

# The Trial of Men's Hearts

## Mark 15:1-20

In this message, we're going to examine three episodes that take place the day Jesus died. As we do, I want us to discuss the meaning then and the meaning for our lives today. First, there was an episode of silence in which Jesus was tried. Then there was an episode of substitution in which Barabbas was released. Finally, we'll examine the episode of suffering in which Jesus was tortured before the cross.

I would like you to be thinking of three questions as we read this account:

1. Why did Pilate marvel at the silence of Jesus?
2. Why did the crowd choose Barabbas instead of Jesus?
3. Why did Pilate scourge Jesus and the soldiers mock him?

I want you to watch for these as we read this account, because as we seek to answer these questions, we will get at the truth and find ourselves in the story. The story of the cross has amazing power in our lives. It seems to be a simple story; yet what it does to us is radical and revolutionary.

If we allow ourselves to be in the story, we will find it is not so much Jesus who is on trial, but it is our own hearts and lives that are on trial. The cross of Jesus Christ has a remarkable way of laying bare our actions and motives.

Listen to Mark 15:1-20:

- 1 Immediately, in the morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council; and they bound Jesus, led Him away, and delivered Him to Pilate.**
- 2 Then Pilate asked Him, "Are You the King of the Jews?" He answered and said to him, "It is as you say."**
- 3 And the chief priests accused Him of many things, but He answered nothing.**
- 4 Then Pilate asked Him again, saying, "Do You answer nothing? See how many things they testify against You!"**
- 5 But Jesus still answered nothing, so that Pilate marveled.**
- 6 Now at the feast he was accustomed to releasing one prisoner to them, whomever they requested.**
- 7 And there was one named Barabbas, who was chained with his fellow rebels; they had committed murder in the rebellion.**
- 8 Then the multitude, crying aloud, began to ask him to do just as he had always done for them.**
- 9 But Pilate answered them, saying, "Do you want me to release to you the King of the Jews?"**
- 10 For he knew that the chief priests had handed Him over because of envy.**
- 11 But the chief priests stirred up the crowd, so that he should rather release Barabbas to them.**
- 12 Pilate answered and said to them again, "What then do you want me to do with Him whom you call the King of the Jews?"**
- 13 So they cried out again, "Crucify Him!"**
- 14 Then Pilate said to them, "Why, what evil has He done?" But they cried out all the more, "Crucify Him!"**

- 15 So Pilate, wanting to gratify the crowd, released Barabbas to them; and he delivered Jesus, after he had scourged Him, to be crucified.
- 16 Then the soldiers led Him away into the hall called Praetorium, and they called together the whole garrison.
- 17 And they clothed Him with purple; and they twisted a crown of thorns, put it on His head,
- 18 and began to salute Him, "Hail, King of the Jews!"
- 19 Then they struck Him on the head with a reed and spat on Him; and bowing the knee, they worshiped Him.
- 20 And when they had mocked Him, they took the purple off Him, put His own clothes on Him, and led Him out to crucify Him.

### 1. SILENCE: An innocent man falsely accused

As you remember, Jesus was arrested late at night in the Garden of Gethsemane and taken immediately to be put on trial before the high priests Annas and Caiaphas. But Jewish law said that any trial at night was illegal.

So the Sanhedrin met again at dawn to make formal charges and pass judgment against Jesus. Their sentence had been death. They wanted Jesus executed. But only the Roman judge could order an execution. So they had to take Jesus to the Roman authorities.

The Jews had accused Jesus of blasphemy against God, but this charge would not stand up in a Roman court. The Romans believed in many Gods, and the charge of blasphemy against God would not be considered a crime in a Roman court.

So the Sanhedrin had to come up with more substantial charges against Jesus. The Gospel of Luke tells us they came up with 3 more. They decided to charge Him with subversion against Rome, of teaching that they should not pay taxes to Rome, and of conspiring against Rome, claiming to be Christ, a king.

So, verse one tells us early the next morning, Jesus was taken to Pilate. The high priests make these accusations against Jesus before Pilate. So Pilate takes Jesus aside and questions Him, "**Are you the king of the Jews?**" Jesus answers by saying, "**It is as you say.**" Why did He answer that way? Why didn't He speak as no other had ever spoken? Why didn't He use His powers of persuasion to convince Pilate that indeed He is king not only of the Jews, but of all people?

I think the answer is clear in John's gospel. John 18:36 says Jesus went on to say, "**My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here**" He makes clear to Pilate that his kingship is no threat to Rome whatsoever. I think it is very clear that Pilate understood it that way.

