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The Roman Trial

John 18.28-40

Series: Signs of Life

July 31, 2022

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I. Introduction

- A. One of the signs of our times – proliferation of web sites designed to deal with one’s reputation
 - 1. Of course, it is related to the proliferation of the internet, of social media, and of the capacity for nearly anyone anywhere to publicly comment on a person, an organization, a business
 - 2. Reputation web sites track one’s reputation
 - a. And if a person doesn’t like their reputation, some of those web sites will seek to expunge the negative elements
 - b. And so sanitize, as it were, how you and I are viewed by the rest of the world
- B. The internet does have some value in this regard
 - 1. If you or I want to engage with a person or a company to provide some kind of goods or services, we might like to know what their reputation is
 - a. And for those of us with a modicum of computer skills, we would likely search the internet
 - b. To see, for instance, whether the contractor we’d like to hire, was, say, accused of mass murder in Alaska
 - 2. Of course, if one is accused of mass murder in Alaska, that doesn’t mean he or she actually committed mass murder in Alaska or anywhere else
 - a. But today it might be possible for the accused mass murderer to enlist the services of one of the reputation web sites
 - b. And hopefully the reputation web site would delete all the terrible reports of homicide associated with this person from Alaska
- C. By the way, I’m not intentionally picking on Alaska
 - 1. So if you’re from Alaska, don’t feel the need to search the internet to see if Hawkins has discovered something sinister in your background
 - a. I merely picked Alaska because it is as far away from here as I can think of at the moment
 - b. So hopefully I would offend the least number of people
- D. And also, by the way, if you’re wondering what my on-line reputation is – I have no idea
 - 1. I’m actually scared to find out
 - a. And if you actually searched and found out something about me, please don’t tell me about it
 - b. As far as my reputation is concerned, ignorance is bliss

- E. Yet I wonder how Pontius Pilate might fare in terms of his reputation in today's digital world?
 - 1. What would show up on his Reputation Defender web account?
 - 2. Actually, it might vary, depending on the area of the world
- F. Some of the elements one might discover in searching for Pontius Pilate would be rather mundane and ordinary
 - 1. Identifying him as the fifth governor of the Roman province of Judea
 - 2. And having served under Emperor Tiberius
- G. Other Christian web sites, particularly those in the west as Christianity expanded into Asia Minor and Europe, would paint a rather dismal, sinister picture of Pilate
 - 1. Recognizing the role he played in the crucifixion of Jesus
- H. On the other hand, Christian sites in north-east Africa, like Egypt and Ethiopia, might provide a glowing portrayal of Pontius Pilate
 - 1. Who, because of his conflicted and reluctant involvement in the crucifixion, is regarded, along with his wife, as a convert to Christianity
 - 2. Even as a saint and martyr
- I. And of course, we might also want to ask, how would Pilate himself wish to have himself portrayed in terms of reputation on the internet
 - 1. It is possible that he might want to embrace the positive portrayals in the Coptic and Ethiopian traditions as a Christian saint
 - 2. But it is also possible that the picture he'd want to present to the Roman world, and to Israel/Palestine in particular, is that of a ruthless autocrat
 - a. One you'd better not mess with
- J. So which Pilate is it?

II. **A Tale of Two Trials**

- A. As we continue in our series Signs of Life, our study of the Gospel of John, we find ourselves in Chapter 18
 - 1. Following Jesus' arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus is immediately remanded for trial
 - a. Two trials, actually
 - 2. The first is a **Jewish Trial**
 - a. First with an initial hearing before Annas, a former high priest and father-in-law of the current high priest, Caiaphas
 - b. And then before Caiaphas himself, and before the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin
 - c. Their intention is to convict Jesus of something serious enough to require the death penalty – a capital crime in the realm of Jewish law
 - 3. But then, the Jews have a problem
 - a. Under the Roman occupation, the Jews are not allowed to execute prisoners
 - b. Hence trial number two – or trial part deux as David Pavey might say
 - 4. That's when they drag him before Pontius Pilate

