

John 18:33-38

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Pilate's First Interview with Jesus and his First Declaration of Innocence

Pilate enters the Praetorium and summons Jesus to investigate the charges brought against Him by the Jewish leaders. He focuses on the charge of insurrection, asking "Are You the King of the Jews?" Before He answers, Jesus asks a probing question to see Pilate's intent. After Pilate responds, Jesus elaborates that His kingdom is not of this world. Pilate, a bit confused, asks Jesus to clarify. Jesus states His purpose and that He is the king of truth. Pilate scoffs: "What is truth?", before exiting the Praetorium and announcing his verdict to the Jews outside. Jesus is not guilty of insurrection.

This event is part of the first phase of Jesus's Civil Trial. It is known as Jesus's Arraignment before Pilate.

The parallel Gospel accounts of this event are found in Matthew 27:11-14, Mark 15:2-5, and Luke 23:3-7.

These events are the continuation of the first phase of Jesus's civil trial. The first phase of Jesus's civil trial is called "Jesus's Arraignment before Pilate." This scripture details Pilate's interview with Jesus as recorded by John. The happenings of this account took place mostly inside the Praetorium (likely Herod's Palace which was built on the western side of the upper city along the city wall).

This event happened while it was early in the morning (likely before 7:00 am). According to the Jewish calendar, the date was likely Nisan 15—the first day of Unleavened Bread. By Roman reckoning the day was probably a Friday.

To learn more about the timing and sequencing of these events, see The Bible Says' ["Timeline: Jesus's Final 24 Hours."](#)

Jesus's Civil Trial occurred over the course of three phases.

1. Jesus's Arraignment before Pilate
(Matthew 27:1-2, 11-14; Mark 15:1-5; Luke 23:1-7; John 18:28-38)
2. Jesus's Audience before Herod Antipas
(Luke 23:8-12)
3. Pilate's Judgment
(Matthew 27:15-26; Mark 15:6-15; Luke 23:13-25; John 18:38-19:16)

The Jews Accused Jesus Before Pilate

Jesus's Civil Trial began with the Jews bringing *Jesus* from His sunrise trial under the supervision of Caiaphas at the temple where He was condemned to death on the religious charge

of blasphemy to *Pilate at the Praetorium* (Matthew 27:1-2; Mark 1:15; Luke 22:66-23:1; John 18:28).

The Praetorium was where the first and third phases of *Jesus's* civil trial was held. It was the Jerusalem residence and office of the Roman governor of Judea. *The Praetorium* was located in the western side of the upper city along the city wall. Inside was a luxurious fortress-palace built by Herod the Great. Because it was constructed under Herod, *the Praetorium* is sometimes called “Herod’s Palace.” Its judgment hall, with its paved court and judgment seat, were built on the outer side of the city wall and was likely canopied. Ruins of *the Praetorium* can be visited at the time this commentary is written (2023).

Pilate opened the trial asking for the Jewish leaders to state their accusation and evidence against *Jesus* (John 18:29). *The Jews* gave an unacceptable answer (John 18:30) possibly because their star witness (Judas) had recently hanged himself (Matthew 27:3-5). At that point *Pilate* seemed ready to toss the case, telling them to “judge Him according to your own laws” (John 18:31a).

The religious leaders explained that they were unable to judge *Him* because Rome did not permit them to put anyone to death (John 18:32b). *Pilate* seems to have then allowed them to resubmit their case. At this point, the religious leaders accused *Jesus* of three things:

1. “We found this man misleading our nation...” (Luke 23:2a)
2. “and forbidding to pay taxes to Caesar...” (Luke 23:2b)
3. “and saying that He Himself is Christ, a King” (Luke 23:2c).

The first charge was that *Jesus* was a public nuisance because His teachings upset the status quo and threatened the fragile stability and order Rome desired. Depending on the severity of this crime, the penalty under Roman law could be death.

