

# JESUS AND THE RULERS

by Ray C. Stedman

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We are nearing the close of Mark's account of the life of our Lord, this marvelous servant who came to rule among men, this ruler who came to serve. The fifteenth chapter of Mark's gospel is the account of our Lord's appearance before Pilate. The events around the cross are more than simple narratives told by the gospel writers. You can read them that way: the simple tragic story of a man who laid down his life on behalf of a cause. But if you read the gospel accounts carefully you will see that there are very strange and marvelous forces at work behind the scenes. We sometimes sing a hymn, "God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform." I do not think anything makes that more clear than these gospel accounts. In First Corinthians 2:7, the Apostle Paul says, "But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, ..." {1 Cor 2:7a RSV}. "None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had they would not have crucified the Lord of glory," {1 Cor 2:8 RSV}. So there is something going on behind the scenes in this account, and I hope we will be able to see something of it in this study.

The cross has amazing power in our lives. It seems to be a simple story; yet what it does to us is radical and revolutionary. In Chapter 14, Jesus appeared before the priests, and the issue was whether or not he was the prophet that was to come, the Messiah, who would come from God to set things right within the nation. This indeed was what the high priest asked him, "Are you the prophet? Are you the Messiah, the Christ, Son of the living God?" {cf, Mark 14:61}. And Jesus answered, "I am," {Mark 14:62 RSV}. When the priests mocked him and ridiculed him, they covered his face and then hit him, saying, "Prophecy!" For that was the great issue: was he the predicted one?

But the account today has to do with Jesus' appearance before Pilate, and the issue is, "Is he the King of the Jews?" That question is foremost throughout this portion of Scripture. Yet underneath are currents that indicate something much deeper is going on, something of mystery.

I would like you to be thinking of four questions as we read this account:

- The first one is, Why did Pilate marvel at the silence of Jesus?
- Second, Why did the crowd choose Barabbas instead of Jesus?
- Third, Why did Pilate scourge Jesus before his crucifixion?
- And fourth, Why did the soldiers mock him with such passion and cruelty?

Now be alert to these as we read this account, because as we seek to answer these questions, we will get at the story behind the story.

The first question is raised in Chapter 15, Verse 1:

**And as soon as it was morning the chief priests, with the elders and scribes, and the whole council held a consultation; and they bound Jesus and led him away and delivered him to Pilate. And Pilate asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" And he answered him, "You have said so." And the chief priests accused him of many things. And Pilate again asked him, "Have you no answer to make? See how many charges they bring against you." But Jesus made no further answer, so that Pilate wondered. {Mark 15:1-5 RSV}**

We do not know how our Lord spent the hours between his late evening appearance before the priests and his appearance here before Pilate the next morning. There were probably five or six hours in between. It's hard to say whether he was able to get a few hours' sleep after that momentous night when he had been betrayed and arrested, brought before the high priests and condemned by them in an illegal night meeting. But early the next morning he is brought before them again, and the priests hold a consultation with the entire Sanhedrin. Their

meeting at night was illegal. In order to justify their actions, they have to hold a meeting in the daytime. So early in the morning, as soon as it is light, they gather together to hold this meeting.

The reason they had to consult together was because they knew that the charge on which they had condemned Jesus would never stand before the Roman governor. They condemned Jesus for blasphemy. They said that he claimed to be God, so he was worthy of death. But the Romans would pay no attention to that charge, so they had to come up with something else before they sent him to Pilate. Luke tells us that they levied three charges against him: First, he was charged with perverting the nation, that is, arousing troublemakers, creating riots and dissension. Second, he was charged with forbidding the payment of tribute to Rome, teaching people to not pay their taxes. Third, he was charged with wanting to be king instead of Caesar.

Now it is this last charge that Pilate seized upon as being the only important one of the three.

Some of you have been to the Tower of Antonio, overlooking the temple area in Jerusalem. It was probably to this Roman fortress that Jesus was taken to appear before Pilate, and Pilate seized the occasion to say to him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Now Jesus' answer has puzzled a lot of people. He did not say, as he had previously said to the priests, "I am." He said, "You have said so," or "So you say." Many have been troubled by that, for it is neither an affirmation nor a denial, but simply, "That is what you say. Am I the King of the Jews? According to your way of thinking, you would call me King of the Jews." Why was he not more positive? I think the answer is clear in John's gospel. John 18:36, 37 says Jesus went on to say, "My kingship is not of this world; if my kingship were of this world, my servants would fight, ..." He makes clear to Pilate that his kingship is no threat to Rome whatsoever. I think it is very clear that Pilate understood it that way and was relieved of any fear that Jesus was indeed trying to foment a revolution against Rome.

