not guilty.

Mark included only two short utterances by Jesus—one to Caiaphas (Mark 14:62) and one to Pilate (15:2). Jesus' silence highlights the fact that He, the Son of Man, suffered and died within God's sovereign plan (cf. comments on 8:31).

Learning that Jesus was a Galilean and hoping to avoid making a judgment against Him, Pilate sent Him to Herod Antipas, governor of Galilee (cf. 6:14), also in Jerusalem at the time. But Herod soon returned Him to Pilate. Only Luke recorded this middle phase of the civil trial (cf. Luke 23:6–12).

(2) Pilate's futile attempts to gain acquittal for Jesus (15:6–15; Matt. 27:15–26; Luke 23:13–25; John 18:39–40; 19:1, 13–16).

15:6. Each year during the Passover festival **it was the** governor's **custom** as a sign of goodwill **to release a prisoner** selected by **the people** (cf. v. 8). Though no explicit reference to the custom occurs outside the New Testament it was consistent with Rome's conciliatory attitude toward subject peoples on local matters. Instead of granting Jesus an acquittal, Pilate chose to grant the customary Passover amnesty, thinking the people would request Jesus' release (cf. v. 9).

15:7. While suppressing an **uprising** in Jerusalem, the Roman authorities had arrested **Barabbas** (from *Bar Abba*, "son of the father"), a notorious freedom fighter, robber (John 18:40), and murderer, along **with** other **insurrectionists**. He may have been a Zealot, a nationalist who stirred up opposition against Rome. Now he was awaiting execution.

15:8–11. During the trial proceedings a sizable **crowd** had gathered in the palace forum (cf. v. 16). The people approached Pilate's elevated judgment seat **and asked him to** grant the annual Passover amnesty (cf. v. 6). Many of them were probably supporters of Barabbas.

Pilate saw this as an opportunity to show his contempt for the Jews, especially their leaders. He offered **to release to them the King of the Jews** (cf. v. 2). He recognized **that the chief priests had turned Jesus over to him** not out of loyalty to Rome but **out of envy** and hatred. **Pilate** hoped to achieve Jesus' release and thus undo the religious leaders' scheme.

But Pilate's plan did not work. **The chief priests** incited **the emotional crowd** to pressure him into releasing **Barabbas instead** of Jesus. Apparently they knew that the Sanhedrin had already condemned Jesus (cf. 14:64). Strangely, Pilate failed to consider that the crowd would never side with him against their own leaders (cf. John 19:6–7).

15:12–14. Since the crowd had rejected Pilate's offer and requested the release of Barabbas, he inquired ("again" is in the Gr.) about **what** they wanted done **with the One** they called **the King of the Jews**. **Pilate** did not accept this title for Jesus but his question implied he was willing to release Jesus *also* if they wished. But without hesitation **they shouted back, Crucify Him!** The punishment that once awaited Barabbas was now thrust on Jesus.

Pilate challenged them to state the **crime** which made Jesus guilty enough to be crucified. **But they** persistently cried out **all the louder, Crucify Him!** Pilate considered the clamor of the crowd an acclamation, legally indicating a decision by popular demand. Thus Jesus must be pronounced guilty of high treason, a capital offense normally punishable by crucifixion in Roman provinces.

15:15. Though he believed Jesus was innocent (cf. v. 14) **Pilate** followed political expedience rather than justice. Wishing **to satisfy the** people lest they complain to Emperor Tiberius—thereby putting his position in jeopardy (cf. John 19:12)—Pilate **released Barabbas to them ... had Jesus flogged, and** sentenced **Him** to death by crucifixion.

A Roman flogging was a brutal beating that always preceded the execution of a capital sentence on male offenders, though it could also be a separate punishment. The prisoner was

stripped, often tied to a post, and beaten on the back by several guards using short leather whips studded with sharp pieces of bone or metal. No limit was set on the number of blows. Often this punishment was fatal.

Pilate had Jesus flogged in hope that the people would take pity and be satisfied. But this also failed; they still insisted He be crucified (cf. John 19:1–7).