The second charge claimed that *Jesus* was instructing the people to rebel against Roman authority by not paying their taxes. This charge was a total lie (see Matthew 22:15-22). It was a charge of sedition and likely carried the death penalty under Roman law.

The third charge was that *Jesus* was challenging Caesar’s political authority as the sovereign ruler of Judea. It was the charge of insurrection; and it was the most serious charge. Under Roman law the penalty for insurrection was death.

Pilate Interviews Jesus

Such charges, especially the charge of insurrection, required the Roman governor to take them seriously. But without a witness (like *Jesus's* disciple Judas) to testify, *Pilate* would have to interview *Jesus* personally. All four Gospels record that this is precisely what he did next (Matthew 27:11; Mark 14:2; Luke 23:3; John 18:33-38). Of the four Gospel accounts of *Pilate's* first interview of *Jesus*, John’s is the most extensive.

Therefore Pilate entered again into the Praetorium, and summoned Jesus (v 33a).

The word *Therefore* indicates that the reason *Pilate entered the Praetorium again* was because *the Jews* had no evidence for their accusations. Because the charges were serious and carried deadly consequences, *Pilate summoned Jesus* to personally interview *Him* himself away from His accusers.

This interview took place inside *the Praetorium*, which means it was removed from *Jesus's* Jewish interrogators who remained outside so they would not defile themselves (John 18:28). The Man whom *Pilate* was about to interview was by now a pitiable sight. *Jesus* had been beaten, slapped, spit-on, and His beard yanked out by the Jews in the hours leading up to this early morning (Isaiah 50:6; Matthew 26:67-68; Mark 14:65; Luke 22:63-65; John 18:22)

Pilate said to Jesus, "Are You the King of the Jews?" (v 33b)

Pilate pursued the third and most serious of the three charges recorded by Luke (Luke 23:2)—the charge of insurrection.

The three synoptic Gospels record, and possibly summarize, *Jesus's* response to *Pilate's* question: "It is as you say" (Matthew 27:11; Mark 15:2; Luke 23:3).

John records that *Jesus* responded to *Pilate's* question with a probing question of His own.

Jesus answered, "Are you saying this on your own initiative, or did others tell you about Me?"

Before *Jesus answered Pilate's* question, He respectfully wanted to understand the place it was coming from. *Jesus* wanted to know whether or not *Pilate* was genuinely asking *this* for himself—his *own initiative*—or if the governor was merely rephrasing the Jewish Council's charge (Luke 23:2).

Everyone who comes to, and believes in, the Son of God does so (paradoxically) both from his *own initiative*, as well as at the invitation of God's grace. Others may tell us about and bring us to *Jesus*, but in order to know *Him*, our interaction must be authentic and personal and not disingenuous or parroted. *Pilate* had now heard that *Jesus* was *the King of the Jews*, and accordingly was asking *Jesus* about His identity—but was he asking sincerely or superficially? *Pilate's* intent was what *Jesus* wanted to ascertain (and wanted *Pilate* to be aware for his own sake) before He *answered* the governor's question.

God takes our questions seriously. He often answers them according to their intent rather than how we present them with our words (Romans 8:26-27). If our intent is impure we are unlikely to understand His answers. This is part of why only the pure in heart will see God (Matthew 5:8)—those with insincere initiatives do not seek Him or ask the kinds of questions intended to seek to know Him by faith. And when they get answers they don't understand, they lack faith to gain wisdom so that they can know Him (James 1:6-8).

Pilate seemed neither to fully understand or be particularly interested in *Jesus's* question.

Pilate answered, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests delivered You to me; what have You done?" (v 35).

His response revealed that *Pilate's* question was not genuine. He was asking *this* on the basis of what *others* told him *about Jesus*.

What *Pilate* responded was that he was *not* asking if *Jesus* was a *king* from the viewpoint of a *Jew*, but as a Roman governor, whose job was to protect and represent the sovereignty of Caesar.