If we read between the lines here we can see the priests began to see that Pilate understood that Jesus was not challenging the authority of Rome and their case was beginning to fall apart. They are angry, Mark tells us, and begin to accuse him of many things. They heap on all the accusations they can think of to show Pilate that they want the death of this man. If we skip to Verse 10, there is a very revealing verse that says Pilate "perceived that it was out of envy that the chief priests had delivered him up." Now Pilate was no fool. He was a cruel and rapacious governor, but he was no fool. He saw through all these empty charges and understood what the priests were trying to do and why. Now "to envy" means that you want something that someone else has. You are jealous of it; if you cannot have it yourself, you do not want the other person to have it either. What the priests wanted was Jesus' power and authority with the people. "He spoke as no other man spoke" {cf, John 7:46}, and they knew that. Again and again they had tried to gainsay what he said, and to trap him with his own words, but they could never catch him. He always had a word, a simple word, that utterly demolished them and all their schemes. Such craft and power made them angry and envious.

Now to all these additional charges that the priests heaped upon him, Jesus remained absolutely silent. He just stood there. Pilate was amazed at this, and tried to encourage him to answer. I think that is what we have to see in Pilate's words, "Have you no answer to make? See how many charges they bring against you." Once again the Lord stood without uttering a word. He did not even reply to Pilate. So it is recorded here that Pilate marveled that our Lord remained silent. Now why did Jesus remain silent, and why was the governor so struck by this silence of Jesus?

If you read further in the chapter you find that some hours later, when Jesus was hanging on the cross, the chief priests and others were standing around, taunting him and mocking him. Verse 29:

**And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying, "Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!" So also the chief priests mocked him to one another with the scribes, saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself." {Mark 15:29-31 RSV}**

When they made that statement, they were wrong. They thought that he could not save himself, but he could have. I think that here, before Pilate, it was quite possible for Jesus to save himself from the cross. For it was evident to him that Pilate knew he was innocent and wanted to deliver him and was seeking some way to do so. If he had replied to Pilate in any way, the governor would have used his words to dismiss the charge and

free him immediately. It is obvious that Pilate's sympathy at this point is with Jesus, not with the priests. He knows what they are trying to do, that they are trying to railroad Jesus. He knows that the man is innocent, and is no real threat to Rome, and wants to set him free. But he marveled because Jesus would not cooperate. He did not say a word, and gave Pilate no grounds on which to free him. Thus the silence of Jesus effectively exposed the true enmity of these priests. It effectively stripped away all their disguise, and they had to come out and openly reveal that what was eating them was nothing more than the jealousy of their own hearts.

That is what I mean when I say the cross has a remarkable way of working with us. It strips us of all pretense. It is God's great plowshare, ripping through the hypocrisy of our lives, laying us bare for all to see, including ourselves. This is what you see happening here. As Jesus remains silent before these priests, they are forced to make clear the enmity of their own hearts against him.

The second movement of this story begins in the incident with Barabbas. The other gospel accounts tell us that at this point Pilate sent Jesus to Herod, and Herod, who was considered king of the Jews, tried to make sport of Jesus, and tried to get him to work a miracle. Mark does not record any of that. But Jesus remained utterly silent before Herod, and never opened his mouth once. So Herod sent him back to Pilate, and here Mark takes up the narrative in Verse 6:

**Now at the feast he used to release for them any one prisoner whom they asked. And among the rebels in prison, who had committed murder in the insurrection, there was a man called Barabbas. And the crowd came up and began to ask Pilate to do as he was wont to do for them. And he answered them, "Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?" For he perceived that it was out of envy that the chief priests had delivered him up. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release for them Barabbas instead. And Pilate again said to them, "Then what shall I do with the man whom you call the King of the Jews?" And they cried out again, "Crucify him." And Pilate said to them, "Why, what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Crucify him." So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released for them Barabbas; and having scourged Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified. {Mark 15:6-15 RSV}**

