

Between *The Rock* and a Hard Place

Luke 23:1-14

Manuscript and Discussion Guide for October 13, 2024

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In part one of our study of Jesus' trial before Pilate, we learn about this political ruler—a man who valued political expediency over moral authority. We also learn about another prominent political figure—Herod—a man who viewed Jesus as a spectacle to observe, not a Savior to obey. Through this study, Stephen Davey shows us the various ways Jesus responded to these two men, and how we can respond to skeptics and antagonists in our world today.

There's an ancient proverb that says. "The enemy of my enemy is my friend." And that's often true.

Two people who don't like each other end up getting along simply because they share an even greater dislike for someone else.

Well, that's about to play out on the stage of human history as Jesus Christ stands trial.

In our last study, we saw Jesus stand trial, so to speak, three different times. At the end of the third—the official—trial, the Supreme Court of Israel, the Sanhedrin, voted unanimously to put Jesus to death.

But there's a major obstacle for the Sanhedrin.

They don't have the legal authority to carry out a death sentence without permission by the local governor. The death penalty must be carried out by the Roman authorities.

Adapted from William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke* (The Westminster Press, 1975), p. 277

So, with that, we're about to be introduced to two Roman officials who will go down in history for allowing the most innocent person who ever lived to be condemned to death.

Take your copy of Luke's Gospel and turn now to chapter 23 where the Sanhedrin takes Jesus to the Roman governor.

Luke chapter 23 and verse 1 tells us:

Then the whole company of them arose and brought him before Pilate. And they began to accuse him, saying, “We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding us to give tribute (taxes) to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ, a king.”

Luke 23:1-2

Now let me stop here and set the stage for this conversation between Jesus and Pilate.

Many people read this account and tend to think of Pilate as a weak and vacillating politician who goes along with the crowd to keep them all happy. He cares about his poll numbers; he wants the Jewish population to like him.

The truth is far different. Pilate isn't running for office and he's actually a man who couldn't care less about his popularity among the Jewish people. In fact, he didn't like Jewish people at all.

Pilate had been appointed by the Roman Emperor, Tiberius. And when Pilate became governor, he immediately insulted the Jewish people by allowing Roman standards—or flags—to fly inside the city of Jerusalem, bearing the image of Caesar.

This was considered idolatry by the Jews, and none of the earlier governor's had been that insensitive. The Jews threatened to riot if he didn't remove the flags, which he finally did. All that to say, his approval ratings dropped after his first week in office.

But he didn't care. Later on, he confiscated money from the Temple treasury to finance a building project. The Jewish people rioted, and Pilate sent soldiers into the crowds, dressed as civilians, and they clubbed to death the leaders of the revolt.

Pilate was actually a very decisive man, given to cruelty to keep the population under control.

A Jewish philosopher and historian named Philo who lived during these times recorded a letter from King Agrippa to the Roman emperor. Agrippa writes these words: “Pilate is unbending; a man of severe brutality, prejudice, savage violence, and murder.”

Charles R. Swindoll, *The Darkness and the Dawn* (Word Publishing, 2001), p. 67

So, if that's true, why does Pilate cave under pressure from this Jewish mob? And why does he try to accommodate these religious leaders?

The truth is, as one author pointed out, Pilate was under investigation by Rome; the emperor had ordered surveillance on him. It seemed to Tiberius that Pilate had been a poor choice for the job.

And this investigation was going on at the same time Jesus was brought before him. Pilate didn't care about public opinion, except now that his own neck was in a noose. His career was on the line.

Ibid, p. 68

This is why he seemed to vacillate; he's trying to resolve this charge against an innocent man while at the same time trying to avoid another riot in Jerusalem, which would go straight back to the emperor as another illustration of his inability to rule this region well.

Talk about being between a rock and hard place.

It struck me in my study that Jesus is the cornerstone and when Jesus shows up here, Pilate is between *The Rock* and a Hard Place.

Now back to the charges before him, here they are again ***in verse 2:***

"We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ, a king."

Luke 23:2

Now the first two charges are blatant lies. Jesus wasn't misleading anybody, and He had even defended paying taxes to Caesar (***Luke 20:25***).

You might notice that the charge of blasphemy—that Jesus claimed to be equal with God, the Son of God, which the Sanhedrin had used to justify his death—isn't even brought up here.

And that's because they knew Pilate wouldn't care about some man claiming to be the Son of God. Pilate's emperor claimed to be the son of God. So what!

So, these religious leaders twist the accusation around and just sort of toss in, "He claims to be a king."

And it's not surprising that Pilate seizes on that charge. Is Jesus a threat to the Roman emperor?

David E. Garland, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Luke* (Zondervan, 2011), p. 903

If anybody at this moment wanted to appear to be extremely loyal to the emperor, it was Pilate.

Verse 3:

And Pilate asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" And he answered him, "You have said so."