Pilate reminded *Jesus* that he did not care to consider the question from a Jewish perspective, and if he did consider it from a Jewish perspective *Jesus* would already be condemned because *Your own nation and the chief priests delivered You to me*. *Pilate* was interested in determining whether *Jesus* was claiming to be a *King* in a manner that defied Caesar.

Pilate was asking *Jesus*: Are *You* the insurrectionist *Your chief priests* accuse *You* of being? Are *You* a threat to Rome? *What have You done* to make them say you claim to be *the King of the Jews*?

With *Pilate's* perspective now clear, *Jesus answered* the governor's original question: *My kingdom is not of this world* (v 36a). In other words, *Jesus* told *Pilate*, "I am not Caesar's rival nor am I trying to take over his earthly *kingdom*."

The first reason *Jesus* gave explaining how He was *not* a threat to Caesar (in the manner *Pilate* was asking) was *My kingdom is not of this world*. *Jesus* taught His *servants* that they would profit nothing if they attained the whole world but lost their soul (Matthew 16:26). *Jesus* had already rejected Satan's offer to rule the world according to the principles of Satan and this *world* (Matthew 4:8-10; Luke 4:5-8). Possibly what Satan was offering was to make *Jesus* the Caesar.

The second reason *Jesus* offered to *Pilate* which demonstrated how He was not a threat to Caesar (in the manner *Pilate* was asking) was *If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews* (v 36b).

Jesus submitted to arrest (Matthew 26:47-56; Mark 14:43-49; Luke 22:47-53; John 18:2-11). He ordered His *servants* to put down their swords. He taught His *servants* to turn the other cheek and to not physically resist an evil person (Matthew 5:39). He taught His *servants* to love and pray for their enemies (Matthew 5:44). He taught His *servants* to seek greatness by being a humble servant (Matthew 20:25-27). He embodied this example when He washed their feet, as a servant would do (John 13:5; 15-17).

Jesus's servants were *not fighting the Jews* or Rome. Therefore, His *kingdom* was *not* a threat of *this world*. And therefore, *Jesus* was not the insurrectionist that *the Jews* were accusing *Him* of being.

After plainly stating His case and demonstrating His innocence, *Jesus* then added, *But as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm* (v 36b).

By making this claim, *Jesus* was implying to *Pilate* that He was a *king* with a *kingdom*, but that His *kingdom* was unlike any this world had ever seen. *Jesus* was not a *king* in the same way *Pilate* understood the term. He was, in fact, a *king* that was above all the kingdoms of *this world*. But He was not seeking the throne of Rome.

The *kingdom* *Jesus* offered does not operate according to the ruthless kill-or-be-killed-*world* upon which Rome, and *the Jews*, and every other human-based dominion has been based since Adam and Eve were banished from Eden. The kingdoms of *this world* rise and fall, fight and contest, cheat and defraud, exploit and abuse for the right to possess and control. But they do it all for what they can never have apart from dependence upon God: human fulfillment.

- The kingdoms of *this world* are all based in pride and selfishness and every other sin.
- *Jesus's kingdom* is based in humility, mercy, service, and love.
- The kingdoms of *this world* destroy themselves in the pursuit of controlling one another (Matthew 20:25; Galatians 5:15).
- *Jesus's kingdom* will last forever and never be shaken (Exodus 15:18; Psalm 145:13; Daniel 4:3; 7:4; Hebrews 12:28; Jude 1:25).

The principles of Christ's *kingdom* are most clearly explained in *Jesus's* Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7).

Some have taken *Jesus's* remark *My kingdom is not of this world* to mean that He has no political designs or intent to rule the earth. This view is mistaken. The promise of the Messiah was to inaugurate heaven's rule upon the earth. The second request in the so-called "Lord's prayer"—"Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10) is a fervent petition for our Heavenly Father to establish His *kingdom* and manifest His perfect will on the earth. *Jesus* will establish His *kingdom* and manifest God's perfect will after He returns as "the King of Kings" (Revelation 19:16) to judge and rule the earth (Matthew 25:31).

