

## **“I Find No Guilt in This Man” (Luke 23:1–25)**

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This is a very strange time in our lives. And it can feel like a very heavy time. It’s a time of uncertainty, and it can be a time of fear. We have already heard the reports of high death counts in China and Italy, and it’s natural to wonder how many might die of the coronavirus (COVID-19) in America. As we respond to this pandemic by shutting down public gatherings, we know that life won’t be the same for us for some time, and that can lead to anxiety and panic. At times like these, we long for hope. We may wonder what all of this has to do with God. We may wonder what God is doing, and why there are things such as deadly viruses in the world.

Those kinds of responses and questions are natural. They come with living in an uncertain world. They come with living in a world that is marred by diseases, natural disasters, and death. So, where is hope? What does this have to do with God? What is God doing? I’m not sure that I can answer all those questions completely this morning, but I think we can get partial answers as we turn to another heavy time in history. In fact, I would argue that this was the heaviest time of all history. This is the time when God himself was subject to the powers of darkness.

This morning, we’re continuing our study of the Gospel of Luke. If you haven’t been with us before, you should know that we’re a church that is committed to studying the whole Bible. That means that we go through entire books of the Bible, looking at one passage each week. If you want to learn more about the rest of this book of the Bible, you can visit [wbcommunity.org/luke](http://wbcommunity.org/luke). This morning, we’re going to look at Luke 23:1–25. If you have a Bible at home, I’m sure you can find that passage rather quickly. If you’re on your computer, you can pull it up by typing into your web browser “[esv.org/luke+23](http://esv.org/luke+23).”

To give us some context: Jesus has been arrested by the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. They have charged him with blasphemy, for claiming to believe that he is the Messiah, or the Christ, and the Son of God. Messiah or Christ mean “anointed one.” In the Old Testament, God promised that there would be a king of Israel who would reign forever and who would defeat Israel’s enemies. He would bring about justice and peace. He would be a perfect king. Now, Jesus is that perfect King, and he is the Son of God. But the Jewish leaders didn’t believe that.

The Jewish leaders wanted to kill Jesus, but they didn't have the authority to put someone to death. They were living under the rule of the Roman Empire, the world's superpower. If they wanted to put Jesus to death, they had to present him to the occupying forces. So, they bring him to Pontius Pilate, the prefect of Judea. The prefect was in charge of keeping the peace. He had the power to enforce capital punishment. That's why Jesus is now presented to Pilate.

Let's begin by reading Luke 23:1–25:

<sup>1</sup> Then the whole company of them arose and brought him before Pilate. <sup>2</sup> 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." <sup>3</sup> And Pilate asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" And he answered him, "You have said so." <sup>4</sup> Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, "I find no guilt in this man." <sup>5</sup> But they were urgent, saying, "He stirs up the people, teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee even to this place."

When the Jewish leaders bring Jesus before Pontius Pilate, they make three accusations. They say that Jesus is misleading the nation, which means that his teaching is somehow dangerous and deceptive. Or so they think. But the fact is that they were misleading the nation, whereas Jesus only taught what was true. They also claim that he has forbidden giving money to Caesar, the Roman Emperor. But that is false. Jesus said it is right to pay taxes to Caesar (Luke 20:25). Then, they say that Jesus has claimed to be the Christ, a king. That's true. Jesus is the Christ, and he is the King of kings. But not in the way that some people might think. He didn't come to overthrow the Roman Empire. He didn't come to command an army and lead a revolution. He was no political threat to the Roman Empire. But the Jewish leaders hope that by presenting Jesus to Pilate in this way, that would be enough to get him executed.