Luke 23:3

In other words, “Yes.” And with that, Pilate can breathe a sigh of relief; Jesus isn’t a threat to the Roman world, but the Jewish world.

So, if anything, Jesus was a threat to the rule of Herod, who considered himself to be the king of the Jews, just as his father had before him.

Adapted from Bruce B. Barton, *Life Application Bible Commentary: Luke* (Tyndale, 1997), p. 525

We’ll get to Herod in a moment.

Now John’s Gospel adds something in Pilate’s conversation with Jesus—chapter 18 and verse 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.” Pilate said to him, “What is truth?”

John 18:37-38

Jesus baits the hook for Pilate: “You want to know about the truth? I can tell it to you. Do you want to listen?” Standing before Pilate is “The Way, the Truth and the Life!”

Pilate doesn’t bite!

Now was Pilate being sarcastic here? As if to snort and respond to Jesus, “There’s no such thing as objective truth anymore.”

Or maybe Pilate was impatient, as if to say, “I’m trying to get to the bottom of this case against you, Jesus; I don’t know what’s true and what isn’t!”

Or was Pilate depressed and despairing, under investigation—no doubt in his mind—with unfair and unjust accusations. Maybe Pilate was saying something like, “Yeah, tell me about it; nobody’s interested in the truth these days; I’m not being treated honestly by my world either.”

The truth is, we’re not told what Pilate meant by *these* words, but we *do* know what Pilate meant by the following words in ***Luke 23 and verse 4:***

Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, “I find no guilt in this man.”

Luke 23:4

Leave Him alone. He’s not guilty!

Take out your pen or pencil and circle that phrase, then circle **verse 14** where Pilate again declares:

"I did not find this man guilty of any of your charges against him. Neither did Herod, ..."

Luke 23:14

And then circle **verse 22**:

"I have found in him no guilt deserving death."

Luke 23:22

Four times, including Herod's assessment: Not guilty! Not guilty! Not guilty! Not guilty!

He's innocent! He's innocent! He's innocent! He's innocent!

Every time Pilate declares the innocence of Jesus, the crowd gets louder and angrier.

But Pilate has just picked up on something. **Luke writes in verse 6:**

When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean. 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.

Luke 23:6-7

Now some would say that Pilate is passing the buck. He's found a loophole in the legal process.

But from what we will learn in a moment, this wasn't Pilate's attempt to put Herod in the hot seat; he was offering Herod the respect of his opinion and advice.

Herod ruled over this region called Galilee. Herod was half-Jewish, and unlike Pilate, he was definitely interested in his poll numbers rising, so here he was at the biggest festival of the year: Passover.

Pilate knows that Herod would understand these accusations better. Herod knew what a Messianic claim would sound like. He had married twice and both women were Jewish. Herod knew the Jewish customs and laws. So Pilate effectively asks, "Herod, would you like to see Jesus?"

Now verse 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.

Luke 23:8

He knew about the ministry and miracles of Jesus.

Garland, p. 905

And he's thrilled to meet Jesus, but only because he wants a personal demonstration of the miraculous power of Jesus. He doesn't care at all about Jesus; he just wants to see a miracle.

Herod is curious about Jesus. He thinks he has a private audience with a religious Houdini. It's show-time!

R. Kent Hughes, Luke, Volume Two (Crossway Books, 1998), p. 365

I think Jesus should have given Herod a miracle, like setting his sandals on fire. Something obvious!

- By the way, this is the same Herod who beheaded John the Baptist three years earlier.
- This is the same Herod who seduced his brother's wife into leaving his brother and marrying him.
- John the Baptizer had called their marriage immoral, which led to John's death.
- Herod is so spiritually and morally calloused, he doesn't even address the accusations against Jesus, he's not interested in the Messiah. So what if He's the Messiah?
- Herod just wants to see a magic trick.

Don't miss the fact that to Herod, Jesus utters not one word. He stands there without any demonstration of power; Jesus answers not one question from Herod.

Let me tell you, there's a lesson embedded in here for the Christian today.

Someone who comes to you with an honest question about your faith or God or the Bible should be answered. Honest questions deserve honest answers.

But if they're not interested in answers, if they're only interested in finding one more reason to disregard the Lord, or demean the Bible, or accuse the believer, save your breath!

Barton, p. 527

Don't get in their face and argue back. We've been told to make disciples, not win arguments.

And think of the things Jesus could have said to Herod! But at this point, the issue is the identity of Jesus Christ, and Jesus was going to stick to that point.

And since Herod isn't interested in the identity of Jesus, Jesus has nothing to say.

Herod isn't going to see a sign, and he isn't going to hear a sound from Jesus.

Garland, p. 906

Now beloved, that doesn't mean people are going to be so amazed at your self-restraint and your composure under fire that they will admire you and decide to be nice to you moving forward. Now that *might* happen, but not here.