But when *Jesus* re-appears, He will have no rivals—not even Caesar will challenge him. Caesar, like everyone else, will bow before Him (Isaiah 52:15; Philippians 2:10-11).

Jesus's statement *my kingdom is not of this world* was truthful and honest. Its power and principles were and are from Heaven. *Jesus* will *not* compete with the *world* on its own terms. But neither will *the world* be able to compete with *Jesus* on His terms as *the King of Kings*. His *kingdom* is literally *not of this world*. His *kingdom* is of heaven.

Pilate heard what *Jesus* was telling him, but he was confused. On the one hand *Pilate* heard *Jesus* say He was *not* a rival to Caesar, but he also heard *Jesus* claim to have some kind of *kingdom*.

Therefore, *Pilate* said to Him, "So You are a king?" (v 37a).

As the sole judge of this case, *Pilate* was trying to gain clarity on the issue of whether *Jesus* was an insurrectionist and/or posed a political threat to Rome. The governor's question appears to be, "If your *kingdom* is not of this world, in what sense are you a king?"

Jesus answered *Pilate*: "You say correctly that I am a king," before going on to explain: "For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice" (v 37b).

Before we look at *Jesus*'s elaboration, it is worth pointing out that the Greek text does not contain the word: *correctly*, within *Jesus*'s response. The literal translation of *Jesus*'s answer to *Pilate* would be: "You say that I am a king." This response is extremely similar to *Jesus*'s answer to *Pilate*'s question "Are you the King of the Jews? (Matthew 27:11a; Mark 15:2a; Luke 23:3a) as recorded by the other three Gospels: "It is as you say" (Matthew 27:11b; Mark 15:2b; Luke 23:3b).

The additional word *correctly* is a (reasonable) interpretative translation of *Jesus*'s response. *Jesus* likely intended to affirm *Pilate*'s assumption that *Jesus* was a king. But He did so shrewdly. Without the word *correctly* in this answer, *Jesus*'s reply could also be interpreted to mean: *You* (and My accusers) say that I am a king, but I have not said this of Myself."

Jesus was probably intentionally and shrewdly ambiguous (Matthew 10:16b). That way He could both affirm *Pilate*'s correct assumption that He was a king, without making Himself guilty of the charges against Him through self-incrimination.

Once again, *Jesus* shrewdly affirmed to *Pilate* that He was a king, but He was a different kind of king.

Jesus explained to *Pilate* that: *for this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world.*

The phrase: *for this*, is an idiomatic expression indicating *for this* purpose. The purpose that *Jesus* was likely referring to here was His purpose to redeem *the world* and bring it back into harmony with God. He came to deliver *the world* from the wickedness and destruction of its violent and exploitative human kingdoms.

- It was for this reason that the Word became Flesh, to give Light and life to all men and to manifest God's grace to *the world* (John 1:14, 16).
- It was for this reason that God gave *Jesus*, His only begotten Son, because He loved the world—His creation—so that all who believe in Him would live (John 3:16-18, 4:13-14, 5:24, 6:47, 6:51, 10:10; John 17:3).
- It was for this reason that the Light came to shine in the darkness, to enlighten and make every man free from sin (John 1:4-9, 3:19-20, 8:32, 12:46).
- It was for the purpose of *Jesus* demonstrating that the abundant life comes from following the will of the Father, even by laying down His own life in obedience to the Father, as well as through love for others (Isaiah 53:10-12; John 10:18, 12:24-25, 15:13).

It was for the purpose of dying in our place that the Resurrection and the Life came and was now standing before Pilate about to be condemned:

“And what shall I say, ‘Father, save Me from this hour’? But **for this purpose** I came to this hour.”
(John 12:27)

Jesus lived and taught *the truth* (John 8:32). *Jesus* was *the truth* (John 14:6). He came to give people the light of truth (John 3:19-20). And *everyone who hears*—listens to and receives—*the truth* by faith follows and obeys *the voice* of *Jesus*, the Good Shepherd (John 10:11, 14, 16, 25-27).

