**Luke 23:3-7**

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/luke/luke-23/luke-233-7/>

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

Pilate follows up on the charge of insurrection and interviews Jesus, asking Him if He is the King of the Jews. Jesus replies, “It is as you say.” Pilate finds nothing in Jesus’s answer to convict Him, so declares His innocence. The chief priests are adamant that Jesus must die. As they protest, Pilate hears that Jesus is from Galilee, and decides to send Jesus to Herod, the ruler of that district, and let him deal with the trial.

 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 John 18:33-38.

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 Luke. 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 7:00am). According to the Jewish calendar, the date was probably 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.](https://thebiblesays.com/tough-topics/a-timeline-of-jesuss-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).

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 to toss the case telling them to “judge Him according to your own laws” (John 18:31a). The chief priests 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 most serious. Under Roman law the penalty for insurrection was death.

**Pilate Interviews Jesus**

Such charges, especially the third one, 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).

Luke’s summary of this interview consists of a single verse:

So Pilate asked Him, saying, “Are You the King of the Jews?” And He answered him and said, “It is as you say” (v 3).

Of the four Gospel accounts of Pilate’s first interview of Jesus, John’s is the most extensive.

The first thing Pilate did was to enter the Praetorium and summon Jesus so he could interview Him away from His accusers who waited outside (John 18:28b; 33). Once there it appears that the conversation focused on the most serious of the three charges—the charge of insurrection.

Luke, like Matthew and Mark, appears to summarize this interview by stating Pilate’s main question and Jesus’s main answer (Matthew 27:11; Mark 15:2). Matthew explicitly states that this exchange took place as “Jesus stood before the governor” (Matthew 27:11).

So Pilate asked Him, saying, “Are You the King of the Jews?” (v 3a).

As the judge of this case, Pilate was interested in whether or not Jesus was guilty of claiming to be a king and therefore was attempting to usurp Caesar’s political authority in Judea.

Jesus answered Pilate’s question and said, “It is as you say” (v 3b).

From John’s much fuller account we see that Pilate basically asked Jesus a version of the question—Are You the King of the Jews? at least twice.

The first time Pilate asks this question is at the beginning of John’s account of this interview.

“Are You the King of the Jews?”
(John 18:33)

Jesus replied to this first question by asking a probing question to ascertain where Pilate was coming from: “Are you saying this on your own initiative, or did others tell you about Me?” (John 18:34). This could be a version of Jesus’s response recorded in the synoptic Gospels: It is as you say.

Pilate was asking Jesus this as a Roman governor presiding over a trial: “I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests delivered You to me; what have You done?” (John 18:35).

Jesus then responded accordingly that He was not a threat to Rome or guilty of insurrection because: His kingdom was not of this world (John 18:36a). The proof Jesus offered to support His claim that His kingdom was not of this world was that neither Jesus nor His followers were resisting the Jewish authorities or the Romans (John 18:36b).

Pilate then asked his question a second time,

“So You are a king?”
(John 18:37a)

Jesus appeared to answer in the affirmative, but He did so ambiguously, “You say correctly that I am a king” (John 18:37b). Note the NASB 95 inserts the word “correctly” in Jesus’s reply. This is added to the Greek text of this answer. The NASB’s translation is therefore interpretative concerning Jesus’s response. The interpretation is reasonable because Jesus likely intended to signal an affirmative response to Pilate, but the interpretive translation masks the brilliant shrewdness of Jesus to both signal to Pilate that He is a king, but to do so without saying anything that would constitute self-incrimination and make Him guilty of the charges against Him.

Again, Jesus’s literal response to Pilate here as recorded by John: “You say that I am a king” (John 18:37b) is very similar to the responses in Luke, Matthew, and Mark: It is as you say (Matthew 27:11; Mark 15:2).

In John’s Gospel Jesus elaborates upon His answer: “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” (John 18:37b). Pilate retorts: “What is truth?” as he ends the interview and exits the Praetorium to announce his not-guilty verdict to the chief priests and the crowds (v 4) waiting outside (John 18:38).

**Pilate Announces his Initial Verdict**

Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, “I find no guilt in this man” (v 4).

This was not the verdict or outcome the chief priests and the crowds of Christ’s accusers had come for.

A not-guilty verdict was unacceptable to the chief priests who brought Jesus before Pilate. They hated Jesus. They were not seeking justice, they were seeking Jesus’s death. The people believed He was the Messiah, but the priests could not control Him. He had outraged them when He cleared out their money changers in the Temple (Luke 19:45-46). He had humiliated them as He answered their questions while teaching publicly in the temple (Luke 20:1-47).

