

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MARK

60. Friend of Caesar Over Friend of Jesus

Mark 15:1-20

There are many today who find it hard to believe in God because of the existence of evil. Here in Mark 15, we see the very reason for the incarnation of God — we see the way the True and Forever King conquered evil.

QUOTE: Christopher Wright (From: *The God I Do Not Understand*) —

“The cross was the worst that human evil and rebellion against God could do. At a purely human level it plumbed the depths of depravity, as the Gospels show with little need to embellish the facts. There were inflamed fanatics, corrupt religious leaders, lying witnesses, political conspiracy, vested interests, nationalist rage, morally bankrupt judicial process, excruciating torture, public shame, and taunting mockery; and even among the friends of Jesus there was treachery, betrayal, denial, and cowardice. At a more profound level, we know that all the powers of evil, satanic allied with human, were ranged against Christ and hurled their worst at him. But Jesus, the Lamb of God, doing the perfect will of his Father, transformed all this into the triumph of divine love, absorbing and defeating it simultaneously. But the crucial point is this: not only did Jesus defeat all the powers of evil, he made them into the agents of his victory and their own defeat. He turned evil against itself to its own ultimate destruction.”¹

So here we go

Mark 15:1 (CSB) ¹As soon as it was morning, having held a meeting with the elders, scribes, and the whole Sanhedrin, the chief priests tied Jesus up, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate.

REMEMBER — last week we learned that there were actually three phases of Jesus’ trial before the Jewish authorities and three phases of His trial before the Roman authorities.

¹ Christopher J. H. Wright. *The God I Don't Understand*.

FIRST — After Jesus was betrayed and arrested in Gethsemane, he was taken to the house of Annas where he was interrogated and brutally assaulted (**John 18:12–13; 19–23**). That trial is recorded for us in **John 18:12–13; 19–23**.

SECOND — came the trial we looked at last Monday in **Mark 14:53-65**.

The THIRD is noted here in **Mark 15:1**.

Mark 15:1 (CSB) ¹As soon as it was morning, having held a meeting with the elders, scribes, and the whole Sanhedrin, the chief priests tied Jesus up, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate.

This was the official daylight trial of Jesus before the Sanhedrin that is described for us in **Luke 22:66–71**. At the very break of day, He stood before the Sanhedrin — the most powerful leaders of the nation. The axiom of this assembly was to save, not destroy life. But when this collection of 72 men convened, they were in no hurry to know the truth — or to save life — they were in a hurry to kill Jesus.

But the Jews had a problem: The Romans had taken from the Jews the right to carry out the death penalty. That didn't mean that it was beyond the religious rulers to have gotten away with a vigilante stoning of Jesus (they would murder a young man named Stephen in that way in just a few months after the death of Jesus). But Caiaphas wanted Jesus crucified. Deuteronomy 21:23 says, *“Anyone who is hung on a tree is under God’s curse.”* Caiaphas wanted the nation to view Jesus, not as Messiah, but as a man cursed by God. There is so much insanity here. The Jews hated the fact that they were ruled by the pagan Roman government; they hated the Roman governor, but they were willing to go to the Romans to have them kill Jesus. As we'll see in a moment, Pontius Pilate hated the Jews, but in his desperate need for Caesar's favor he ended up being used by the Jews. Sin is twisted and insane!

But here's the big deal in all of this —

Acts 2:23 (ESV) *this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.*

Jesus said he would be crucified.

John 3:14-15 (ESV) And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

Psalm 22 predicted Jesus would be crucified. **Isaiah 53** predicted that Jesus would be crucified. **Zechariah 12:10** predicted that Jesus would be crucified. It never entered Caiaphas' mind that he was fulfilling prophecy. God was sovereign over the worst in humanity

the chief priests tied Jesus up, led him away,

This at dawn! Jesus has been awake for at least 24 hours. He has suffered hematidrosis in the Garden of Gethsemane — and He has been brutally beaten at the house of Caiaphas. Now they are forcing Him to walk from the Southwest part of the city all the way to the Northeastern corner of the city.

We know that Jesus will be on the cross at the third hour = 9am.

the chief priests tied Jesus up, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate.

REMEMBER — last week we also learned that there would be three phases of His trial before the Roman authorities.

In the first civil trial Jesus stands before Pilate.