All the gospel writers tell us of Barabbas. He was a bloodthirsty revolutionary, a member of the first-century edition of the Symbionese Liberation Army; hard-nosed, bloody-handed, he was a murderer, Luke tells us. The interesting thing about him is his name, which means "son of the father." And in a most dramatic historic coincidence, according to some old manuscripts, there is some evidence that his name probably was Jesus Barabbas: Jesus, son of the father. I do not see how we could read and understand that without knowing that this is again God's subtle teaching, that "hidden and secret wisdom of God" Paul speaks of {1 Cor 2:7 RSV}, that is silently guiding events behind the scene, bringing things to light that otherwise would never be known. For this crowd is not confronted with choosing between Jesus, the son of the father, who rules by force, and makes his living by his wits; and Jesus, the Son of the Father, who rules by love, and is ready to sacrifice himself.

Now I think we have to ask the question, Why did they choose Barabbas? The answer seems to be that they were disappointed with Jesus. This was the crowd which, just a few days before, had welcomed him into Jerusalem. The city was filled with people Jesus had healed. The eyes of the blind had been opened, the deaf made to hear, and the lame to walk. There must have been hundreds, if not thousands of people in Jerusalem at that time whom Jesus had touched personally. He had awakened within the people the hope, the flaming desire, that this was indeed the Messiah, come to deliver them from the yoke of Rome. All their ideas of messiahship centered around the thought that he would be the one who would set them free from the hated bondage of Rome. Now, when they saw him standing helpless before the Roman governor, saw his apparent unwillingness or inability to make any defense or to get out of this by any means or to do anything against the Romans, all their loyalty to him collapsed. In anger and disappointment, they turned and chose Jesus, the son of the father, who lived by force, Barabbas the murderer.

We, too, face the same decision these Jews had to make between Barabbas and Jesus. Have you ever been disappointed in Jesus, disappointed in God? Have you ever expected him to act in a certain way because of what you understood about him and his life and his nature -- but he did not do it. Has that ever happened to you? It has to me. I have been angry and disappointed in God. I have been all but convinced that he did not live

up to his promise, for I was sure that I knew what he was going to do, and God disappointed me. My heart was filled with rage that God would act that way, despite the fact that God has told us all, again and again, "My ways are not your ways, and my thoughts are not your thoughts. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts higher than your thoughts," {cf, Isa 55:8-9}. We cannot figure out God. He will be true to himself, he will never lie, he will never deceive us; but he is more than we can handle. He is bigger than we are. And, like this crowd, when we get angry with God, and upset with Jesus and turn from him, there is always another Jesus waiting in the wings for us to follow.

A few weeks ago I saw the musical, *Jesus Christ Superstar*. In a way, I appreciated that musical. I thought it was a very honest revelation of what the world conceives Jesus to be. One thing was very clear, however; it was not the same Jesus that is in the gospels. It is the same name, same attributes, but not the same Jesus. Our anger and disappointment in Jesus always open us to the possibility of following another Jesus. The scourging of Jesus related in this paragraph raises another question. Pilate knew that the crowd wanted him to release Barabbas and not Jesus. He asked them, "What shall I do then with Jesus, the King of the Jews?" And they said, "Crucify him." I think Pilate was somewhat aghast at that; there was no basis for him to order Jesus to be crucified. And yet the crowd was demanding it, and Pilate was a man-pleaser. So he scourged Jesus. Now it was not the normal practice to scourge a prisoner before crucifying him. There is no evidence that the other thieves who were crucified with Jesus were scourged before they went to the cross. But Pilate ordered Jesus to be scourged. Any of you who have seen what the Romans used in this process of scourging would realize what a bloody and bitter experience it was. These long leather cords were imbedded with bits of metal and bone, so that as the thongs whipped around him, the skin on the prisoner's back was cut and flayed open, until it was a bloody mass. I often have wondered why it was that Pilate ordered this scourging, knowing that crucifixion would follow. But I think it is clear that this was the last attempt by Pilate to spare Jesus. He hoped, by the scourging, to awaken the sympathy of the crowd. He hoped to punish him in a way that would arouse the feeling of the crowd on his behalf. For John tells us that after the scourging, Pilate led Jesus out before the crowd and said to them, "Behold the man!" {John 19:5 KJV}. But it failed. Stirred up by the chief priests and others, the crowd kept crying, in their madness, "Crucify him!"

