

Mark 15:1-20 ~ Scripture Verses

Jesus Before Pilate

¹ Very early in the morning, the chief priests, with the elders, the teachers of the law and the whole Sanhedrin, reached a decision. They bound Jesus, led him away and handed him over to Pilate.

² “Are you the king of the Jews?” asked Pilate.

“Yes, it is as you say,” Jesus replied.

³ The chief priests accused him of many things. ⁴ So again Pilate asked him, “Aren’t you going to answer? See how many things they are accusing you of.”

⁵ But Jesus still made no reply, and Pilate was amazed.

⁶ Now it was the custom at the Feast to release a prisoner whom the people requested. ⁷ A man called Barabbas was in prison with the insurrectionists who had committed murder in the uprising. ⁸ The crowd came up and asked Pilate to do for them what he usually did.

⁹ “Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?” asked Pilate, ¹⁰ knowing it was out of envy that the chief priests had handed Jesus over to him. ¹¹ But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have Pilate release Barabbas instead.

¹² “What shall I do, then, with the one you call the king of the Jews?” Pilate asked them.

¹³ “Crucify him!” they shouted.

¹⁴ “Why? What crime has he committed?” asked Pilate.

But they shouted all the louder, “Crucify him!”

¹⁵ Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.

The Soldiers Mock Jesus

¹⁶ The soldiers led Jesus away into the palace (that is, the Praetorium) and called together the whole company of soldiers. ¹⁷ They put a purple robe on him, then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on him. ¹⁸ And they began to call out to him, “Hail, king of the Jews!” ¹⁹ Again and again they struck him on the head with a staff and spit on him. Falling on their knees, they paid homage to him. ²⁰ And when they had mocked him, they took off the purple robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.

Mark 15:1-20 ~ Discussion Questions

1. Looking at the memory aid SPECK (Sin to avoid, Promise to claim, Example to follow, Command to obey, Knowledge to learn) to apply Biblical scripture to your life, what kind of passage is the story of Jesus' trial before Pilate? (Mark 15:1-15)

2. From the verses about Jesus' trial, a good deal can be implied about the character of Pilate. But what do we actually know about Pilate *other* than from these few Bible verses of Jesus trial before him?

3. Bible scholars are sharply divided about Pilate. Here are the two views:

Weak and vacillating

Afraid of the Jews

Wants to please the Jews

Unsure of his position

Wants to avoid responsibility

Unprincipled, unpredictable

Cruel tyrant

No fear of the Jews

Willing to go along with the Jews

No compunction about ordering the

execution of a Jew, especially one

who claimed to be a king

Which view seems more plausible? Does it really matter? If it does, why?

4. Could it be that the accounts of Jesus' trial before Pilate are slanted to shift the blame away from the Romans and onto the Jews?

5. Of those involved in trying and sentencing Jesus, who do you think bore the greater responsibility: the Jewish leaders (Sanhedrin) or Roman court (Pilate)? Does it matter who is to blame?

6. One must read all four Gospels to get a complete account of Jesus' trial. Why are they so different? Mark's is the most condensed. Why? Who was his audience?

7. If false criminal charges were being leveled at you and a judge asked you to explain yourself, would you reply? If you did not reply, what could you be charged with? Why do you think that Jesus did not answer Pilate? (15:4)

8. Why do you think that Pilate did what the crowd wanted? When have you ever done something because a crowd or group pressured you? Why is group pressure so powerful?

9. Whether he was weak and afraid of the Jews or a cruel tyrant with no fear of them, Pilate would have needed some charge or reason to justify to both himself and his superiors the crucifixion of Jesus. This was most likely what?

10. What do we know about the Barabbas incident? Is it credible?

11. What is it like to go through a painful experience without the support of family or friends? Has your family or friends encouraged you (or deserted you) during difficult times in your life? How?
12. The mocking of Jesus falls at a different place in the Gospels; Matthew and John put it part way through the interaction with Pilate, Luke doesn't mention it at all and Mark puts it after the trial is over. It probably doesn't matter, but where it falls gives a somewhat different flavor to the progression of events. Any thoughts?
13. What did the soldiers say in mockery of Jesus? What is the supreme irony of this?
14. What difference does it make that Jesus endured harsh ridicule and pain for your sake—yes, for you personally?
15. Have you ever been mocked for being a Christian? How did it feel? How should we respond when others mock our faith?
16. What can we learn from Jesus about how to deal with pain and suffering?
17. Why does God allow good Christian believers to suffer?