Matthew, Mark, and Luke seem to summarize *Jesus*’s extended explanation from John: *You say correctly that I am a king. For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice.* They summarize this as: “It is as you say” (Matthew 27:11; Mark 15:2; Luke 23:3). This was in response to Pilate’s question: *So you are a King?*

Pilate did not appear to understand all that he heard about this. But *he* had heard and understood enough to know that *Jesus* was not a threat to Rome and He was innocent of the charge of insurrection. We know there were a number of Roman soldiers who became believers (Matthew 8:5-10; Acts 10:22-34; Philippians 1:13). This is an opportunity for *Pilate*; what will he decide?

He sarcastically replied to *Jesus*: *What is truth?* (v 38a) and promptly ended the interview and his investigation.

The irony is that *Pilate* has just heard the voice of *truth* (*Jesus*) speak truly about Himself, and yet *he* did not realize it. *Pilate*’s comment indicates that he did not know *what truth is* and *he* did not know **Who truth is**. It seems likely that *Pilate*’s comment meant he did not believe there was such a thing as truth. Roman politicians had a habit of claiming that truth was whatever accumulated power to themselves. An example is emperors asserting they were divine. Now here before *Pilate* is one who actually is divine. *Pilate* seems to sense there was something about this abused and slandered Jewish prisoner, but he dismisses these thoughts prematurely and fails to see Who is talking and standing before him.

Jesus is the Person of truth and He was speaking to *Pilate* who was preoccupied with the trial before him and therefore oblivious to this reality. His question may have been sarcastic, but it was a proper question for *Pilate* to ask as a matter of serious inquiry. However, this *what is truth* statement appears to be a dismissal, a statement indicating a hardened heart (Romans 1:18-21).

There is no record of *Jesus* responding to *Pilate*’s sarcastic question—*What is truth?* The implication is that *Jesus* did not reply to it. If He did not, *Jesus* was addressing the intent and *initiative* of *Pilate*’s heart rather than to his empty words. This is how God often relates to us. He goes beyond our empty chatter and relates with us according to our *heart*’s initiative and motives (Hebrews 4:12). God knows us better than we know ourselves, and always relates to us as we really are. He is not limited to our imaginations of ourselves or of our circumstances.

Pilate Delivers His Initial Verdict

John writes: *And when he had said this, he went out again to the Jews and said to them, "I find no guilt in Him"* (v 38b).

Pilate went back out the door of the Praetorium to address Jesus's Jewish accusers who were waiting anxiously outside. Once there, he announced his verdict: I find no guilt in Him. Thus the verdict is given: "I find the defendant innocent."

Luke records this moment thus: "Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, 'I find no guilt in this man'" (Luke 23:4).

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke all describe what happened next (Matthew 27:12-14; Mark 15:3-5; Luke 23:5).

The crowds of *chief priests* and elders erupted in angry protest at this verdict of innocence. An avalanche of harsh accusations broke down upon *Jesus* as they furiously pleaded with *Pilate* to reconsider.

Matthew observes how when this happened, *Jesus* remained silent (Matthew 27:12). *Jesus's* silence was in fulfillment of a Messianic prophecy within the fourth servant song of Isaiah (Isaiah 52:13-53:12):

"He was oppressed and He was afflicted,
Yet He did not open His mouth;
Like a lamb that is led to slaughter,
And like a sheep that is silent before its shearers,
So He did not open His mouth."
(Isaiah 53:7)

This prophecy foretold how the Messiah would be silent before His oppressors as a lamb is before the priests who slaughter and sacrifice it.

