

## **“Behold Your King!” (John 18–19)**

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One of the things we do in this church is emphasize the importance of reading and re-reading the Bible. There are many reasons for doing this. First and foremost, the Bible is God’s word to us. If we want to know God and hear him speak, we need to read the Bible. Second, the Bible is a long anthology of books, so to understand it truly, we need to keep reading. Third, we won’t understand all of it the first, second, or even third time we read it. So, we need to keep reading to get more out of it, and even to remember the things we have forgotten.

This week, I read the Gospel of John once again. Each of the four Gospels gives quite a bit of information about what many people call “Holy Week,” including the death of Jesus. But each Gospel has different details. Each Gospel writers focuses on slightly different themes. For example, Luke’s Gospel makes it quite clear that Jesus was innocent. This week, as I read John, I was surprised to see how often he points out the political maneuverings behind Jesus’ death. Much of what we read concerns in John’s account concerns authority, particularly who had authority or who wanted to retain authority.

Each one of us must deal with the issue of authority. Part of human nature is that we don’t like authorities over us. Many of us want more power and control. We want to be in charge. As that 1980s pop song says, “Everybody wants to rule the world.”

In Jesus’ death, we see the issue of authority come up many times. The Jewish religious leaders wanted to kill Jesus because he threatened them. They were in control of the Jewish religion. They controlled the temple, the place where God met with his people and where God was worshiped, and they controlled how people interpreted the Hebrew Bible. Jesus threatened their power and control.

Jesus was also gathering a large following, and the Jewish leaders were worried about how the Roman Empire would respond. The land of Israel at this time was under the control of the Roman Empire and had been for almost a hundred years. The Roman Empire was the superpower of the world. They allowed the Jews some leeway with respect to their religion and the government of the nation, but the Romans were still in charge. And you simply didn’t mess with Rome.

The Romans thought that they were the most powerful people on earth, and that their emperor, the Caesar, was the most powerful man on earth. And they were intent on letting everyone know this, even if it required violence.

Behind all this human activity, supernatural powers were at work. Satan, the devil, wanted to assert his authority. Or, perhaps to put it more accurately, he wanted to wrest control away from God.

Yet God is the ultimate and true authority, the true King. And in the midst of all the drama that we'll read about, the world's most powerful man, the King of kings, was arrested, beaten, and killed. Jesus of Nazareth wasn't just a man. He is the God-man, the Son of God who became a human being to fulfill God's plans for humanity and to rescue his people from the condemnation that they deserve for their rebellion against God. Though people doubted that Jesus is the true King, and though he was mocked and put to death, Jesus was and is always in control. He is the true authority. And yet he laid down his life to save people from sin, death, and hell.

Tonight, we're going to read portions of John 18 and 19, and we'll see how this issue of authority is addressed.

We'll start by reading John 18:1–3:

<sup>1</sup> When Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his disciples across the brook Kidron, where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered.

<sup>2</sup> Now Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place, for Jesus often met there with his disciples. <sup>3</sup> So Judas, having procured a band of soldiers and some officers from the chief priests and the Pharisees, went there with lanterns and torches and weapons.<sup>1</sup>

When we read this, we should think about why Jesus was betrayed and why a group of soldiers and some religious officials were coming to arrest him. One reason is that these Jewish leaders thought Jesus had committed blasphemy by “making himself equal with God” (John 5:18). Twice they picked up stones, ready to kill Jesus because of statements that he made that demonstrated that he is God (John 8:58–59; 10:30–33). They obviously thought Jesus was wrong.

But Jesus wasn't wrong. He clearly claimed to be God and, indeed, he is. Look at verses 4–6:

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

<sup>4</sup> Then Jesus, knowing all that would happen to him, came forward and said to them, “Whom do you seek?” <sup>5</sup> They answered him, “Jesus of Nazareth.” Jesus said to them, “I am he.” Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them.

<sup>6</sup> When Jesus said to them, “I am he,” they drew back and fell to the ground.