- a. And we have the **Roman Trial**
- b. Which we will consider today

III. **Pilate's Personae**

- A. But before we explore the elements of the trial, let's try to get a sense of the man who would preside over these proceedings
- B. Pilate was the 5th **Governor of Judea**, a relatively minor outpost in the Roman empire
 - 1. Judea was certainly not the plum appointment for Roman administrators
 - a. Indeed, for many, it was viewed as the armpit of the empire
 - 2. Pilate was appointed by the Emperor, who at the time was Tiberius
 - a. And was supervised by the legate of Syria, who for much of Pilate's tenure – which lasted a bit more than a decade – was absent from the region
 - b. Allowing Pilate to do pretty much what he wanted in the region
- C. Pilate was likely a reasonably **capable administrator**
 - 1. Much of his authority was military in nature
 - a. But in this province, the military was primarily a policing operation
 - 2. He was the longest running procurator of the region up to that time
 - a. Which means he likely satisfied Rome reasonably well
- D. At the same time, it was evident that his political skills left something to be desired
 - 1. You would think that the administrator of a predominately Jewish population would do what he could to avoid offending his constituents
 - 2. But he once had his soldiers display their ensigns with images of the emperor
 - a. While that may have made Rome happy, it was deeply objectionable to the Jews
 - b. Such a display, to the Jews, was idolatrous
 - 3. When the Jews objected, he threatened them with death
 - a. But the Jews didn't relent
 - b. Pilate then showed a weak spine even as he had exhibited arrogant bluster, and backed down and removed the images
 - 4. Pilate also once used the temple treasury to pay for an aqueduct
 - a. This time when the Jews complained, he had his soldiers beat them into submission
- E. The incident which got him removed from office occurred when a group of Samaritan rebels, under the direction of a false prophet, were ascending Mt. Gerazim to confiscate sacred artifacts which they believed Moses had hidden there
 - 1. Pilate's soldiers attacked them, killing many
 - 2. Pilate was recalled to Rome to account for the massacre by Tiberius
 - a. But on his way there, Tiberius died
 - 3. At that point, Pilate disappears from the annals of history, never to be heard from again

4. So his tenure as the governor of Judea was at best a mixed bag
- F. Personally, Pilate was a **proud man** – even though he seemed to be a big fish in a small Roman pond
 1. He tried to throw his weight around with Jesus, for instance
 2. **John 19:10** (ESV) — 10 So Pilate said to him, “You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?”
- G. Pilate’s wife – which, by the way, was connected to the imperial family and was likely a basis for his appointment – was a **superstitious** woman
 1. **Matthew 27.19** – has her recounting a dream which had her tied up in knots because of Jesus
 2. Pilate himself likely shared similar superstitions
 - a. He is reported as being spooked by the kinds of things he was hearing about Jesus from the Jews
- H. Bottom line, Pilate was a **self-seeker**
 1. Always trying to navigate the good graces of the emperor
 2. But also maintaining reasonable relationships with the Jewish leaders
 - a. Like Caiaphas, whom Pilate appointed as high priest
 - b. And who served through the entire tenure of Pilate
- I. Pilate was also a **conflicted man**, eager to avoid conflict if he could help it
 1. He tried as much as he could to get rid of this case
 - a. Which we’ll examine in a moment
 2. And so was **motivated by fear**
 - a. Fear of his superiors in Rome
 - b. Fear of insurrection among Jews
 - c. Fear of reprisals from Jewish leaders
 - d. And even fear of Jesus the more he knew about Him

IV. **Pilate’s Proceedings**

- A. **John 18:28** (ESV) — 28 Then they led Jesus from the house of Caiaphas to the governor’s headquarters. It was early morning. They themselves did not enter the governor’s headquarters, so that they would not be defiled, but could eat the Passover.
 1. The governor’s headquarters – known as **the praetorium**, was the fortress of Antonia (one of the stops on our Israel trip)
 - a. Located on the northwest corner of the temple area
 - b. Pilate had rooms there, in close proximity to his garrison
 2. It was early morning – immediately after the Sanhedrin had regathered to render their final verdict
 - a. And they were in a hurry to get the Roman trial under way
 - b. Because recall that everything had to be wrapped up, including the execution, by sundown
 3. Amazingly, the Jews took him to the praetorium, but did not enter
 - a. To enter the governor’s domain might subject them to ceremonial defilement