The only reason the average person knows anything about Pontius Pilate is because of his relationship with Jesus Christ. If Pilate had not been the governor of Judea at the time of Jesus, he would have lived and died in obscurity. There were thousands of Roman officials commissioned throughout the Roman Empire, but I doubt that any of us know even one of them by name. But Pilate is known throughout history **because of these moments he spent with Jesus.**

Secular history tells us some stuff about this guy Pilate that sheds important light on how he responded to the voices and made his choices in his meetings with Jesus.

The Roman historian Tacitus (*Annals* XV. xliv. 4) called Pilate *Procurator*. An inscription discovered in the Herodian theatre in Caesarea, calls him ‘*prefect (Lat. praefectus) of Judea*’. The Gospels use the generic category ‘governor’ (*hēgemēn*).²

Pilate was a native of Seville, Spain. He joined the legions of Germanicus and fought in the wars on the Rhine. We know that he was a tribune in the 12th Roman Legion in the area of Syria with 6,000 men under his command. He was a tough commander and a tough administrator.

In 26 A.D. Pilate was appointed Governor and Prefect of Judea by Tiberius Caesar. That was a big step up in power for Pilate — but it was a massive blow to the political aspirations of a guy named Herod Antipas who ruled over the region of Galilee and was hoping Rome would also make him governor over Judea.

Back to Tiberius Caesar for a moment. Tiberius was such a self-indulgent, cruel man that the Romans hated him and celebrated when he died. Pilate was given the privilege of wearing a ring with the inscription, *Amicus Caesaris* — The friend of Caesar. Under the best of circumstances, it was one of the highest honors in the Empire. If you failed to live up to the honor the ring would be removed, and the person would be banished from the empire or forced to commit suicide. But when the reigning Caesar was Tiberius, you could be his friend one day and lose your head the next day.

So, there was this man, Pilate — he possessed great power and position in the Empire. But he hated Judea — he hated the Jews — he had zero concern for them or for their religion — all of which led to decisions that resulted in horrific political setbacks with the Jews that put his entire career in jeopardy.

So, as we meet Pilate in the dark hours of this morning he is walking on political eggshells — hating the Jews — yet fearful of provoking another violent riot that would jeopardize his standing as *Amicus Caesaris*. I’m pretty sure Pilate would have rather crucified Caiaphas than Jesus.

² Carson, D. A. (1991). *The Gospel according to John* (590). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans.

DON'T MISS THIS — Pilate's life was defined by his decisions concerning Jesus — and most importantly the consequences of his indecision concerning Jesus.

Life is filled with decisions. There are political decisions. As the voting results from presidential elections are reported there are the graphic banners running across screens that say “Decision 2021.” There are educational decisions. Purchase decisions (Buying a car: Make, Model, Color / Buying a house: School district, square footage, neighborhood). Relationship decisions — Is this **the** one? Each of those decisions has consequences — some small; some life changing (Our oldest daughter Deborah chose to go to Westmont; met the man who would be her husband — whose post grad education moved them to Manhattan and led to their jobs in Manhattan — a home in Brooklyn and two children. Big stuff!

But there is one decision that has eternal consequence. That is the decision that we make concerning Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit inspired the authors of all four accounts of the life and mission of Jesus (**Matthew, Mark, Luke and John**) to hold **this** man, Pontius Pilate, before us **because** his decision was made through the filters of a value system that could never supply the deepest need of his heart — a value system that has without exception failed everyone. He came down on the wrong side of the decision concerning Jesus — when all the while he tried everything in his power to make no decision.

the chief priests tied Jesus up, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate

Try picture this — Pilate would have been surrounded by guards in order to protect him against any assassination attempt. One of those guards or one of his personal staff had the unpleasant job of waking up Pilate *early in the morning* to let him know that there was *a bunch of Jews that needed to talk to with him — right now! No, you have to get up. The Sanhedrin is here; Caiaphas is here. They have some political prisoner with them.* Pilate didn't want to give them the time of day — but he knows that he can't afford any more news of strained diplomacy to get back to Rome.

He comes out into the judgment hall. There were steps that led up to a golden seat on a marble stand in the judgment hall. He ascends to the seat and says, *Bring them in.* The soldiers say

Oh..... they won't come in; they don't want to be defiled. You're a Gentile and this is their feast.

He hated the Jews before, now he really hates them.