First, we see that Jesus already knew what would happen to him. How could he know that unless he had divine knowledge? Second, when they tell him who they are looking for, he says, “I am he.” Or, more literally, he says, “I am.” That may not seem important, but in the Old Testament, God is known as “I AM” (Exod. 3:14). The same Greek language that John uses here was used in the translation of various “I am” sayings in Isaiah (41:4; 43:10; 45:18–19; 46:4). When Jesus simply says, “I am,” it would have struck the Jewish officials. And when Jesus says that he is God, they fall back to the ground. This reaction must have been because they were shocked that Jesus would make this confession in the face of opposition. Or it might have been simply that some small part of Jesus’ divine power was on display, enough to physically overwhelm them. Even these few verses show that Jesus is God.

Another reason they wanted to arrest Jesus and have him killed was because he was threatening whatever authority these Jewish leaders had. This is what we read in John 11:45–53:

<sup>45</sup> Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him, <sup>46</sup> but some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. <sup>47</sup> So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council and said, “What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. <sup>48</sup> If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.” <sup>49</sup> But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, “You know nothing at all. <sup>50</sup> Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish.” <sup>51</sup> He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, <sup>52</sup> and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad. <sup>53</sup> So from that day on they made plans to put him to death.

If Jesus had developed a large enough following, it would threaten the Roman Empire. After all, the confession that Christians would later make is that Jesus is Lord. But in the Roman Empire, the Emperor was known as Lord. That was certainly true when John wrote his Gospel. The Emperor wouldn’t put up with a man who was making himself out to be the true Lord, King, and God.

For that reason, the high priest, Caiaphas, said it was better that one man should die instead of the whole nation suffering. But as John tells us, he spoke better than he knew. It’s true

that it's better for one man to die than a whole group of people. And that's why Jesus died, to pay for the sins of everyone who would ever turn to him in faith. If that didn't happen, we would all have to pay for our own sins, and that would mean condemnation and hell for all of us.

There is yet another reason why Jesus was arrested. That is because one of his own disciples, Judas Iscariot, betrayed him to the Jewish leaders. They wanted to kill Jesus, but they knew they would have to arrest him away from the crowds. Otherwise, there would be a riot in Jerusalem, and the Roman Empire would discipline the Jews in very harsh ways. So, they found a way to arrest Jesus away from the heart of the city, in the darkness of night. Judas betrayed Jesus for money (Matt. 26:14–16), but he also betrayed Jesus because he was influenced by Satan, the devil, the very embodiment of evil. Earlier, John said that “the devil had . . . put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray” Jesus (John 13:2). We're even told that “Satan entered into him” (John 13:27).

Satan is an evil being opposed to God. Earlier in John, Jesus said of Satan, “He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44). Satan must know that he cannot overturn God's authority, but he tries. He is opposed to God and God's people. He doesn't submit to God's authority. He knows God exists, but he doesn't love or trust him.

So, there are many reasons why Jesus was arrested, and why he would die. But, ultimately, it was the will of God. Look at verses 7–11 (still in chapter 18):

<sup>7</sup> So he asked them again, “Whom do you seek?” And they said, “Jesus of Nazareth.” <sup>8</sup> Jesus answered, “I told you that I am he. So, if you seek me, let these men go.” <sup>9</sup> This was to fulfill the word that he had spoken: “Of those whom you gave me I have lost not one.” <sup>10</sup> Then Simon Peter, having a sword, drew it and struck the high priest's servant and cut off his right ear. (The servant's name was Malchus.) <sup>11</sup> So Jesus said to Peter, “Put your sword into its sheath; shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me?”

Peter, the boldest of the disciples, tried to keep Jesus from being arrested. He attacked the high priest's servant, cutting off his right ear. But Jesus (who healed the ear—Luke 22:51) told Peter not to fight. He said that he had to “drink the cup that the Father had given” him. The one true living God is one Being in three Persons. He is Father, Son, and Spirit. Jesus is the perfectly obedient Son of God who came to do the Father's will. It was the Father's will for Jesus to “drink the cup.” The “cup” is a metaphor for God's wrath (Job 21:20; Ia. 51:17; Jer. 25:15). It is

what sinners deserve to drink, because they have rejected their Creator, the one who made them for his own purposes. And Jesus came willingly to do what the Father commanded him to do. Jesus wasn't arrested and killed against his own will. No, he laid down his life willingly (John 10:11, 14–18).

