
“Is This the Son Of God?”

*“The Jews answered him, ‘We have a law, and by that law He ought to die because He made Himself out to be the Son of God.’ Therefore when Pilate heard this statement, he was even more afraid”
(John 19:7, 8).*

During the last stage of the trials of Jesus, Pilate found himself caught between two great forces. As a Roman official, His integrity constrained him to give a just verdict for this innocent prisoner. However, as a public leader whose reputation was haunted by poor decisions of the past, he was determined to avoid—at any cost—a riotous outbreak in Jerusalem. He was pulled in one direction by the rope of conscience and in the opposite direction by the rope of political expediency. Both pulls were strong, but they were not of equal strength. The pressure from the Jews for him to acquiesce to their will was by far the stronger. Driven by envy, they were crying out for a crucifixion—and they would do anything to get it. They had Pilate in a corner, and they were going to keep him in it until they got what they wanted.

Even though Pilate was convinced of Jesus’ innocence, his cowering before the demands of the chief priests had allowed the trial to get out of hand. At the beginning of the trial, he had given his judgment to them; but they had refused to accept it. He had sent Jesus to Herod, seeking the help of the Galilean tetrarch; but Herod had sent Him back without a judgment against Him and without any guidance on what to do with Him. As a last resort, Pilate had tried to take refuge in a Passover custom, hoping to get the crowd to ask for the release of Jesus; but the crowd had chosen Barabbas instead. Now Pilate had exhausted his options.

Perhaps as one final attempt, as an expression of hope against hope, Pilate gave the com-

mand for Jesus to be scourged (John 19:1). He must have thought that the Jews would be satisfied to see Jesus beaten inhumanely. Scourging was the nearest thing to death. Roman flogging left even the strongest men within an inch of death. Pilate may also have thought that the Jews would view this scourging as a prelude to crucifixion and be quiet, supposing that they were about to get their way.

After Jesus had been scourged and had been humiliated by mockery (John 19:1–3), Pilate made one more attempt to acquit Him. The text says, “Pilate came out again and said to them, ‘Behold, I am bringing Him out to you so that you may know that I find no guilt in Him.’ Jesus then came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, ‘Behold, the Man!’” (John 19:4, 5).

Fully aware that he had already gone too far and there was probably no way out but to release Jesus to their wishes, Pilate asked them to look upon this pathetic figure whom they wished to crucify. Jesus stood before them, covered with bloodstains from the scourging. His shoulders were draped with a purple robe of mockery, and His head was adorned with a crown of cruelty. Pilate must have thought that Jesus’ prosecutors would say, “Now that we have humiliated Him, beaten Him, and publicly declared His criminality, we are satisfied. Go ahead and release Him.” On the contrary, the chief priests, hardened in their decision for His death, cried, “Crucify, crucify!” In desperation, Pilate restated his verdict: “Take Him yourselves and crucify Him, for I find no guilt

in Him" (John 19:6b). The priests angrily yelled, "We have a law, and by that law He ought to die because He made Himself out to be the Son of God" (John 19:7).

The priests' declaration about Him jarred Pilate. The idea that Jesus had said He was the Son of God filled him with horror. The text says, "Therefore when Pilate heard this statement, he was even more afraid" (John 19:8). Fear took over his mind, shaking him greatly and reminding him of what he had seen in Jesus. The words of the Jews explained to Pilate the unusual character of this One called Jesus who stood before him, humiliated, bloody, and clothed with the garments of scorn. Jesus had spoken to Pilate as no other had spoken to him; His life before him had been flawless; even His silence had been nothing short of majestic. The Jews' statement that He claimed to be the Son of God contained a ring of truth. Pilate may have thought, "Suppose His words were true. What would be their implications for this trial and for me?" Just thinking of this possibility shrouded his mind in fear.

At this juncture in the trial, Pilate had confronted three important truths concerning Jesus. As we read about his facing them, the Holy Spirit—through their presentation in the sacred Scriptures—reminds us that these truths are also ours to face. These trials of our Savior forever broadcast them to all who read the Bible.

The first truth is that Jesus often puts Himself in our hands. He will allow us to stand by and let others do their worst to Him. If, by our inaction, Jesus is humiliated, then He will permit it to happen. He will stand before us in silence while we allow His cause to be condemned. He is the almighty Christ, to be sure; but He has imparted to us, at least in this world, a measure of power over Himself. He desired to give us freedom, and His gift of free choice inevitably comes with a tremendous risk.

He made us into free moral people. He will teach us, wait for us, and encourage us; but He will not make us give ourselves for what is right. We must see the need for it, make the sacrifice for it, and walk through the doors that open for it. Why would Jesus allow Pilate, the chief priests, and the crowd to decide His fate? The answer lies somewhere between His desire

to provide salvation for us and His desire to give us human freedom.

The second truth is that Jesus must be seen as the Son of God. Throughout the Gospel Accounts, we are never allowed to identify Him as just a man. He completely and fully took on humanity, but He was also God in the flesh. His divine nature was declared at His birth, at His baptism, at His transfiguration, and in His trials. His undeniable miracles, perfect sermons, matchless conduct, and unique foreknowledge join together to proclaim who He is.

Neither Pilate nor the Jews could witness and participate in this trial without confronting the deity of Christ. Jesus declared it, and His actions confirmed it. Anytime a person has an association with Jesus, he confronts His deity.

Others talked about the truth, but Jesus revealed that He was and is the Truth. He has never acted out of character with who He is. Pilate, to some extent, recognized who Jesus was; but his weak will prevented him from doing anything about it. We want the truth—but when we get it, do we know what to do with it?

The third truth is that nothing should bring more reverence and fear to our minds than the fact that Jesus is the Son of God. No wonder Pilate became afraid! The trial over which Pilate presided was a disaster. Jesus was abused in every imaginable way. Pilate, toward the end of it, was only faintly beginning to understand his dilemma. If this Man whom he had tried was indeed the Son of God, he would be depicted by history as the worst governor the world has ever known, and he would be painted as having made the worst mistake that anyone can make. Can we imagine any public official mistreating God? Think about it! When Pilate had the opportunity to deal fairly and justly with the God who made him, he allowed wicked men to mock and torment Him! What will Pilate say to Jesus when he stands before Him on the Judgment Day?

Before we leave this passage, let us remember that, from one viewpoint, we are standing beside Pilate. Jesus is before us. He puts Himself into our hands, letting us do with Him as we choose. We know from the Scriptures that He is the Son of God, the almighty Christ. This truth of His deity will either cause us to be

filled with fear or to fall upon our faces in worship. He is not just a perfect man whom we should honor; He is not a superman of whom we should stand in awe. He is the God-Man, the One whom we should honor, reverence, and praise as the second member of the Godhead.

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*The Eternal Being who knows everything and who created the whole universe became not only a man but (before that) a baby, and (even before that) a fetus inside a woman's body. If you want to understand His condescending to live as a man, think how you would like to become a slug or a crab!*¹

¹Adapted from C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, rev. and enl. ed. (New York: Macmillan Co., 1952), 155.