- b. And they themselves would be unable then to participate in the remaining elements of the feast of Passover as it was unfolding
 - 4. How remarkable that these religious leaders would be so careful to avoid ceremonial defilement!
 - a. All the while willing to arrange for the execution of an innocent man
 - b. Indeed, a man who was God-incarnate
 - c. The evil hypocrisy of these people is palpable
- B. **John 18:29** (ESV) — 29 So Pilate went outside to them and said, “What accusation do you bring against this man?”
- 1. This gives the impression that Pilate himself was doing his best to accommodate the religious scruples of the Jewish leaders
 - a. He leaves his residence to meet them
 - 2. And at this point in the trial, Pilate seeks to operate by the book
 - a. “What are the charges?”
 - b. That’s the first step in a Roman trial – to hear the charges brought by the accusers
 - c. So this is Pilate pretty much doing what the Roman procurator is supposed to do to uphold Roman law
- C. **John 18:30** (ESV) — 30 They answered him, “If this man were not doing evil, we would not have delivered him over to you.”
- 1. Here’s where things get a little testy
 - a. The Jewish leaders seem to presume upon their relationship with Pilate
 - b. They fully expect to bring Jesus to Pilate, take their word for it that Jesus is guilty of something capital, and declare his execution
 - c. It’s almost as if they are surprised by Pilate following protocol, by his asking for charges
- D. **John 18:31** (ESV) — 31 Pilate said to them, “Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law.” ...
- 1. Pilate pushes back
 - a. “You people can judge him yourselves. Why get me involved?”
 - b. “If you bring Him to me, we’re going to follow procedure”
- E. **John 18:31** (ESV) — 31 ... The Jews said to him, “It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death.”
- 1. Oh, now it becomes clear
 - a. “They want to do away with this guy Jesus”
 - b. “That’s why they’re in such a wad about this; they want me to do their dirty work for them”
 - 2. Under Roman law the Jews could try someone, and even pass sentence
 - a. But they couldn’t carry out the sentence in a capital crime
 - 3. And they knew that if Pilate would carry out the sentence, Jesus would be crucified
 - a. And that was exactly what they wanted to do with Jesus
 - b. They wanted Jesus lifted up as a man cursed

- c. “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree” (Galatians 3.13; Deuteronomy 21.23)
- F. John 18:32 (ESV) — 32 This was to fulfill the word that Jesus had spoken to show by what kind of death he was going to die.
 - 1. This was, of course, in accord with the plan of Jesus all along
 - a. The Jews, even in their wicked intentions, were playing right into the divine purpose
- G. John 18:33 (ESV) — 33 So Pilate entered his headquarters again and called Jesus and said to him, “Are you the King of the Jews?”
 - 1. Now the Roman trial continues
 - a. But John does not record the entire interchange between the Jewish leaders and Pilate
 - 2. Luke 23:2 (ESV) — 2 And they began to accuse him, saying, “We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ, a king.”
 - a. Once it becomes clear to the Jews that Pilate will not simply endorse their sinister intentions about Jesus
 - b. They find they must provide a legitimate charge
 - c. A charge that will capture Rome’s attention
 - d. A charge that will provoke a death sentence
 - 3. So three charges are presented
 - a. Jesus has misled the Jewish nation
 - b. Jesus has forbidden Jews to give tribute to Caesar
 - c. And Jesus has declared Himself to be the king
 - 4. Essentially, all the charges boil down to one – **Treason!**
 - a. And the Jews assert, not just that these are the charges, but that they have already done the investigation and have found the charges to be true
 - b. “We found this man...”
 - 5. Notice how the actual charges have changed from one trial to the next!
 - a. In the Jewish trial, the accusation was of blasphemy
 - b. Jesus claimed to be God!
 - c. But that won’t wash in the Roman court of Pontius Pilate
 - d. The Jews must make up another charge on the spur of the moment, once they realize that Pilate will not simply endorse their judgment
 - e. A charge they had not adjudicated earlier
 - f. In order to make the charge stick and get Jesus crucified
 - g. Another way in which the Jewish trial is unjust
 - 6. But Pilate can’t ignore these charges
 - a. He, after all, serves Rome
 - b. He cannot ignore a charge of treason
 - 7. So that’s when Pilate goes back inside of his headquarters and interrogates Jesus
 - 8. “Are you king of the Jews?”
 - 9. Now in the biblical text we can’t always tell what’s behind a question like