Let's move ahead in the story. I'm going to skip a bit of John 18. There are some important details that we can't get into tonight. I'm going to start reading again in verse 28. Jesus has already been brought before the former high priest, Annas, and to the current high priest, Caiaphas. Now, they bring him to the Roman governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate. They bring him to Pilate because they want Jesus to die, and they didn't have the power to perform capital punishment. Let's read verses 28–32:

<sup>28</sup> 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. <sup>29</sup> So Pilate went outside to them and said, "What accusation do you bring against this man?" <sup>30</sup> They answered him, "If this man were not doing evil, we would not have delivered him over to you." <sup>31</sup> Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law." The Jews said to him, "It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death." <sup>32</sup> This was to fulfill the word that Jesus had spoken to show by what kind of death he was going to die.

When the Jewish leaders bring Jesus to Pilate, they don't go into his headquarters, because he was a Gentile, a non-Jew. According to Jewish tradition, this would have made them unclean, and they were about to take part in the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which began with Passover. So, Pilate comes outside to them. What's interesting is that they are greatly concerned about not being unclean, yet they want Jesus, the God-man, the true Passover lamb, to die. Though they didn't think Jesus could make them clean, ironically, they put him to death, so that anyone who turns to Jesus in faith could be made clean.

Pilate wants to know the charges against Jesus. Pilate seems to want nothing to do with this matter. Perhaps he was relishing his power, making these Jewish men grovel before him. At any rate, Jesus had predicted that he would be handed over to "Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified" (Matt. 20:18–19).

Pilate then questions Jesus inside his headquarters. He wants to know who Jesus thinks he is. Let's read verses 33–38:

<sup>33</sup> So Pilate entered his headquarters again and called Jesus and said to him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” <sup>34</sup> Jesus answered, “Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?” <sup>35</sup> Pilate answered, “Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done?” <sup>36</sup> 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.” <sup>37</sup> 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.” <sup>38</sup> Pilate said to him, “What is truth?”

Pilate must have heard that some people regarded Jesus as the King of the Jews. Indeed, Jesus is the Messiah, the promised, anointed descendant of King David, the one who would reign forever. Pilate doesn’t care about Jewish Scriptures and prophecies being fulfilled. He just wants to know if Jesus is a threat to the Roman Empire. So, he asks Jesus, “What have you done?”

Jesus tells him that he has a kingdom, but that his kingdom isn’t like Caesar’s. The Roman Empire was established through violence. It kept provinces like Judea under control through the threat of violence. But Jesus’ kingdom is “not of this world.” It’s God’s kingdom. God’s kingdom doesn’t come through force. It comes through a suffering Messiah, and it grows when people tell others about Jesus, and when people turn to Jesus in faith, not with a sword to their throat or a gun to their head.

Jesus also says that he came “to bear witness to the truth.” Anyone who wants to be right with God listens to Jesus. But Pilate doesn’t care about that. When he says, “What is truth?” he isn’t asking a philosophical question. He’s saying, “In a time like this, I don’t care about truth. I just want to make sure you’re not a threat to Rome. I want to make sure that there are no riots in Jerusalem.” If Pilate failed to keep Judea under control, he wouldn’t just lose his job—he could lose his life!

Pilate obviously didn’t think Jesus was a threat, so he brought him back outside and offered to release him. Let’s read the second half of verse 38 to the end of the chapter:

After he had said this, he went back outside to the Jews and told them, “I find no guilt in him. <sup>39</sup> 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?” <sup>40</sup> They cried out again, “Not this man, but Barabbas!” Now Barabbas was a robber.

Pilate had a tradition of releasing a criminal at Passover. Since he didn’t think Jesus was guilty, he was willingly to let him go. But he offered the people a choice. They could let Jesus go

or a man named Barabbas. The translation says he was a “robber,” but he was really an insurrectionist, a revolutionary, a rebel against Rome who committed murder (Mark 15:7; Luke 23:18–19). These Jews were so against Jesus that they would rather a murderer go free than Jesus. They didn’t know this, of course, but this is really a picture of the gospel. Jesus takes the condemnation that sinners deserve. He is arrested and killed so that criminals can go free.