There was an outside judgment seat. That judgment seat had a stairway leading up to it from the back. That seat of judgment was in front of a pavement called “Gabbatha” in the Hebrew. The accused would stand on the pavement where everybody could see him. On both sides of that seat were the letters **SPQR**, which stood for “The Senate and People of Rome” (Senatus Populusque Romanus). Those letters meant that Pilate judged with the authority of the Senate and people of Rome. Keep that in mind because Pilate declares Jesus innocent three times — yet the religious leaders of the Israel **refused the official verdict of Rome** and insisted Jesus be crucified — and Pilate caved to their demands.

Mark 15:2 (CSB) ²So Pilate asked him, “Are you the king of the Jews?”

These guys knew that Pilate would toss out any charges that were rooted in Jewish religious law — so they accused Jesus of three acts of insurrection against Rome. Mark records the third charge — Luke gives us the first two and the third.

Luke 23:2 (CSB) ²They began to accuse him, saying, “We found this man misleading our nation, opposing payment of taxes to Caesar, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king.”

They accused Jesus of stirring up civil unrest trouble. They accused Jesus of telling the people not pay taxes to Caesar. And lastly, they testified that Jesus was telling the nation that He is Christ, a King. They were hoping that this would give cause for Pilate to condemn Jesus on the grounds of insurrection.

They brought Jesus before Pilate to accuse Him of political crimes (sedition/treason) which were capital crimes punishable by death. Pilate hates the Jews. He doesn’t want to be involved in their situation. And yet only Rome has the right to execute — the “the right of the sword.” They let the territories that they conquered maintain a form of self-rule. But they strictly guarded the right to execute the death sentence because that was the sign of Rome’s ultimate authority over a people. In fact — forcing a man to carry his

cross through the city to the place of execution was pure propaganda. It was Rome's way of saying: We have the power to take your life. We even have the power to make you carry the instrument of your death to the place where we are going to take your life!

No doubt Pilate had heard much about him. He wouldn't have failed to miss the way Jesus entered into Jerusalem on the first day of that week with the crowds shouting *Hosanna, Hosanna, blessed is the King who comes*. Then there was a Cohort (600 Roman soldiers) involved in the arrest Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. The ranking officer would have had daily communications with Pilate. He had spies all through Judea and Galilee. In fact, **Mark** (and Matthew) tells us that Pilate knew exactly why the religious rulers had brought Jesus to him

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Mark 15:10 (CSB) ¹⁰For he knew it was because of envy that the chief priests had handed him over.

But there, in his headquarters — Jesus was standing there in front of Pilate; His face is bloodied and swollen from the beating he endured at the house of the high priest. Pilate had been around people of royalty and dignity. He had stood before Caesar. Now he is face to face with this Jewish carpenter from Nazareth, with His face battered, bloodied, and radically disfigured, His beard and hair matted with blood.

All four Gospel accounts tell us the first words of Pilate to Jesus: ***“Are you the King of the Jews?”***

DON'T MISS THIS — Pilate didn't ask, *“Are you the Messiah? Are you bringing salvation? Are you from heaven?”* Pilate has ZERO interest in such things. Pilate's question has everything to do with our brief biographical sketch of this man. The man whose identity is rooted in being *Amicus Caesaris* wants to know wants to know if Jesus is a threat to that identity! *“Are you the King of the Jews?” “Do you have a political agenda?” “Are you out to oppose Caesar and me?”*

All four Gospel accounts give us the answer of Jesus to this first question:

Mark 15:2 (CSB) ²So Pilate asked him, “Are you the king of the Jews?” He answered him, “You say so.”

Check this out! In **John 18:35** we read

Jesus answered, “Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?”

This is radical! Suddenly, Pilate's on trial! The beaten, disfigured and defenseless Jesus was holding court on Pilate; and by proxy you and me. So many people think that Jesus is on trial when someone shares the Gospel with them! REALITY — Jesus is judging them! THEY are the ones on trial!

We need to bear this in mind — Jesus loved Pilate. Jesus was after Pilate’s heart. Jesus was appealing to him —

As you stand here and look at Me, are you asking if I'm a king because you need to know for yourself?

Do you have a conviction in your heart about Me? Or are you just saying this because it's popular opinion, other people told it to you?

Why are you asking me this question?

Jesus wasn’t asking to obtain information. He was asking so Pilate could discover the truth about himself.

Pilate was used to being the guy on the judgment seat — wielding the authority of the Senate and People of Rome — looking down at the man on the pavement and interrogating the man on the pavement. He **wasn’t used to** being the man on the pavement being interrogated; especially if the man interrogating him was a Jew. But that was exactly what was happening. So, he snapped back —

John 18:35 Pilate answered, “Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done?”