Mark 15:1-20 ~ Leader's Guide

1. Looking at the memory aid SPECK (Sin to avoid, Promise to claim, Example to follow, Command to obey, Knowledge to learn) to apply scripture to your life, what kind of passage is the story of Jesus' trial before Pilate? (Mark 15:1-15)

We would probably first say that this is Biblical knowledge. Yes, we all know the story well, but there is always something more to learn. An example to follow? Actually more of an example not to follow in the actions of the people in the crowds who went along with their leaders without thinking for themselves. On the other hand, assuming you respect the leaders or your friends who are following them, it's difficult to go in a different direction.

2. From the verses about Jesus' trial, a good deal can be implied about the character of Pilate. But what do we actually know about Pilate *other* than from these few Bible verses of Jesus trial before him?

Pontius Pilatus was the Prefect of the Roman Judaea province from the year AD 26 until AD 36. Normally, Pilate resided in Caesarea but during the Passover, a festival of deep national as well as religious significance for the Jews, Pilate, as governor or prefect, would have been expected to be in Jerusalem to keep order.

Little enough is known about Pilate, but mythology has filled the gap. Some accounts relate that Pilate fell under misfortunes in the reign of Caligula (AD 37–41), was exiled to Gaul and eventually committed suicide there in Vienne.

The fragmentary apocryphal *Gospel of Peter* (a passion narrative written circa AD 160) exonerates Pilate of responsibility for the crucifixion of Jesus, placing it instead on Herod and the Jews, who unlike Pilate refuse to “wash their hands.” After the soldiers see three men and a cross miraculously walking out of the tomb they report to Pilate who reiterates his innocence: “I am pure from the blood of the Son of God.” He then commands the soldiers not to tell anyone what they have seen so that they would not “fall into the hands of the people of the Jews and be stoned.”

The 4th Century *Acts of Pilate* and many other early and later works of fiction were written about Pilate, but the bottom line is that we really know nothing definitive about him except what appears in the Bible.

3. Bible scholars are sharply divided about Pilate. Here are the two views:

Weak and vacillating

Afraid of the Jews

Wants to please the Jews

Unsure of his position

Unprincipled capriciousness

Wants to avoid responsibility

Cruel tyrant

No fear of the Jews

Willing to go along with the Jews

No compunction about ordering the

execution of a Jew, especially one

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Which view seems more plausible? Does it really matter? If it does, why?

Biblical scholars seem to get quite worked up over the character of Pilate, and lay people, especially Christian believers, want to know more about him. Some commentators agree with what is written in the Bible (left column). Others ascribe to him the characteristics of a “typical” Roman governor of that day (right column). It really matters only in the sense of “answering” the next two questions of whether the Gospel accounts are biased to shift blame for Jesus’ crucifixion from the Romans to the Jews.

4. Could it be that the accounts of Jesus’ trial before Pilate are slanted to shift the blame away from the Romans and onto the Jews?

Authors of the Oxford Bible Commentary (and others) believe that “the picture of Pilate as weak and vacillating, anxiously trying to please the Jews, in no way squares with what we know elsewhere of the man” (from where, I might ask). They see him as a “cruel tyrant who would not have had the slightest compunction in executing an odd Jew or two to keep the peace.” They believe that the Gospel authors, especially Mark, “have been influenced by the tendency to shift the blame [for the crucifixion] away from the Romans and onto the Jewish authorities.”

5. Of those involved in trying and sentencing Jesus, who do you think bore the greater responsibility: the Jewish leaders (Sanhedrin) or Roman court (Pilate)? Does it matter who is to blame?

Over the centuries, this has proved to be a very controversial and divisive question. Some people blame the Jews, some blame the Romans, and some say it was inevitable that Jesus had to die—it was part of God’s plan—and therefore it doesn’t matter that much who was responsible for his execution.

In fact it was probably *both* the Jews and Romans who were guilty. As it is reported in Mark 14:64, the 71 members of the Jewish Sanhedrin “*all* condemned him as worthy of death.” But because under Roman rule, they were not permitted to execute anyone, they had to put the matter before the Roman court.

But I would ask, who cares who is to blame? Does it really matter? The point is that Jesus was destined for what happened here, to take the sins of all believers on his shoulders, to suffer and to die on the cross, and to rise again. Whether the final catalyst for the crucifixion was the Romans or the Jews doesn’t really matter. What matters is that you believe that God loved you so much that He had Jesus die for you and if you believe in him, you will have eternal life. That’s what matters!

6. One must read all four Gospels to get a complete account of Jesus’ trial. Why are they so different? Mark’s is the most condensed. Why? Who was his audience?