Pilate is now in quite a predicament. The crowd wants Jesus to die, but he doesn’t think Jesus is a threat. He does have Jesus tortured and some soldiers mock him. Let’s read verses 1–11:

<sup>1</sup> Then Pilate took Jesus and flogged him. <sup>2</sup> And the soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head and arrayed him in a purple robe. <sup>3</sup> They came up to him, saying, “Hail, King of the Jews!” and struck him with their hands. <sup>4</sup> Pilate went out again and said to them, “See, I am bringing him out to you that you may know that I find no guilt in him.” <sup>5</sup> So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, “Behold the man!” <sup>6</sup> When the chief priests and the officers saw him, they cried out, “Crucify him, crucify him!” Pilate said to them, “Take him yourselves and crucify him, for I find no guilt in him.” <sup>7</sup> The Jews answered him, “We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has made himself the Son of God.” <sup>8</sup> When Pilate heard this statement, he was even more afraid. <sup>9</sup> He entered his headquarters again and said to Jesus, “Where are you from?” But Jesus gave him no answer. <sup>10</sup> 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?” <sup>11</sup> Jesus answered him, “You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin.”

The Roman soldiers made a crown of thorns, which was probably made from a date palm. These aren’t the thorns like we have around here. They would be longer, firmer, and sharper, and would cause Jesus to bleed. They also put a purple robe on Jesus. Purple was associated with royalty, as was a crown. They are mocking Jesus. Pilate brings Jesus out to the crowd, again to say that he is not guilty. And he says, “Behold the man!” He’s probably saying, “Look at this man. He’s been whipped and beaten and he’s bleeding. Does he look like a threat?” But the people don’t care. They say, “Crucify him!” Pilate didn’t want to do this, so he tells them to do it themselves. It’s then that they say that Jesus “has made himself to be the Son of God.”

At this, Pilate gets more afraid. Perhaps he wonders if Jesus could possibly be divine. So, he speaks to Jesus in private again, and asks Jesus where he comes from. When Jesus doesn’t answer, Pilate reminds Jesus that he has authority to release him or to crucify him. At this, Jesus says that the only reason he has authority is because God gave it to him. None of this was

happening apart from God's will. Jesus wasn't a victim of circumstances. He was here because it was part of God's plan. Pilate was just a tool. But Judas and the Jewish leaders should have known better. They were guilty for rejecting the Messiah.

Pilate still wanted to release Jesus. But the crowds say something that frightens him.

Let's read verses 12–16:

<sup>12</sup> From then on Pilate sought to release him, but the Jews cried out, "If you release this man, you are not Caesar's friend. Everyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar." <sup>13</sup> So when Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judgment seat at a place called The Stone Pavement, and in Aramaic Gabbatha. <sup>14</sup> Now it was the day of Preparation of the Passover. It was about the sixth hour. He said to the Jews, "Behold your King!" <sup>15</sup> They cried out, "Away with him, away with him, crucify him!" Pilate said to them, "Shall I crucify your King?" The chief priests answered, "We have no king but Caesar." <sup>16</sup> So he delivered him over to them to be crucified.

Notice that it's only when the Jewish leaders say, "If you release this man, you are not Caesar's friend," that Pilate proceeds with the crucifixion. He knew that if word got back to Rome that he wasn't with Caesar, he would be regarded as an enemy, and he would be killed. So, he brings Jesus to be judged, which is yet one more bit of irony in this story. Jesus, who will one day come in glory to judge the living and the dead, is himself judged.

When Pilate presents Jesus to the crowd, he calls him their King. "Behold your King!" In the end, the chief priests, the leaders of the Jews, say, "We have no king but Caesar." It's hard to exaggerate how shocking this is. They should have known their true King is God. And when God was in the flesh before him, they reject him. They sell out their beliefs in order to get rid of Jesus. They are willing to compromise their allegiance to God in order to pledge allegiance to the Emperor, all so they can retain whatever little power and political freedom they had. To keep their own sphere of authority and power, they reject God's authority and come under Caesar's authority. The irony is that though they have accused Jesus of blasphemy, they are the ones who are guilty of blaspheming.