Without a doubt, Pilate did not expect the answer that he was about to hear from this bloodied, disfigured man standing before him.

John 18:36 Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world.

In the course of His civil trials Jesus mentioned His Kingdom three times! Jesus is very clear about two things — ¹. He is a king with a kingdom; ². His kingdom is not of this world. It’s the second bit that messed up Pilate. If Jesus had proclaimed himself an earthly king, Pilate’s decision would have been easy; Jesus has to be executed as a threat to Caesar and to Rome. But politically, Jesus was guilty of nothing. The kingdom He spoke of was not even of this world. And THAT was Pilate’s dilemma. What was he supposed to do about THIS king? What was he supposed to do with THAT other kingdom that is not of this world. The very things that Pilate had to come to grips with are the same things that trouble men and women today.

Pilate’s concern was the source of this kingdom: where did Jesus derive His authority? Would the rule of Jesus challenge the geopolitical authority of Rome and Caesar? Bottom line is that Jesus is not just *a* king — Jesus **IS KING** — the only true King! Jesus does rule.

Jesus doesn’t derive His rule by permission of His creation. His rule proceeds from, and has its origin from, His inherent, transcendent eternal and divine nature. The rule of Jesus changes EVERYTHING! THAT troubles fallen man and culture to the core — at the core is the attitude of independence from the Creator God. Mark Sayers (Disappearing Church) puts it like this: *“Follow **your** passion, chart **your own** course, march to the beat of **your own** drummer, follow **your** dreams and find **yourself**. This is the litany of expressive individualism.”*³ Which, by the way, is shaping the way many professing Christians view and understand the Gospel.

Mark 15:4–7 (CSB) ⁴Pilate questioned him again, “Aren’t you going to answer? Look how many things they are accusing you of!” ⁵But Jesus still did not answer, and so Pilate was amazed. ⁶At the festival Pilate used to release for the people a prisoner whom they requested. ⁷There was one named Barabbas, who was in prison with rebels who had committed murder during the rebellion.

³ Mark Sayers. “Disappearing Church.”

Barabbas is mentioned in all four gospels — I believe — for very definite reasons. We don't know a whole lot about him. Bar-Abba means son of the father. There are those who say that his name was actually Jesus Bar-abbas.

Barabbas was a piece of work. John's Gospel tells us that he was a robber. The word means a violent thief. D.A. Carson says that in the eyes of Rome he was *a terrorist*.⁴

Mark 15:8–17 (CSB) ⁸The crowd came up and began to ask Pilate to do for them as was his custom. ⁹Pilate answered them, "Do you want me to release the king of the Jews for you?" ¹⁰For he knew it was because of envy that the chief priests had handed him over. ¹¹But the chief priests stirred up the crowd so that he would release Barabbas to them instead. ¹²Pilate asked them again, "Then what do you want me to do with the one you call the king of the Jews?" ¹³Again they shouted, "Crucify him!" ¹⁴Pilate said to them, "Why? What has he done wrong?" ¹⁵But they shouted all the more, "Crucify him!" ¹⁵Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them;

Barabbas was scheduled to be crucified. It was originally Barabbas who was going to be crucified on Golgotha between two other thieves.

THIS IS SO HUGE — Jesus died on the very cross Barabbas was going to die on. If anyone could say, "Jesus died for me," it was Barabbas. He knew that he was guilty. He knew that he was facing the death penalty. He knew that there was a piece of wood with *his* name on it waiting for him to carry it outside of the city where they would nail him to it. He knew that he was released and that Jesus died in his place — the innocent for the guilty.

QUOTE: Dr. Donald Grey Barnhouse — *Barabbas was the only man in the world who could say that Jesus Christ took his physical place. But I can say that Jesus Christ took my spiritual place. For it was I who deserved to die. It was I who deserved that the wrath of God should be poured upon me. I deserved the eternal punishment of the lake of fire. He was delivered up for my offenses. He was handed over to judgment because of my sins. This is why we speak of the*

⁴ Carson, D. A. (1991). *The Gospel according to John* (596). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans.

substitutionary atonement. Christ was my substitute. He was satisfying the debt of divine justice and holiness. That is why I say that Christianity can be expressed in the three phrases: I deserved Hell; Jesus took my Hell; there is nothing left for me but his Heaven.