Interestingly, similar charges are brought against Christians in the book of Acts. Paul was a great missionary and teacher, who traveled through the Roman Empire after Jesus' death and resurrection, telling people about Jesus. When he was in the city of Thessalonica, in modern-day Greece, with his associate Silas, they taught about Jesus in the local synagogue. Some people didn't like what they heard about Jesus, and they tried to get these Christians in trouble with the local authorities. They couldn't find Paul and Silas, but they brought a man named Jason before the city's authorities and said, "These men who have turned the world upside down . . . are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus" (Acts 17:6–7). Jesus has always been viewed as a threat by some people. That's still true today. It's true in totalitarian countries, like North Korea. It's true of Communist countries like China. But it's also

true of individuals. A lot of people reject Jesus because they realize that Jesus is an authority. You can't really be a Christian without coming under the authority of Jesus. People realize that if you become a Christian, your life must change in some way. There are some things that you may have to give up. And they don't like that. Some people just don't like being told what to do. They want to be their own authorities.

Now, you can remain your own authority in this life and reject Jesus. But you can't be your own king and have Jesus. If you reject Jesus, you reject your only path to God and to eternal life in a new creation where there are not more diseases and deadly viruses, where there is no more death. If you come under Jesus' authority, you must admit your own failures and limitations, and you must start to obey King Jesus. You can't have it both ways.

When Pilate is told about these charges, he asks Jesus if he is king of the Jews. Jesus only says, "You have said so." These are the only words that Jesus says in this whole passage. Jesus doesn't defend himself. He doesn't make any qualifications to the charges made against him. This must have puzzled Pilate. He must have looked at Jesus, who was already beaten and must have looked rather weak, and not seen a threat to the Roman Empire. So, he says, "I find no guilt in this man." Luke makes it abundantly clear that Jesus is innocent and has done nothing deserving of death.

But the crowds aren't happy with that. They try to convince Pilate that Jesus is stirring up the people, and not just in Jerusalem. He has taught throughout the regions of Judea and Galilee. When Pilate hears this, he wonders whether Jesus was a Galilean. Galilee was a separate region, to the north, and it was under the jurisdiction of Herod Antipas, a son of Herod the Great, who was the Jewish ruler when Jesus was born. These Jewish rulers were under the authority of the Roman Empire, but Rome allowed them to exercise some power. So, Pilate sends Jesus to Herod Antipas. Perhaps Pilate was trying to pass the buck. He saw an innocent man and an angry crowd, and he didn't want to take responsibility for whatever happened to Jesus.

At any rate, Pilate sends Jesus to Herod. Let's read what happens next. Here are verses 6–12:

<sup>6</sup> When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean. <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> So he questioned him at some length, but he made no answer. <sup>10</sup> The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently

accusing him. <sup>11</sup> And Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him. Then, arraying him in splendid clothing, he sent him back to Pilate. <sup>12</sup> And Herod and Pilate became friends with each other that very day, for before this they had been at enmity with each other.

Herod Antipas was the Jewish ruler over Galilee and another region called Perea. He didn't have all that much authority, since he was under Roman rule. He certainly didn't have the authority that his father, Herod the Great, had. Herod the Great was a king, known as "King of the Jews." But after his death, his kingdom was divided among his sons. Several years after this episode, this Herod sent his wife, Herodias, to Rome to ask if Herod could be given the title of "king." The emperor refused and Herod was deposed.

This Herod was, like his father, a bad man. He took his brother's wife as his own wife. He had John the Baptist beheaded. He wanted to see Jesus for some time (Luke 9:9). There was even a rumor that he wanted Jesus dead (Luke 13:31). But here we're told that he wanted to see Jesus because he was hoping that Jesus would perform a "sign," a miracle for him.

If you've ever seen *Jesus Christ Superstar*, you might remember that Herod sings a song in which he asks Jesus to turn his water into wine and walk across his swimming pool. He wants Jesus to perform for him. That's how some people treat Jesus today, or how they treat God more generally. They expect God to perform wonders at their command. If God did that, then we would be the authorities. We would be kings. But God isn't obligated to do what we demand. He has performed miracles, signs that point to his existence. Jesus did perform miracles, signs that illustrated what he came to do, which was to heal people of their greatest disease, sin. But he didn't come to perform tricks or to entertain people's curiosity.