Look at what Herod does next in **verse 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.*

Luke 23:11

This expression here for **splendid clothing** is not a reference to the purple robe that will be put on the Lord after His flogging.

This garment is believed by historians to refer to the kind of garment worn by Roman candidates for political office.

Warren W. Wiersbe, Be Courageous (Victor Books, 1989), p. 131

Herod is mocking Jesus' claim to be some kind of political leader.

With that, verse 12 makes this strange statement:

*And Herod and Pilate became friends with each other that very day, for
before this they had been at enmity with each other.*

Luke 23:12

Neither one of these men had any regard for Jesus. He was a troubling irritation to both of them, for different reasons. But now they were united in their disdain for Jesus; He was now their enemy.

And the enemy of my enemy is my friend.

I don't want to belabor the details, but here's the drama behind this statement.

Herod the Great had ruled over all four provinces: Galilee, Perea, Judea and Samaria. When he died, that kingdom was divided by the Roman government into four regions, and Herod's sons were given rulership.

One of the sons was replaced by Pilate, and that was an insult to Herod's dynasty. Herod Antipas had not been silent about his dislike for Pilate.

But now here, Pilate is honoring him by acknowledging his rule over Galilee. Jesus was a Galilean. Pilate wanted Herod's counsel, his verdict.

That not only flattered Herod, but Pilate's viewpoint that Jesus was innocent was supported by another political leader, and that would serve him well back in Rome.

So, with that, these two brutal, ungodly men bury the hatchet.

Herod condemned John the Baptist to death—an innocent man; and Pilate will condemn Jesus to death—an innocent man, and they will be reconciled as friends.

Let me tell you, they may have reconciled with one another, but they were not reconciled with God.

Garland, p. 907

You might have friends who find courage in one another in defying the Lord.

Paul writes in Romans 1 that an ungodly world will join together and heartily approve all kinds of immorality and all manner of sin.

They find reinforcement in their friendship against God's Word.

I've actually had people tell me they won't mind going to hell because that's where their friends will be.

"I'll have a party down there with my friends."

Now, I don't mean to trivialize the horror of hell, but if that's your thinking, I want you to go home and turn on your stove top and then you and your friend hop up there and see how long you can have a party, much less a friendly conversation.

Herod and Pilate become friends only because they now view Jesus the same way: they support each other in their unbelief.

Now they might mock Jesus as an imbecile, but they know Jesus is innocent of the charges. They think He might be delusional, but they know He's not dangerous.

And with that, Pilate once again declares Jesus' innocence, here in **verse 14**, he offers a compromise here to punish Jesus and then let Him go.

The religious leaders come unglued with that offer and they rage against him—a riot is stirring in Jerusalem and Pilate is trapped.

Now somewhere around this time, something takes place that only **Matthew's Gospel account records in chapter 27 and verse 19:**

Besides, while he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, "Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered much because of him today in a dream."

Matthew 27:19

This dream was so vivid and so real that she wrote a note to her husband while court was in session. Basically, it said, "Don't you do anything other than let that man go."

Talk about between a rock and a hard place. Now, if Pilate let's Jesus go, the Jewish people will riot; and if he doesn't let Jesus go, he'll never get another home-cooked meal—He's in the doghouse for life."

The Romans were superstitious people; they gave credence to any kind of premonition or dream. They never felt confident with their gods, they never knew when they might offend one of them.

Pilate's wife, Claudia, knew her own grandfather's fear of thunder and lightning. He was terrified by thunderstorms.

I read the biography of her grandfather, Caesar Augustus, some time ago and Caesar carried with him a piece of sealskin that was supposedly a good luck charm against lightning. In fact, one time caught in a storm, a flash of lightning struck near enough to him that it left burn marks on his carriage. He escaped unharmed and then went on to build in Rome the magnificent **Temple to Jupiter**, the god of thunder and lightning, and he would go there often.

Anthony Everitt, Augustus (Random House, 2006), p. 212

So, for Claudia to be so distressed by such a vivid dream, the message to her husband was basically, "Don't mess with Jesus; let Him go at all costs!"

So, Pilate is racking his brain to come up with some kind of loophole to get Jesus freed from this mob.

And then he comes up with it; frankly, it's a mark of administrative and legal genius.

And that will be the subject of my next sermon. There's just so much involved there, that I don't want to go too fast.

But for today, I have focused more on these two men than I have the religious leaders and the crowd. These two men represent so much of our world today.

But if I could fast forward the tape, so to speak, ironically, both men will be treated in the same way they treated Jesus.

Herod's wife grew jealous that Caligula the emperor had awarded another governor the title "king" over his region, and so she pushed Herod to demand that Caligula grant him the same honor.