One reason the accounts of the trial are so different because none of the Gospel

writers were actually there. All of them got it by here say from others. Moreover, they were written at different times for different audiences (see discussion question 1 in the previous Leader's Guide for Mark 14:53-72).

Number of verses in the four Gospels devoted to Jesus' trial and his mockery.

	<i>Trial before Pilate</i>	<i>Soldiers mock Him</i>	<i>Total</i>
Matthew	18	5	23
Mark	15	5	20
Luke	31	0	31
John	26	3	29
Total	62	7	69

Mark was writing to the church in Rome, and especially to Gentile readers. It was the first of the four Gospels written, probably in the 50's or early 60's.

Luke was probably the second Gospel written, most likely in Rome. It was directed to Theophilus, a Roman (Gentile) official of high power and wealth, who then published and circulated it. Only Luke mentions that Jesus was sent to Herod.

Matthew was written after Mark and was aimed at Greek-speaking Jews.

John was clearly written later and was quite independent of the other Gospels. John is more a meditation on Jesus' life than a recitation of events, although John's description of the trial before Pilate is detailed and extensive.

7. If false criminal charges were being leveled at you and a judge asked you to explain yourself, would you reply? If you did not reply, what could you be charged with? Why do you think that Jesus did not answer Pilate? (15:4)

Not replying at all today could result in you being charged with contempt of court. That was not an issue in Biblical days, although by not answering, one would probably incur the ire of the judge. However, in Jesus' case, the trial was what we would call today a kangaroo court. The Jewish religious leaders were bringing false charges in a Roman civil court in order to get it to impose the death penalty, which they could not do. By answering the charges, Jesus would have lent some credibility to the proceedings which he was unwilling to do.

8. Why do you think that Pilate did what the crowd wanted? When have you ever done something because a crowd or group pressured you? Why is group pressure so powerful?

We don't really know that much about Pilate (see Questions 2 and 3). But we do know that he was human and subject to pressures just like anyone else. Some scholars picture him as weak and afraid of the Jews, which seems unlikely, but regardless of whether he was weak or strong, he would certainly have an easier time ruling in the future if he went along with the Sanhedrin. And, really, what did he have to lose by doing so?

9. Whether he was weak and afraid of the Jews or a cruel tyrant with no fear of them, Pilate would have needed some charge or reason to justify to both himself and his superiors the crucifixion of Jesus. This was most likely what?

The charge of being king of the Jews was almost certainly the charge on which Jesus was crucified by the Romans. It was the only political charge, which would lead to the punishment of crucifixion, and a charge on which someone like Pilate might feel obliged to act: a royal pretender would clearly pose a threat to political power which Pilate could not ignore.

10. What do we know about the Barabbas incident? Is it credible?

The Oxford Bible Commentary states, “the Barabbas incident defies explanation: no such custom of releasing a prisoner on a regular basis is known, nor is it really credible. Most likely the account here (in Mark) has been influenced by the tendency to shift the blame away from the Romans and onto the Jewish authorities.” On the other hand, we find the Barabbas incident reported in all four Gospels and it is quite unlikely that the writers got together and decided to make it up out of whole cloth. It is something about which we know no more than we do the person of Pilate. Reported independently by all four Gospel authors, it seems to me that it must be true, however implausible it might sound.

However, as one of my men suggested, could it be that Barabbas was a figurative character that represents our sin? Jesus died instead of Barabbas—or, instead of us. In other words, it’s possible this was a real-life parable. Could be.

11. What is it like to go through a painful experience without the support of family or friends? Has your family or friends encouraged you (or deserted you) during difficult times in your life? How?

12. The mocking of Jesus falls at a different place in the Gospels; Matthew and John put it part way through the interaction with Pilate, Luke doesn’t mention it at all and Mark puts it after the trial is over. It probably doesn’t matter, but where it falls gives a somewhat different flavor to the progression of events. Any thoughts?

13. What did the soldiers say in mockery of Jesus? What is the supreme irony of this?

The soldiers mock homage to Jesus and hail him—for them ironically—as ‘king of the Jews.’ But the real irony goes one stage further because, for Mark, what is said here in mocking jest is, in fact, profound truth. Jesus *is* the king of the Jews. What the soldiers say in jest is truly the deepest reality.

14. What difference does it make that Jesus endured harsh ridicule and pain for your sake—yes, for you personally?

15. Have you ever been mocked for being a Christian? How did it feel? How should we respond when others mock our faith?
16. What can we learn from Jesus about how to deal with pain and suffering?
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