So, Jesus doesn't play that game. He doesn't answer Herod's questions. He knows that Herod is not sincerely interested in his identity or his mission. Yet, apparently, Herod doesn't find Jesus to be a threat, despite the accusations given by the Jewish leaders. So, he sends him back to Pilate, but not before his soldiers mock Jesus. They put him in "splendid clothing," as if to say, "If you're such a great king, let's dress you like one." Of course, they didn't believe he was king.

Then, Luke gives us this interesting little bit of information. Pilate and Herod had once been at odds with each other. But now, they became friends. The enemy of my enemy is my friend. They both agreed that Jesus was no threat. Yet neither of them did anything to save Jesus

from the accusing Jewish leaders and the angry crowds. They were typical politicians, lacking courage and acting to save face.

So, Jesus is sent back to Pilate. Let's read verses 13–16:

<sup>13</sup> Pilate then called together the chief priests and the rulers and the people, <sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup> Neither did Herod, for he sent him back to us. Look, nothing deserving death has been done by him. <sup>16</sup> I will therefore punish and release him.”

This section is important because it establishes once again that Pilate didn't find Jesus guilty, and neither did Herod. Jesus did nothing wrong. Ever. He certainly didn't do anything to deserve the death penalty. I'll talk more about that in a moment. But first, it's interesting to see that Pilate was hoping he could release Jesus. He thought that if Jesus were flogged, that would satisfy the blood lust of the crowd. And he did have Jesus flogged (Matt. 27:26; John 19:1). That was a terrible punishment on its own. Flogging was done with a weapon torture: a wooden handle with leather strips that had bone or metal attached to them. Flogging would tear the skin and could even kill a man. But the crowd wasn't satisfied by some blood; they wanted Jesus dead.

Let's now read verses 18–25:

<sup>18</sup> But they all cried out together, “Away with this man, and release to us Barabbas”— <sup>19</sup> a man who had been thrown into prison for an insurrection started in the city and for murder. <sup>20</sup> Pilate addressed them once more, desiring to release Jesus, <sup>21</sup> but they kept shouting, “Crucify, crucify him!” <sup>22</sup> 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.” <sup>23</sup> But they were urgent, demanding with loud cries that he should be crucified. And their voices prevailed. <sup>24</sup> So Pilate decided that their demand should be granted. <sup>25</sup> 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.

Pilate had a habit of releasing one criminal on Jewish holidays. The crowd knows this. They know that Pilate might release Jesus. So, they ask him to release another man instead, a man named Barabbas, an insurrectionist who had committed murder. He was basically a terrorist.

When Pilate tries to release Jesus instead, the crowds demand that Jesus be crucified. Crucifixion was a terrible way to kill someone. Roman citizens couldn't be crucified. But enemies of Rome, people suspected of treason, could be. Crucifixion meant attaching a person to

a cross with rope or nails and letting that person hang there until they could no longer breathe. It was a slow, agonizing way to die. And it was a public execution. It said: “Don’t mess with Rome.”

Pontius Pilate finds himself in a predicament. He can release Jesus, whom he finds to be innocent, but then he knows the crowds will not be satisfied. They might riot. And Pilate’s job was to maintain order. Or, he can give an innocent man over to the will of the people and release a real criminal. Pilate tries to plead with the crowd, but in the end, he gives into their demands. He releases Barabbas, a murderer, and he puts the only truly innocent person who has ever lived to death.

There’s a great irony here. Barabbas literally means “son of the father” (bar = son; abba = father). Jesus is the Son of God, the true Son of the true Father. Barabbas, obviously a guilty man and a true threat to the Roman Empire, is released. Jesus, who wasn’t a political threat and is the only sinless person who ever walked the face of the earth, is given the death penalty.