So, Jesus is crucified. But even then, the issue of authority, of who is really King, comes to the foreground. Let's read the paragraph that begins with the very end of verse 16:

So they took Jesus, <sup>17</sup> and he went out, bearing his own cross, to the place called The Place of a Skull, which in Aramaic is called Golgotha. <sup>18</sup> There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, and Jesus between them. <sup>19</sup> Pilate also wrote an inscription and put it on the cross. It read, "Jesus of



Nazareth, the King of the Jews.”<sup>20</sup> Many of the Jews read this inscription, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and it was written in Aramaic, in Latin, and in Greek.<sup>21</sup> So the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, “Do not write, ‘The King of the Jews,’ but rather, ‘This man said, I am King of the Jews.’”<sup>22</sup> Pilate answered, “What I have written I have written.”

Why did Pilate have “King of the Jews” written on the inscription? When someone was crucified, the charge against that person was written on a placard and it was fastened to the cross. From Pilate’s perspective, the only thing that Jesus could possibly have been guilty of was threatening Caesar. King Jesus is always a threat to dictators, because they know that Jesus’ followers will pledge their allegiance to him, not to the Caesar, the Supreme Leader, the King, or any other leader.

But the Jewish people wanted the placard to say, “This man said, ‘I am King of the Jews.’” In other words, they didn’t want anyone to think Jesus was indeed their King. But Pilate wouldn’t change his mind. He was probably taunting the Jews, as he had earlier by saying, “Behold your king!” In his commentary on this Gospel, Don Carson writes that Pilate was “mocking their convenient allegiance to Caesar by insisting that Jesus is their king, and snickering at their powerless status before the might of Rome by declaring this wretched victim their king.”<sup>2</sup>

In the end, Pilate wrote more than he knew. Jesus is the King of Israel, the King of all God’s people. He is the true King of the world, though everyone doesn’t realize it yet.

There’s a great irony in all of this. Judas wanted money, so he sold Jesus out. But he is now poor for eternity, because he rejected Jesus. But all of God’s people, no matter their economic status now, will be rich for eternity. The Jewish leaders wanted to retain their power and control, whatever amount they could have under Roman rule, but those who rejected Jesus and never repented have lost power and authority forever. Yet however powerless God’s people seem to be right now, they will rule as a kingdom of priests forever. Caesar and the Roman Empire thought that they were in charge of the world. But the Roman Empire is long gone, and Jesus is much more famous than Tiberius, the Caesar who reigned when Jesus died. Pilate had Jesus killed to save his own hide, yet in rejecting Jesus, he missed out on eternal life. All

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<sup>2</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 611.

Christians, regardless of whether they are healthy now, or whether they will even die for their faith, will be raised from the dead and will live forever.

In the end, the real reason that Jesus died didn't have to do with politics and people grabbing after power. The real reason Jesus died was to save people. He came to pay the penalty that we deserve for our sin. He endured hell on the cross so that we don't have to be cast into hell. All we need to do is turn to him now in faith, trusting that his work on the cross paid for all our sins and that his perfectly righteous life is credited to us, so that we can be right in God's eyes. We cannot add to Jesus' work. It is already finished. We just need to turn away from our rebellion against God and embrace Jesus.

Let's finish by reading John 19:28–30:

<sup>28</sup> After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the Scripture), "I thirst."<sup>29</sup> A jar full of sour wine stood there, so they put a sponge full of the sour wine on a hyssop branch and held it to his mouth.<sup>30</sup> When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, "It is finished," and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

Jesus, the world's true King, did not come to set up a political kingdom. He didn't come to take the world by force. That was the way of Rome. Instead, he came to die for sinners like you and me. God came to us because we cannot find our way to God. The only innocent man who ever lived was arrested so we could go free. He laid down his life so that we can live. Let us be thankful, let us trust in Jesus, and let us act as if he really is our King.