John tells us that Pilate was afraid of Jesus. He was afraid of the crowd; he was afraid of Jesus. So as this account unfolds, you see a man of dubious character, caught on the horns of a dilemma. Trying to please two opposing powers, he is stripped naked before all of history, and we begin to see this man in his true character. He is a coward, afraid to make the decision on the basis of justice. So he tries to decide on the basis of expediency and he ends up the curse of all the ages. See how the cross again is at work behind the scenes, bringing out the hidden things.

Now the final paragraph this morning deals with the soldiers. Verse 16:

**And the soldiers led him away inside the palace (that is, the praetorium); and they called together the whole battalion. And they clothed him in a purple cloak, and plaiting a crown of thorns they put it on him. And they began to salute him, "Hail, King of the Jews!" And they struck his head with a reed, and spat upon him, and they knelt down in homage to him. And when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the purple cloak, and put his own clothes on him. And they led him out to crucify him. {Mark 15:16-20 RSV}**

This mockery was a strange thing. They did not usually do this with those sentenced to crucifixion. These were rough, hard-handed soldiers, used to carrying out gruesome orders. They could callously take a man out and nail him to a cross, then go to breakfast. But they went through this mockery of Jesus that seems to have a tremendous passion behind it. Notice they called the whole band together, all the soldiers who were off duty or lounging around, so they were all joined together in this. It was spontaneous. They did not have to do this, they decided by themselves to indulge in this cruel and insulting mockery. They made the crown of thorns and jammed it down on the Lord's head; they put a reed in his hand as his scepter and bowed down before him; they spit on him, and jerked the reed out of his hand and hit him over the head with it.

Why this strange insulting mockery? Again, I think the answer is revealed in what they said to him: "Hail, King of the Jews!" Now, they were not angry at Jesus. Probably had never seen him before, and knew very

little about him. What they were angry at was the Jews. All the pent-up hatred and resentment against this stubborn and difficult people came pouring out and found its object in this lonely Jew whom they understood was regarded in some sense as King of the Jews. All the foul mass of bigotry and racial hatred came pouring out against Jesus. Once again we see how the cross unveils what is hidden. We read this morning in Psalms 2, which begins with these words,

**Why do the nations conspire,  
and the people plot in vain?  
The kings of the earth set themselves,  
and the rulers take counsel together,  
against the Lord and his anointed, saying,  
"Let us burst their bonds asunder,  
and cast their cords from us." {Psa 2:1-3 RSV}**

The Psalmist is asking, "Why?" And as you read through this account you can see that God is subtly moving in strange and various ways behind the scenes to answer that question. As the cross of Jesus comes into the life of any man, woman, boy, or girl, it has a powerful way of ripping off all our disguise, and we have to answer finally, clearly, and honestly, what our reaction is to Jesus.

That is why the great question of all time is, "What will you do with Jesus, who is called the Christ?" What is your attitude toward Jesus? Do you love him? Paul writes, "Any one who does not love the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be accursed," {cf, Gal 1:8-9}. The word is, "let him be damned." Now why would he say a harsh thing like that? Because, you see, that is the test. If you do not love Jesus, what do you love? You love the opposite. Instead of loving love, you love hate. Instead of loving truth, you love lies. Instead of loving honesty, you love deceit. It is the final testing of all time, of every person. What do you feel about Jesus? Do you love him? Most of us do. But even in those hours when we act differently, the cross has this strange and marvelous way of penetrating deep beneath the surface and bringing out all that hidden secret wisdom of God, which none of the rulers of this age understand; for if they had, they never would have crucified the Lord of glory. Every one of us finally stands naked before God. So I hope that if your attitude is anything other than a love for Jesus, perhaps this morning you will surrender that attitude to him. You cannot change your heart, but he can. If you bring it to him, he will make the change.

### **Prayer:**

Lord, we see so clearly how you have become the crisis of history, the great divide that separates the true from the false, the good from the bad, the loving from the unloving. Lord, you tell us who we are, and what we are. We would now just simply realize that life is confronting us all the time with decisions to choose Barabbas or Christ, to choose honesty or deceit, arrogance or humility. Grant to us, Lord, that we may turn our hearts to you, and choose the Lord Jesus, the one who has been exalted to be Lord over all heaven and earth, over all things, before whom every knee shall bow, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. May our hearts echo that praise now. In his name we pray, Amen.

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