- that
- a. Maybe Pilate approaches the accused with utter seriousness
 - b. “Are you king of the Jews?”
 - c. Or maybe there is ridicule and sarcasm in his question
 - d. He goes inside, calls for Jesus; standing before him is this bedraggled human specimen
 - e. About whom the scriptures say, “he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him”
(Isaiah 53.2)
 - f. And laughing, Pilate says, “Are you king of the Jews?”
“Seriously?”
10. Whatever it is, the question requires an answer
- a. And that answer requires an explanation
- H. **John 18:34** (ESV) — 34 Jesus answered, “Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?”
1. If Pilate is asking the question from his own Roman secular perspective, it might be answered one way
 - a. But if Pilate is merely parroting the Jews’ narrative, Jesus might respond differently
 2. Is this an earthly kingdom question?
 - a. Or is this a heavenly kingdom question?
- I. **John 18:35** (ESV) — 35 Pilate answered, “Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done?”
1. Pilate disdains the Jewish perspective
 - a. Nevertheless he presses the question that must be answered
 - b. “What have you done?”
 2. It’s clear at this point from Pilate that this Jesus is no real threat to insurrection
 - a. And he was astute enough to know that the Jewish leaders were driven by envy
 - b. But was there anything at all that Jesus could be held accountable for?
 - c. “What have you done?”
 3. That gives Jesus the opportunity for an explanation
- J. **John 18:36–37** (ESV) — 36 Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world.” 37 Then Pilate said to him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.”
1. So Jesus does not answer the question “What have you done?”
 - a. He returns to the earlier, basic question
 - b. “Are you the king of the Jews?”
 2. Jesus begins by implying, at least, that He is a king – at least in a certain

sense

- a. “My kingdom is not of this world”
 3. And then He tells Pilate what His kingdom is not
 - a. “Not of this world
 4. And finally, He tells Pilate what His kingdom is – it is a spiritual kingdom
 - a. One in which His subjects listen to the truth
 - b. It is a kingdom of truth
 5. It is not a kingdom in which He will lead the Jews in an insurrection against Rome
 - a. The Jews are the opposition!
 - b. Pilate had pressed the question: “So you are a king?”
 - c. Jesus has affirmed him: “You say that I am a king”
 - d. And then Jesus goes on to define the nature of His kingship
 - e. “Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice?”
- K. **John 18:38** (ESV) — 38 Pilate said to him, “What is truth?” ...
1. Again, hard to tell what’s behind the question
 - a. Is it a cynical put-down? “What is truth?”
 - b. Or is Pilate confused about its meaning? “What is truth?”
 - c. Or is Pilate’s conscience wrestling with the profound implications of the very concept of truth? “What is truth?”
 2. The ironic thing that never seems to occur to Pilate is that, no matter how confused and conflicted he is about truth – “What is truth?”
 - a. Truth was standing in front of him, staring right into his eyes
- L. **John 18:38** (ESV) — 38 ... After he had said this, he went back outside to the Jews and told them, “I find no guilt in him.”
1. Whatever else might be said about this man, He is no threat to Rome
 2. At this point, the trial should be over
 - a. Pilate has conducted the trial by the book
 - b. He has received the charge – the first step in a Roman tribunal
 - c. He has interrogated the accused – the second step
 - d. And he has made his judgment, rendered his verdict – the third step in a Roman trial
 - e. The fourth step would be sentencing and the execution of the sentence
 - f. But since the verdict is “innocent” the fourth step is not necessary

V. **Pilate’s Predicaments**

- A. But the story continues – not all of it in John
1. **Luke 23:4–5** (ESV) — 4 Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, “I find no guilt in this man.” 5 But they were urgent, saying, “He stirs up the people, teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee even to this place.”
 2. The Jews wouldn’t take innocent for an answer; they were insistent
 - a. Something must be done about this man
 - b. “He stirs up the people, all the way from Galilee”

- B. So what's Pilate to do?
1. He's followed the Roman law
 - a. He's done his investigation
 - b. Jesus is no threat to Rome; he is no insurrectionist
 - c. But these Jews are a pain in the neck
 - d. "How can I get this resolved without a mob going berserk?"
- C. "Oh, it's too brilliant; what an great idea?"
1. "Did you say 'Galilee'?"
- D. **Luke 23:6-7** (ESV) — 6 When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean. 7 And when he learned that he belonged to Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him over to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time.
1. "I'll send him to Herod; let him deal with this Jesus"
 2. So off to Herod they go – evidently staying nearby
 - a. And Herod always wanted to meet this famous rabbi
- E. **Luke 23:8-9** (ESV) — 8 When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had long desired to see him, because he had heard about him, and he was hoping to see some sign done by him. 9 So he questioned him at some length, but he made no answer.
1. Jesus made no answer – because Herod had no jurisdiction in the Roman trial
 - a. Jesus was playing it by the book as well
- F. **Luke 23:10-11** (ESV) — 10 The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him. 11 And Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him. Then, arraying him in splendid clothing, he sent him back to Pilate.
1. In spite of all the accusations, not even Herod was persuaded that Jesus was guilty
 2. But Herod knew when to take advantage of the political moment
 - a. He sent Jesus back mocked, treated with contempt, arraying Jesus with royal vestments
 - b. And surely when Pilate saw Jesus so arrayed, he was amused
 3. And the text says from that time on Pilate and Herod became friends
- G. **Luke 23:13-16** (ESV) — 13 Pilate then called together the chief priests and the rulers and the people, 14 and said to them, "You brought me this man as one who was misleading the people. And after examining him before you, behold, I did not find this man guilty of any of your charges against him. 15 Neither did Herod, for he sent him back to us. Look, nothing deserving death has been done by him. 16 I will therefore punish and release him."
1. There; done
 - a. Even got the advice of someone who understands Judaism
 - b. He agrees
 - c. Whatever this Jesus has done to stir the pot – we'll punish Him for it
 2. Court adjourned
 3. But not so fast!