(3) The Roman soldiers' mockery of Jesus (15:16–20; Matt. 27:27–31; John 19:2–12). 15:16. After the flogging of **Jesus**, presumably outside in the public square, **the Roman soldiers** took Him, battered and bleeding, **into** (*esō*, “inside”) **the palace** (lit., “courtyard”; cf. same word in 14:54, 66). The rendering “palace” is justified due to Mark's explanatory comment, **that is, the Praetorium**, equating the two places. The Latin loanword, *Praetorium*, meant the governor's official residence (cf. Matt. 27:27; John 18:28, 33; 19:9; Acts 23:35).

Once inside they summoned **the whole company** (*speiran*, Gr. for the Latin “cohort”) **of soldiers**. Ordinarily a cohort was 600 men, 1/10 of a 6,000-soldier legion. But in this case it may have been an auxiliary battalion of 200–300 soldiers that had accompanied Pilate to Jerusalem from Caesarea.

15:17–19. In ludicrous imitation of a vassal king's regal robes and gilded head-wreath, the soldiers dressed Jesus in **a purple robe**, a faded military cloak, and pressed **a crown of thorns**, perhaps palm spines, on His head. With this “crown” the soldiers unwittingly pictured God's curse on sinful humanity being thrust on Jesus (cf. Gen. 3:17–18). Matthew noted that they also placed a staff in His hand as a mock scepter (Matt. 27:29).

Then they ridiculed Him with contemptuous words and insulting actions in mock homage to a king. The derisive greeting **Hail** (Rejoice), **King of the Jews**, paralleled the formal Roman plaudit, “Ave, Caesar.” The NIV words, **again and again** reflect the imperfect tense of the Greek verbs. The soldiers kept striking Jesus **with a staff**, probably His mock scepter, on His thorn-crowned **head**. They kept spitting **on Him** (cf. Mark 14:65) and bending **their knees** in mock submission to royalty. In all this they acted out of contempt not so much for Jesus personally but for their subject nation which had long desired a king of its own.

15:20. The soldiers then removed the mock royal attire and dressed Him in **His own clothes**. **Then they**, a four-soldier execution squad (cf. John 19:23) under the command of a centurion, **led Him** outside the city **to crucify Him**.

Jesus' suffering before the Roman authorities was exemplary for Mark's readers who would be subjected to similar ridicule before pagan authorities (cf. comments on Mark 13:9–13).

Church, C.L. (1998). *Mark In D. S. Dockery (Ed.), Holman Concise Bible Commentary (pp. 443-444). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.*

THE KING OF THE JEWS (15:1–16:8)

Jesus was doubtless brought before Pilate on charges of being a revolutionary. Jesus' response to Pilate's question, “Are you the King of the Jews?” was guarded, “So you say” (NRSV). Jesus was a king, but not the kind to which Pilate was accustomed (see 10:42–45). Ironically, Pilate released Barabbas, a real terrorist, and sentenced the innocent Jesus to death.

The soldiers mocked Jesus with a purple robe and crown of thorns. The symbols are both awful and beautiful. Jesus embraced His role as suffering, dying Messiah with royal dignity. The inscription above the cross defined the charge: “THE KING OF THE JEWS.” The cross redefined the meaning of Messiah. Jesus taught His disciples that “those who want to save their life will lose it” (8:35). At the cross the crowds jeered for Jesus to do just that—save His own life. But Jesus

believed what He taught His disciples: Those who lose their life for the sake of what God is doing in the world will save it (8:35). Jesus could face the cross because He trusted God with His life. Ironically, the Jewish leaders confessed that Jesus had saved others. Their insult, “He can’t save himself,” was a great half-truth. Jesus could not save Himself and still trust God and submit to the necessity of His death. Jesus’ cry, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” points to the sense of abandonment Jesus experienced when He bore our sins. It would be a mistake to think God aloof from the cross event. The tearing of the temple veil “from top to bottom” demonstrates that “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ” (2 Cor. 5:19). Strangely, when Jesus felt God was farthest from Him, a centurion saw clearly that Jesus was God’s Son. God doubtless was pleased with Him (1:11; 9:7).

The women who had followed Jesus from Galilee accepted His suffering and death but “from a distance.” Joseph of Arimathea exhibited boldness when the most a disciple could do was see to Jesus’ proper burial.