If we read between the lines here I think that the priests began to see that Pilate understood that Jesus was not challenging the authority of Rome and their case was beginning to fall apart. They are angry. Verse 2 tells us that they begin to accuse him of many things. They heap on all the accusations they can think of to show Pilate that they want the death of this man.

But in the face of these withering accusations, Jesus didn't say another word. He didn't try to defend Himself. This was in fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecy found in Isaiah, "**He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led**

**like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.” (Isaiah 53:7)**

Verse 4, Pilate asks Jesus, **“Do You answer nothing? See how many things they testify against You!”** But in verse 5 Jesus made no reply, not even to a single charge and Pilate marveled.

Why was he amazed? I think Pilate was waiting for one word from Jesus that would give him an excuse, a basis upon which he might release Him.

Later when Jesus is on the cross you find the chief priests and scribes saying, **"He saved others; Himself He cannot save."** (Mark 15:31). But that is not true! Jesus could have saved Himself. As he said at His arrest in the Garden, He could have called down legions of angels to save Him. But really it seems that at His trial before Pilate, all that Jesus really had to do was to speak up in His own defense, and Pilate might have turned Him loose. Pilate knew that Jesus had done nothing worthy of crucifixion. "Why doesn't He defend Himself? Why doesn't He plead for His life?" It made no sense at all to Pilate.

He marveled because Jesus did not say a word, and He gave Pilate no grounds on which to free Him. Thus the silence of Jesus effectively exposed the true enmity of these priests. It effectively stripped away all their disguise, and they had to come out and openly reveal that what was eating them was nothing more than the jealousy and evil of their own hearts.

That is what I mean when I say the cross has a remarkable way of working with us. It shows us for who we are. It is God's great dividing line, ripping through the hypocrisy of our lives, laying us bare for all to see, including ourselves. As Jesus remains silent before these priests, they are forced to make clear the enmity of their own hearts against Him.

Politicians sometimes decide issues on the basis of majority pressure rather than on the principle of right and wrong. Some time ago a state governor declared that he personally believes abortion is wrong. But he said that as a public official he would support the will of the majority.

Pilate acted in much the same way regarding Jesus. Although he knew there was no truth to the charges leveled against Christ, he caved in to the pressure of the chief priests and the crowd.

John tells us that Pilate was afraid of Jesus. He was afraid of the crowd; he was afraid of Jesus. So as this account unfolds, you see Pilate as a man of dubious character, caught on the horns of a dilemma. Trying to please two opposing powers, he is stripped naked before all of history, and we begin to see this man in his true character. He is a coward, afraid to make the decision on the basis of justice. So he tries to decide on the basis of expediency and he ends up the curse of all the ages. See how the cross again exposes what is hidden in our hearts.

The second movement of this story is the incident with Barabbas. The other gospel accounts tell us that at this point Pilate sent Jesus to Herod, the King of Galilee, who tried to make sport of Jesus, and tried to get Him to work a miracle. Mark does not record any of that. But Jesus remained utterly silent before Herod, and never opened His mouth once. So Herod sent him back to Pilate.

## **2. SUBSTITUTE: A guilty man graciously excused**

Pilate wanted to release Jesus. So he figured out a plan. Since it was Passover, it was a custom to release a guilty prisoner. Pilate asked if he could release Jesus as this Passover Pardon, but religious leaders were stationed in the crowd. They stirred up the mob by saying, "Tell him to release Barabbas. Tell him to release Barabbas."

The Bible says Barabbas was part of the insurrection movement against the Romans and had committed murder in the process. There was a Roman cross waiting for him. But in the last moment, he suddenly found himself free, and Jesus was sentenced to die on the cross that had been prepared for him. He was a murderer and he got off scot-free. I want the crowd to yell, "Release Jesus! Crucify Barabbas!" But instead they yell, "Release Barabbas! Crucify Jesus!"

Barabbas, a scoundrel, a sinner, a murderer, was declared innocent and Jesus took his place on a cross meant for Him. When I look inside myself I realize I AM Barabbas. We're in the same sandals. You are Barabbas, too. We're the guilty ones. We're the scoundrels, but we get to go free and Jesus died in our place.

Barabbas deserved death, but Jesus became his substitute. You don't have to understand the Bible to understand what a substitute is. If you're a basketball player on the bench and the coach says, "Go in and take #12's place." You run onto the court and #12 sits on the bench. You become his or her substitute. We deserved to suffer for our sins, but Jesus came into the game and we got to sit on the bench of grace.