But that’s the message of Christianity, and Jesus’ death is no accident. And to understand this, we must consider the broader message of the Bible. The Bible says that God created the universe for his purposes. He didn’t have to create anything outside of himself. It’s not as if he was lonely or bored. But God chose to create the universe to display his greatness and to share his existence with human beings. God created humans in his image, which means they are supposed to reflect what he is like, to represent him on earth, and to rule the world by carrying out God’s commands. God also made us in his likeness, which means that we were made to be his children, to love him and obey him the way perfect children would love and obey a perfect parent. That’s good news, because it means that our lives have meaning and purpose. If there is no Creator, there is no ultimate meaning to life. We’re just cosmic accidents, and in the end, our lives don’t matter.

But there’s bad news. From the beginning, people have turned away from God. Instead of realizing that he is King, they wanted—and they still want—to be their own kings and queens, their own masters and lords. We tend to think the world revolves around us. And if there’s a God, he should do what we want. The result is that we live life on our terms, and not on God’s. We don’t do what he wants us to do, because we don’t love him as we should.

God desires perfect children, perfect covenant partners. God is perfect, and he can’t tolerate people making a mess of his creation. The first human beings lived in a garden paradise,

where there was no death. But they were evicted from the garden, and were put in the wilderness, where life was hard, where we find diseases, where we die. Because of our sinful nature, we are alienated from God. We don't see him; we don't always feel his presence. Because of our sinful nature, we are alienated from each other. We have conflicts, we fight, we're greedy and selfish—we hoard toilet paper and other supplies! And because of our sinful nature, we feel at odds internally. We realize we're not who we should be, and we get depressed and anxious. We know we have thoughts and desires that are wrong. We know we have done and continue to do wrong things.

As I said, God cannot tolerate people making a mess of his creation. So, he kicked us out of paradise. And in this wilderness, we find things like viruses. The reason why things like the coronavirus exist is because of sin, because humans turned away from God in the beginning, something we call the Fall.

All of this is bad news. If we were to die separated from God by our lack of love, by our rebellion, by our sin, we would be alienated from him forever. And God would be right to punish and condemn us in that way.

But there's really great news. There is a way back to God, a way back to paradise. And that way—the only way—is Jesus. Jesus is the Son of God. That means that he is God. He's divine. He has always existed. He created the universe. (It's most accurate to say that the Father created the universe through the Son by the power of the Holy Spirit.) But over two thousand years ago, the Son of God also became a man. When Jesus was conceived in Mary, a virgin, by the power of the Holy Spirit, the Son of God added a second nature to himself. He still was and is God, but he also was and is a human being. This was God the Father's plan, and it was God the Son's plan (and God the Spirit's plan, too).

The Son of God became a man for two reasons. One, to live the perfect life that God demands of human beings. That's why it's so important to see that Jesus was innocent. He is the only one who lived the way God wants us to live. He always loved God. He always worshiped God. He always obeyed God. He always loved other people perfectly. He was never greedy and selfish. So, he fulfilled God's plans for humanity. And when people have a right relationship with Jesus, when they put their trust in him and are willing to follow him, then they are credited with his perfect standing, his innocence, his righteousness.

The second reason why the Son of God became a man was to pay the penalty for sin that his people deserve. We all deserve condemnation. And that sounds harsh, I know. But think about this: If you have a home, would you allow people there who don't love you, who don't abide by your rules, and who do things that are harmful to your family? You might put up with such a guest for a little while, but if they keep acting that way, you would kick them out. And that's essentially what God does. He says, "You don't want me, you don't love me, you don't want to obey my rules? Fine. Go your own way." But that's a terrible thing. God is the source of love. When we turn away from him, we find a world of hate. God is the source of beauty. When we turn away from him, we find ugliness. God is the source of light. When we turn away from him, we find darkness. God is the source of truth. When we turn away from him, we find lies. And God is the source of life. When we turn away from him, we find death.