The women’s desire to anoint Jesus’ body though appropriate at another time (14:3–9) was not the proper response for Easter morning disciples. The “young man” seated at the empty tomb said it all: “You’re looking for Jesus in the wrong place; God has raised him from the dead; he’s not here!” (author’s translation). God had vindicated Jesus. The message for the disciples point to restoration after they had denied and abandoned Jesus.

The oldest manuscripts of Mark end at 16:8 with the women silent and fearful. As noted in the introduction, Mark might be termed “the Gospel of loose ends,” for Mark often pointed ahead to promises that are only fulfilled outside his story. That God would raise Jesus from the dead following His suffering and death and that Jesus would then meet His disciples in Galilee are but two such promises. Mark doubtless knew traditions relating the fulfillment of such promises; he would have had no reason to write a Gospel had he doubted these promises. That he left these “loose ends” suggests that for Mark the “Jesus story” is not finished until it is finished in you and me through our bold witness to the resurrection.

Theological and Ethical Significance. The Jesus who confronts us in Mark makes us uncomfortable. He is hard to understand and even harder to follow. This is the Jesus most clearly seen to be God’s Son only when He has suffered and died on the cross. What those first disciples were so slow to understand, what the centurion and Mark grasped, and what Paul preached is this: “Christ crucified . . . the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:23–24).

Mark challenges us, his readers, to open our eyes and see Jesus for who He really is. Mark dares us to follow the example of this suffering, dying Servant of the Lord. Our discipleship will be costly. It may call for leaving families, giving up hoarded resources, even giving up life itself. All too often we, like those first disciples, will fail Jesus. We too misunderstand; we too lack faith; we too retreat under pressure; we too remain silent and comfortable while others wait to hear that we have been with Jesus. Our stories of discipleship, like Mark’s story, are incomplete. But Jesus’ promises stand sure. Like those first disciples, Jesus will forgive our failures and make us into what He desires—bold witnesses and followers in His way of costly discipleship.

Leavell, L.P. (1972). Mark. In H. F. Paschall & H. H. Hobbs (Eds.), The Teacher’s Bible Commentary (p. 632). Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers.

The Trial of Jesus (Mark 14:53–15:20)

The passage—The full details of the trial of Jesus must be pieced together from all four Gospels. There are two sections to the trial, before the Jews and before the Romans. Each of these two consists of three phases.

The Sanhedrin's illegal trial (14:53–65) was held in violation of their own rules. It was decreed that they could not meet at night nor during any of the great feasts. Their law also required that if a death verdict were given, a night must elapse before it was carried out in order to have time for reconsideration. Their animosity had reached the point that they were not interested in administering justice, they were interested in killing Jesus.

During the testimony, Jesus did not speak. Finally, Caiaphas asked Jesus if he were the Messiah. This could be construed as insurrection against Rome and would be grounds for death. Jesus responded positively in language which incited the wrath of the Sadducees. Pandemonium broke loose, and their great hour arrived. They used the occasion to spit on Jesus, to strike him, and call upon him to show them his ability to prophecy.

The denials of Peter are fast moving and decisive (14:66–72). The redeeming feature of this is that Peter knew he was wrong and wept bitter tears of remorse. As inexcusable as his conduct was, we can be grateful it was not unforgiveable.

The trial of Jesus before Pilate is found in 15:1–20. He was the legal representative of the Roman Empire. He was despised by the Jewish people at large. Perhaps the question Pilate asked Jesus stemmed from unbelief. It would be hard to believe that this Galilean peasant, dressed in the garb of an ordinary working man, could be King of the Jews.

The offer to release a prisoner brought about the release of Barabbas. Having asked for their opinion regarding Barabbas, Pilate asked them what he should do with Jesus. Roman justice was trampled underfoot as the people cried for the crucifixion of Christ. The Jews were not allowed to give the death penalty. Only the Romans could do this. Crucifixion was a common method of punishment under the Romans.

Scourging was the ordinary prelude to crucifixion. Since a man could easily be beaten to death, the number of lashes was limited.

Even the Roman soldiers caught the spirit of the crowd. When they led Jesus away, they made mockery of him by dressing him in purple, crushing a crown of thorns upon his brow, spitting in his face, striking his head with a reed, and bowing their knees in mock worship.

The Holy Bible: New International Version. (1984). Mark 15:1-20. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.