That Bible says, "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed." (1 Peter 2:24)

I'm a curious kind of guy, and I'd like to know what happened to Barabbas after he was pardoned. I wish Paul Harvey had researched and given us "the rest of the story." Did Barabbas watch Jesus being scourged and say, "Thanks?" Did he follow Jesus to the cross and say, "Thank you?" Did he follow and say, "That should have been me. That should have been my blood." We don't know the rest of Barabbas's story. But we know the rest of Jesus' story. Regardless of what Barabbas did, we should look at the cross and say, "Thank you! Thank you! Jesus, that should have been me hanging there."

### **3. SUFFERING: A strong man shamefully abused**

Before Jesus ever reached the cross, He faced unspeakable torture at the hands of the cruel Roman soldiers. First Pilate had Jesus scourged. A squad of three soldiers usually performed a flogging. The prisoner was stripped and his hands were tied above his head to a ring in a wooden post. Then two of the soldiers stood on each side with a flagrum in their hands. This was a leather whip of nine thongs with pieces of metal or stone embedded in the end of each thong.

It was so excruciating that there are accounts of Roman soldiers flogging prisoners to death. After the flogging, Jesus was taken inside the fortress where an entire company of Roman soldiers came and continued to torture him. In mockery they put a purple robe on his wounded back and twisted a crown of thorns and crushed it on his head. They blindfolded him and struck him in the face and head with a club. At the end of the torture sessions, Jesus was unrecognizable.

This mockery was a strange thing. They did not usually do this with those sentenced to crucifixion. These were rough, hard-handed soldiers, used to carrying out gruesome orders. They could callously take a man out and nail him to a cross, then go to breakfast. But they went through this mockery of Jesus that seems to have a tremendous passion behind it.

Why did the Roman soldiers react so violently and so cruelly to Jesus? Most of them probably didn't even know Him. Most of them probably had never seen Him before. Why did they react that way?

We know that because it was part of the prophecy about him. The Bible says, **"Just as many were astonished at you, So His visage was marred more than any man, And His form more than the sons of men."** (Isaiah 52:14) **"He is despised and rejected by men, A Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him."** (Isaiah 53:3)

A poem about the suffering of Jesus was written in the Middle Ages, and in the 18th century, J. S. Bach put it to music. He used a haunting minor key to accompany the words. *"O sacred Head, now wounded, with grief and shame weighed down. Now scornfully surrounded with thorns Thine only crown: How pale Thou art with anguish, with sore abuse and scorn! How does Thy visage languish, which once was bright as morn!"*

Listen to what the soldiers were saying. They were saying, **"Hail, King of the Jews!"** These soldiers were taking out all of their hatred for the Jews on Jesus. I think they were mad at these stubborn and stiff necked Jews who had caused them so many problems. Jesus was in their hands, so they took out all their hatred on Him. All the foul mass of bigotry and racial hatred came pouring out against Jesus. Once again we see how the cross unveils what is hidden.

As the cross of Jesus comes into the life of any man, woman, boy, or girl, it has a powerful way of ripping off all our disguise, and we have to answer finally, clearly, and honestly, what our reaction is to Jesus.

Three episodes, but one truth: An innocent man was falsely accused; a guilty man was graciously excused; and a strong man was shamefully abused. And our hearts are laid bare before the cross.

As we look at the cross we need to realize that our hatreds, our prejudice, our sins drove the nails into the hands and feet of Jesus just as surely as the Roman hammers. The one who suffered there suffered there for me. And because of His suffering and His pain and His death I can stand before God today, forgiven and cleansed and justified.

Pilate's final question to the crowd still rings across the centuries: "What shall I do, then, with Jesus?" It the question of the ages and every person must eventually give an answer.

There are only two possible answers. I can crown him or I can crucify him. There is nothing else, no middle ground.

Let's turn the question around and make it more personal: "What will you do with Jesus?" If he is the Son of God, then crown him the Lord of your life and give your heart to him. If he is a fraud, then by all means send him off to be crucified.

But I cannot decide that for you. No one can answer that question but you. The friends of Jesus cannot answer for you. Neither can his foes. Pilate tried to wash his hands, but water won't wash off that kind of blood. You can't claim neutrality. Either join those who crucified him or join those who follow him.

I ask the question once more: What will you do with Jesus? For once, there is no putting it off. Before long, each of us will leave this place having made a decision for Jesus or against him.