Even before those events the chief priests had conspired to murder Him because they feared if they let Jesus go on, He would turn the nation against them, and Rome would strip away their power (John 11:47-57). Now they knew He was aware of their conspiracy (Matthew 26:23-25). Further, they had illegally arrested (Luke 22:51-53) and condemned Him (Luke 22:66-71) and much abused Him (Luke 22:63-65). If Pilate were to release Jesus now, they would likely be ruined once their crimes and abuse against the Man many people regarded as the Messiah came to light. They were desperate for Jesus to die.

The crowds with the chief priests erupted in angry protest at this verdict of innocence pronounced by Pilate. An avalanche of harsh accusations broke down upon Jesus as they furiously demanded that Pilate reconsider.

Matthew observes how Jesus remained silent as they shouted their accusations against Him (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 foretells how the Messiah would be silent before His oppressors as a lamb is in front of 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).

Pilate was amazed at Jesus’s remarkable composure and silence during the slanders being made against Him as His life was on the line. Jesus was putting into practice His teaching: “do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also” (Matthew 5:39).

Perhaps Pilate was trying to get Jesus to say something that would either cause Pilate to change his mind and see Him as guilty so the governor could appease the angry crowds of priests and elders; or to say something that would shame His accusers and thus give Pilate an opportunity to finalize his verdict of innocence and pin the decision on the religious leaders’ failure to win their case.

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 deadly outcome and were willing to precipitate civil unrest in order to secure it.

The chief priests “kept on insisting” that Jesus be killed (Luke 23:5a).

**Pilate’s Dilemma and his Solution**

As Jesus’s trial progressed, Pilate’s responsibilities to uphold Rome’s laws and to maintain good order were proving to be at odds. He believed Jesus to be innocent (Luke 23:4; John 18:38). But he needed the chief priests’ help in maintaining control over the masses of people 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. Fear and indecision seemed to fester within Pilate’s heart as he tried to balance the law which favored Jesus’s innocence against keeping good order, while the Jewish priests 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).

Something in the remark that Jesus started from Galilee apparently gave Pilate an idea—an idea that could absolve him from having to make a decision that was becoming harder and harder to make. With the trial dragging on, and the people protesting his verdict of not-guilty, Pilate was looking for a way out.

Judea was the entire Roman province that Pilate was governor over. Galilee was a district within that province. The district of Galilee was administered by Herod Antipas.

When Pilate heard it—that Jesus stirs up people, teaching all of Judea, starting from Galilee—he asked whether the man was a Galilean (v 6).

Although born in Bethlehem, Jesus was raised in Galilee (Nazareth) and began and headquartered His public ministry in and around the town of Capernaum of Galilee (Matthew 4:12-13).

And when he (Pilate) learned that He (Jesus) belonged to Herod’s jurisdiction, he sent Him to Herod, who himself also was in Jerusalem at that time (Luke 23:7).

This Herod was Herod Antipas, son of King Herod the Great (builder). Herod Antipas was the Roman magistrate of Galilee, Jesus’s home district. This is why Luke describes Pilate’s thought process as Jesus belonged to Herod’s jurisdiction. Pilate sent Jesus to Herod to let him deal with this matter.

Sending Jesus to Herod conveniently shifted unwelcome blame and unwanted responsibility away from the governor from having to decide between the law (under which Jesus was innocent) and peaceful order (the unrest threatened by Jewish leaders if Pilate found Jesus innocent).

Roman law demanded the release of Jesus because no guilt was found in this man. (But such a verdict enraged the chief priests who now threatened maintaining good order). The chief priests demanded that Jesus be put to death. (But such a verdict broke the law and condemned an innocent man to death).

Pilate was now having to choose between following the law and appeasing the priests. He had to cross one for the sake of the other. He would be criticized for whichever side he chose. By sending Jesus to Herod, Pilate had (at least for the moment) seemed to extricate himself from having to make a decision that would incur criticism upon him.

Herod Antipas was the son of the ruler who had tried to execute Jesus when Christ was first born (Matthew 2:16); and he was the same ruler who beheaded John the Baptizer, Jesus’s cousin (Matthew 14:1-12; Mark 6:14-29; Luke 9:9).

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 takes place in the court of Herod Antipas. It is called, “Jesus’s Audience before Herod Antipas” (Luke 23:8-12). And it is to this trial that we now turn.

**Biblical Text**

**3 So Pilate asked Him, saying, “Are You the King of the Jews?” And He answered him and said, “It is as you say.” 4 Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, “I find no guilt in this man.” 5 But they kept on insisting, saying, “He stirs up the people, teaching all over Judea, starting from Galilee even as far as this place.” 6 When Pilate heard it, he asked whether the man was a Galilean. 7 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.**