Pilate also noticed *Jesus's* silence while *the chief priests* accused *Him* harshly (Mark 15:3-4),

"The chief priests began to accuse Him harshly. Then Pilate questioned Him again, saying, 'Do You not answer? See how many charges they bring against You!'"
(Mark 15:3-4)

But *Jesus* "did not answer him with regard to even a single charge, so the governor was quite amazed" (Matthew 27:14; see also Mark 15:5). In addition to His prophetic destiny, *Jesus* has already been pronounced innocent—and that ought to be the end of it under Roman law.

Pilate was amazed at *Jesus's* remarkable composure and silence during the slanders levied against *Him* as His life was on the line. As the Roman governor of Judea, the final verdict was vested in *Pilate*. But tensions were high. It was clear that the leading *Jews*, *the chief priests*,

hated *Jesus* and desperately wanted *Him* executed. And it was becoming apparent that they were determined to accept nothing other than this outcome.

The chief priests “kept on insisting” that *Jesus* be killed in spite of *Jesus* being declared innocent by *Pilate* (Luke 23:5a). They would not take no for an answer. Their insistence might have been fueled by the knowledge that *Jesus* and His followers were aware of their plot, and at this point they might have reasoned that if *Jesus* did not die, they might lose their place (John 11:47-48).

As *Jesus*’s trial progressed, *Pilate*’s responsibilities to both uphold Rome’s laws as well as to maintain good order were becoming at odds. He believed *Jesus* to be innocent (Luke 23:4; John 18:38). But he needed the priests’ and Jewish leaders’ help in maintaining control over the masses of Jews who had crowded the city of Jerusalem for the Passover. If the province turned against *Pilate*, he would lose his honor, his job, and possibly his life.

In any case, fear and indecision seemed to creep and fester within *Pilate*’s heart as he tried to balance the law, which required *Jesus*’s innocence, with keeping good order, which was essential for his political survival. Meanwhile, the Jewish priests and leaders obsessed over one goal—kill *Jesus*.

The chief priests were relentless. In their accusations, they said: “He stirs up the people, teaching all over Judea, starting from Galilee even as far as this place” (Luke 23:5). It seems at this point they realized their only leverage was to concern *Pilate* that he might lose order if he did not do their bidding.

This revelation that *Jesus* started *from Galilee* apparently gave *Pilate* an idea. An idea that could absolve him from having to make a decision that ran contrary to finding *Jesus* innocent. *Pilate*’s verdict was becoming harder and harder to sustain the more the Jewish leaders protested:

“When *Pilate* heard it, he asked whether the man was a Galilean. And when he learned that He belonged to Herod’s jurisdiction, he sent Him to Herod, who himself also was in Jerusalem at that time.”
(Luke 23:6-7)

The Herod referred to here was Herod Antipas, son of King Herod the Great (builder), and the Roman magistrate of Galilee, the district *Jesus* was from. Herod Antipas was the ruler who beheaded John the Baptizer, *Jesus*’s cousin (Matthew 14:1-12; Mark 6:14-29; Luke 9:9). *Pilate* sent *Jesus* to Herod to let him deal with this matter.

This ended the first phase of *Jesus*’s civil trial. It was: “*Jesus*’s Arraignment before *Pilate*” (Matthew 27:1-2, 11-14; Mark 15:1-5; Luke 23:1-7; John 18:28-38).

The second phase of *Jesus*’s trial will take place in the court of Herod Antipas. It is called, “*Jesus*’s Audience before Herod Antipas” (Luke 23:8-12).

Click [this link](#) to read The Bible Says Commentary for this scripture detailing the second phase of *Jesus*’s trial.

Biblical Text

33 Therefore Pilate entered again into the Praetorium, and summoned Jesus and said to Him, "Are You the King of the Jews?" 34 Jesus answered, "Are you saying this on your own initiative, or did others tell you about Me?" 35 Pilate answered, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests delivered You to me; what have You done?" 36 Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm." 37 Therefore Pilate said to Him, "So You are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say correctly that I am a king. For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice." 38 Pilate said to Him, "What is truth?" And when he had said this, he went out again to the Jews and said to them, "I find no guilt in Him."