Caligula was paranoid of any rival and Herod's political rivals used this as an opportunity to convince Caligula that Herod was stashing weapons and was planning to lead a rebellion. He was innocent of these charges, but it didn't matter.

Adapted from Garland, p. 905

Herod was stripped of his position and his power and exiled nearly 1,000 miles from Rome.

Less than 5 years after Pilate condemned Jesus, he will put down a Samaritan revolt with such brutality that religious leaders will bring charges against him.

Without much of a fair trial at all, the religious leaders will win, Pilate will be stripped of his authority and power and financial resources.

The granddaughter of the emperor and the former Governor of Judea are forced into poverty.

Here's the irony:

- Both men were not believed in court.
- Both men had false charges brought against them.
- Both men were exiled to the same town on the southeastern coast of Gaul, which is modern day France.

Herod will die without a trace of his last days; Pilate will take his own life.

Two men before whom the King of Kings stood.

To Pilate, Jesus offered to give him the truth: "I'm a king and those who want the truth listen to my words." But Pilate wasn't interested in the truth, he was interested in his political career.

To Herod, Jesus offered nothing but silence, because He knew Herod wasn't interested. To Herod, Jesus was a curiosity at best, a joke worth mocking at worst.

Let me tell you, these men represent the world around you and me today. But do they represent you?

- Do you think, Jesus could ruin my career if I defended Him in public?
- Do you think, Jesus said some things that you can't take too literally?
- We would rather go along with the majority opinion than stand alone.
- Maybe you are more comfortable with people who don't take Jesus seriously.
- Maybe you think, Jesus is an interesting person, but He certainly isn't a king.

Since Jesus is effectively standing before you, through His word, what will you believe about Him? What will you do with Him today?

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Study Guide

Summary

In this sermon, we explore the trial of Jesus Christ as He stands before Roman officials, Pilate and Herod, who ultimately condemn Him to death despite His innocence. The sermon delves into the political and personal motivations of Pilate and Herod, highlighting Pilate's precarious position as a governor under scrutiny and Herod's superficial curiosity about Jesus. Both men, despite recognizing Jesus' innocence, choose to prioritize their political interests and personal biases over justice. The sermon challenges us to reflect on our own responses to Jesus, questioning whether we, like Pilate and Herod, are more concerned with societal approval and personal gain than with the truth and identity of Christ.

Key Takeaways

- Pilate's predicament illustrates the tension between political expediency and moral integrity. Despite recognizing Jesus' innocence, Pilate prioritizes his career and public order over justice. This serves as a reminder that our decisions should be guided by truth and righteousness, even when they conflict with personal or societal pressures.
- Herod's encounter with Jesus highlights the danger of treating faith as mere spectacle. His desire for a miracle rather than a genuine understanding of Jesus' identity warns us against reducing our spiritual journey to superficial experiences. True faith seeks a deeper relationship with Christ, beyond mere signs and wonders.
- Jesus' silence before Herod underscores the importance of discerning when to speak and when to remain silent. In a world eager for arguments and debates, we are reminded that not every challenge requires a response. Sometimes, silence can be a powerful testament to our faith and convictions.
- The alliance between Pilate and Herod, formed through their shared disdain for Jesus, reflects how common opposition to truth can unite individuals. This serves as a caution against forming alliances based on shared unbelief or compromise, urging us to seek friendships that encourage and uphold our faith.
- The sermon challenges us to consider our own stance towards Jesus. Are we like Pilate, swayed by public opinion, or like Herod, treating Jesus as a curiosity? Or do we recognize Him as the King of Kings, worthy of our allegiance and trust? Our response to Jesus' identity is crucial, shaping our lives and eternal destiny.

Discussion Guide

Bible Reading

- Luke 23:1-25
- John 18:37-38

Observation Questions:

1. How did Pilate initially respond to the accusations against Jesus, and what was his final decision?
2. What was Herod's reaction upon meeting Jesus, and what did he hope to see?
3. How did the relationship between Pilate and Herod change because of their interactions with Jesus?

Interpretation Questions:

1. Why did Pilate, despite recognizing Jesus' innocence, ultimately decide to condemn Him? What does this reveal about his character and priorities?
2. How does Herod's desire for a miracle from Jesus reflect a superficial approach to faith? What are the dangers of such an approach?
3. What significance does Jesus' silence before Herod hold in the context of the trial? How can silence be a powerful response in certain situations?

Application Questions:

1. Reflect on a time when you faced a dilemma between doing what is right and what is convenient. How did you respond, and what can you learn from Pilate's example?
2. Consider a situation where remaining silent might be more powerful than speaking. How can you discern when to speak and when to remain silent in your own life?
3. How do societal pressures and the desire for approval influence your response to Jesus' identity? What steps can you take to prioritize truth and righteousness over public opinion?
4. Identify an area in your life where you might be more concerned with personal gain than with the truth of Christ. What changes can you make to align your priorities with your faith?