QUOTE: Charles Spurgeon — *"If the Lord's bearing our sin for us is not the gospel, I have no gospel to preach."*

Mark 15:15b (CSB)and after having Jesus flogged, he handed him over to be crucified.

For time's sake this evening I won't go through the historical medical description of what this beating did to Jesus. If you've watched "The Passion of the Christ" you get a semblance of the brutality and trauma Jesus experienced. I'd also recommend that you read an article in the March 21, 1986 issue of the Journal of the American Medical Association Titled: *On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ.*⁵

We don't want to miss how brutal Pilate was willing to be in order to maintain the privileged status of wearing that ring that said *Friend of Caesar.*" He essentially said — *I'm not going to kill him all the way — "I'll half kill him. When this mob sees Jesus torn to shreds they will leave me alone and I can be rid of Jesus."*

HERE'S THE DEAL — You can't say, *I'll let him live in half of my life and I'll kill him in the other half of my life.* You can't say, *He can have the religious half of my life, but I'll kill him in my day in day out life.* You can't say *I'll give Jesus have half of what He wants.*

Mark 15:16-20 (CSB) ¹⁶The soldiers led him away into the palace (that is, the governor's residence) and called the whole company together.

After they scourged Jesus, he was taken to the Praetorium where Matthew's Gospel tells us that an entire cohort (600 men) of Roman soldiers gathered to mock Jesus.

⁵ On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ; JAMA, March 21, 1986 William D. Edwards, MD; Wesley J. Gabel, MDiv; Floyd E. Hosmer, MS, AMI

17They dressed him in a purple robe, twisted together a crown of thorns, and put it on him.

This is *after* He was scourged.

18And they began to salute him, “Hail, king of the Jews!” 19They were hitting him on the head with a stick and spitting on him. Getting down on their knees, they were paying him homage.

The tense of the verbs tell us that they *continued* to *beat Him on the head with a stick* — they *continued* to *spit upon Him bowing their knees in mock worship of Him*.

20After they had mocked him, they stripped him of the purple robe and put his clothes on him.

Then they brought Him back to Pilate one more time. Pilate stood Jesus in front of the crowd and said **(John 19:5) — ECCE HOMO — BEHOLD THE MAN!**

There has never been a man like Jesus. Jesus is the ultimate man — the perfect man.

Imagine Barabbas looking at Jesus — knowing that he should have been beaten, not Jesus.

They led him out to crucify him.

CLOSE

Pilate had to choose between Jesus and Caesar! Pilate had to choose between his place in the world or Jesus. Pilate had to choose between his power in the world or Jesus. Pilate had to choose between all that gave him meaning in life or Jesus. Pilate attempted the impossible. Pilate desperately attempted to have Jesus *and* his status as *Friend of Caesar* and *Roman governor*.

Pilate ultimately lost everything that he was seeking to hold on to.

HERE'S THE DEAL — You can NEVER keep anything that you have gained by denying Jesus. Within 10 years Pilate would lose his position as Prefect and Governor of Judea and be sent back to Rome. By the time he was sent back to Rome Tiberius had died. Caligula was Caesar. Caligula banished Pilate to the region known as Gaul where he ended up committing suicide. Here he had compromised everything in regard to Jesus in order to secure his identity as the *Friend of Caesar* — and his place in the Roman Empire. He chose *friend of Caesar* over *Friend of Jesus* — the King of kings and Lord of lords.

HERE'S THE DEAL — You'll have to kill [Jesus] or crown Jesus.

PLEASE DON'T MISS THIS — Jesus was not the one on trial here. The **voices** of the crowd and the **choices** of Pilate said nothing about Jesus. Their voices and their choices said everything about them.

You can choose to be Friend of Caesar or Friend of Jesus. That is *the* decision that everyone must make. This is *the* decision that determines forever for you. This isn't like the choice someone makes to flee an approaching hurricane. This is a decision to flee from eternal loss, eternal darkness — to the light of Jesus Christ. This is the decision to choose life over death.

By the way — Even the Jews made a choice between Caesar and Jesus. It is radical to think of this: In order to rid themselves of Jesus, the Jewish authorities made themselves loyal subjects of Caesar. A little more than four decades later Caesar would destroy Jerusalem and the Temple and drive the Jews from the land promised to Abraham and his descendants.
Friend of Caesar or friend of Jesus?

Why would you want Caesar over Jesus, who is Savior and King?