- a. The Jews wouldn't have it!
 - b. They demanded the death of Jesus
 - c. Now what was Pilate to do?
- 4. Ah! Another brilliant idea
- H. **John 18:38–39** (ESV) — 38 Pilate said to him, “What is truth?” After he had said this, he went back outside to the Jews and told them, “I find no guilt in him. 39 But you have a custom that I should release one man for you at the Passover. So do you want me to release to you the King of the Jews?”
 - 1. “Here’s my way out”
 - a. “Jesus is an innocent man; I can’t condemn Him”
 - b. “So they can say He’s guilty, but we can still release Him”
 - c. A stroke of genius
- I. **John 18:40** (ESV) — 40 They cried out again, “Not this man, but Barabbas!” Now Barabbas was a robber.
- J. **Luke 23:20–25** (ESV) — 20 Pilate addressed them once more, desiring to release Jesus, 21 but they kept shouting, “Crucify, crucify him!” 22 A third time he said to them, “Why? What evil has he done? I have found in him no guilt deserving death. I will therefore punish and release him.” 23 But they were urgent, demanding with loud cries that he should be crucified. And their voices prevailed. 24 So Pilate decided that their demand should be granted. 25 He released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, for whom they asked, but he delivered Jesus over to their will.
- K. Pilate had tried six ways to Sunday
 - 1. Tried Jesus by the book
 - 2. Tried to pass Jesus off to Herod
 - 3. Tried to appeal to the Passover tradition to release a prisoner
 - 4. But nothing has worked
 - a. He released the insurrectionist Barabbas – who really was guilty
 - b. And instead remanded Jesus to the executioners after all – the One who was truly innocent

VI. **The Cosmic Chess Match**

- A. Of course all of this was nothing if not a cosmic chess match
 - 1. **Acts 2:23** (ESV) — 23 this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.
- B. This is the essence of the **Doctrine of the Providence of God**
 - 1. God sovereignly superintends and orchestrates the events of history
 - a. Even while using the evil intentions and actions of human beings
 - b. All of whom are acting freely
 - c. All of whom are responsible for their actions
- C. Pilate thinks he has the game under control
 - 1. The Jews press their case beyond any reasonable limits
 - a. Back and forth they go
 - 2. Bishop to Knight 4 – check

- a. Queen to King 2 to block
- 3. Move after move they make
- D. Until God says “Checkmate”

VII. **Lessons from Legal**

A. **God always wins cosmic chess matches**

- 1. Maybe that’s what going on in your life right now
- 2. God is orchestrating the events of your life, and you don’t even realize it
 - a. You’re moving around on the chess board of life the best you can
 - b. Trying to manipulate your circumstances, trying to gain the advantage
 - c. But you never can seem to get to the end game
 - d. Never can see the final winning combination
- 3. Ultimately, God will win that match
- 4. The best way out – the only way out – is to resign
 - a. Resign the game your playing
- 5. And when you do, all of a sudden, you’ll see God’s glorious strategy
 - a. You’ll understand the beauty of the Divine design
 - b. You’ll see the tapestry from the right side, in all of its glory
- 6. When will you submit to the Grand Master?

B. **Pilate’s lesson**

- 1. Pilate tried the best he could to be **neutral** about Jesus
 - a. He did everything he could to fulfill his obligations as the Roman governor
 - b. He used whatever brilliant ideas came into his mind to get an innocent man released
 - c. And he thought he could treat Jesus as just some ordinary Jewish man
 - d. That he wouldn’t have to commit himself one way or another
- 2. But ultimately, no amount of human ingenuity
 - a. No amount of political maneuvering
 - b. No amount legal protocols
 - c. No passing the buck on to somebody else
- 3. Sooner or later, you will have to decide about Jesus
 - a. You’re either for Him or against Him
 - b. There is no fence sitting
 - c. Pilate discovered just how uncomfortable it is to sit on a fence