If you want proof that people don't really want God, consider something that happened this past week. We find ourselves in this strange world threatened by a new virus. You would think that if ever people would turn to God and humbly ask for his help, now would be the time. But we don't see that happening. Sometimes, we see something else, like a video of celebrities singing John Lennon's song, "Imagine." You might have seen the video. Gal Gadot, who plays Wonder Woman on the big screen, starts to sing the song, and then other celebrities follow her, singing one phrase at a time. It's supposed to be a hopeful thing, signaling that we're all in this together. If you know the song, you may remember some of the lyrics. The song can be taken as a hopeful vision of humans working together, united in harmony. But if you stop and think of the lyrics, it's a troubling song. John Lennon asked us to imagine that there's no heaven—"above us, only sky." In other words, imagine that there's no God. So, in a time of crisis, people are singing a song that says, "We don't need God and religion. That stuff is divisive. We just need to love each other and get along, and then the world will be as one." That song is proof that we don't love God the way we should, that we don't see that he is the one who gives us life and who sustains our lives at every moment. That song shows that we don't see our desperate need for God. There's no admission of our real problem, which is our sin. Frankly, the song is naïve, and it doesn't provide us with any real answers to the very real problems of the world.

But Jesus is the answer. Jesus lives the perfect life. And Jesus pays the penalty for sin. He was crucified not just because some people didn't believe him and hated him. He didn't die just because Pontius Pilate was weak and was afraid to stand up to the crowds. He didn't die just

because he was betrayed, and because the powers of spiritual darkness wanted to destroy him. He died because it was God's plan to have someone rescue us from the penalty of sin. This was Jesus' plan, too. He laid down his life to pay for our sin. That's why Jesus didn't defend himself, and why he hardly says a word. The prophet Isaiah predicted Jesus' sacrificial death roughly seven hundred years earlier. He said,

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,  
yet he opened not his mouth;  
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,  
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,  
so he opened not his mouth (Isa. 53:7).

Right before that verse in Isaiah 53, we read these words, also about Jesus:

- <sup>5</sup> But he was pierced for our transgressions;  
he was crushed for our iniquities;  
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,  
and with his wounds we are healed.
- <sup>6</sup> All we like sheep have gone astray;  
we have turned—every one—to his own way;  
and the LORD has laid on him  
the iniquity of us all (Isa. 53:5–6).

When Jesus died on the cross, he suffered the death penalty, but also much more than that. He took on God's righteous punishment against sin, his holy wrath. He endured hell on earth so that we don't have to.

We don't have to experience hell if come to Jesus and put our trust in him. If we trust in him, he takes away our sins. Our punishment has already been paid. And we are credited with his perfection. That's the good news. We don't have to earn our way to God. In fact, we could never do that. Christianity says that even our best efforts are always tainted by bad motives. But God came down to us. He entered a world that can be beautiful but also ugly, a world that is governed by orderly laws of nature but can also appear to be chaotic, a world that supports life but ends in death. He did this to rescue us and to bring us back to God, to bring us ultimately to paradise, which will come in the future, when God remakes the world and removes all suffering, sin, and death.

So, why do we have things like the coronavirus? They are the result of sin in the world. These things are part of living in a fallen world. Cancer and earthquakes, toilet paper hoarding and murder, are the result of sin in the world. But there's good news. God entered this world, and

he subjected himself to rejection and betrayal, to mocking and torture, and even to death, so that he could save us. God has not promised that this life will be free of pain and sickness. But he has promised that he will sustain his people, even through death. And he has promised that one day, Jesus will return to bring human history as we know it to an end. And on that day, a new era will begin. There will be no more pain, no more disease, no more wars, and no more death. It will be God and his people dwelling in a renewed and perfected creation.

I urge us all to put our hope in God. Let us look to him during this time. I don't know exactly why God has us in this situation, but I know that he uses things like this to teach us lessons and to draw us closer to him. So, let us focus on God. Specifically, let us focus on Jesus. If you don't know him yet, learn more about him. And put your trust in him. Only he would lay down his life for you. No politician will do that. No one else can save you from your real problem, which is a broken relationship with God. But Jesus can, and he stands ready to receive you if you come to him.