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INTRODUCTION

To know who Jesus was and what was done to him is to know it was the saddest of all days. To know who Jesus was and what he did for us is to know that was a day of hope. On that day sin crucified Christ, but Christ crucified sin.

Luke 23:33 says, "And when they were come to the place, which is called Calvary, there they crucified him." *Calvary* is from the Latin word *calvaria*, "the skull", which corresponds to the Hebrew word *Golgotha,* meaning the "place of a skull" (Matthew 27:33; Mark 15:22; John 19:17). Some translations drop the Latin designation and render it "the skull," but *Calvary* has been so frequently used in poems, hymns, and preaching that almost everyone in the English-speaking world knows that it refers to the place where Jesus was crucified. We are not told why the place had this name. The most common conjecture is that there was a rock formation which had the appearance of a skull. Others have thought it was so named because it was a place of execution.

All we know for certain about the actual location is that it was near Jerusalem (John 19:20) but outside the city walls (Hebrews 13:12). It was near a garden (John 19:41) that included a sufficient rock formation into which had been carved a cave for a tomb (Matthew 27:60). We also know it was in a

place where people were passing by (Matthew 27:39), thus a public thoroughfare. The area has many hills and it is possible the crosses were on a knoll, but in spite of all the poems, sermons, and artistic images, there is actually no mention at all of it being "the hill of Calvary" or "Mount Calvary." The point to be made is that for us Calvary is not so much a place as it is an event.

While any narrative must include descriptions of circumstances and actions, much of what best conveys the story is to be found in the words that are spoken. Many have given expositions of the last seven words of Jesus, and for good reason, for everything he spoke is rich in significance. But there were other voices heard at Calvary. It will strengthen our faith and stir our emotions to go back to the story and consider voices and words that still echo from Calvary.

My own faith has been strengthened by this study. I make no claim of originality. Instead I have simply tried to bring together insights from many sources. As with the study of any biblical text, there is in each case the obvious meaning and then the deeper significance. The point is not that there are hidden meanings, but that by comparison with other passages and that by thinking through the implications, our understanding will be enlarged and our souls will be enriched. "But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world" (Galatians 6:14).

David R. Pharr, 2005

And there followed him a great company of people,
and of women, which also bewailed and lamented him.
But Jesus turning unto them said,
Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for me,
but weep for yourselves, and for your children.
For, behold, the days are coming,
in the which they shall say,
Blessed are the barren,
and the wombs that never bare,
and the paps which never gave suck.
Then shall they begin to say to the mountains,
Fall on us; and to the hills, Cover us.
For if they do these things in a green tree,
what shall be done in the dry?
(Luke 23:27–31).

Chapter One

THE WORD OF JUDGMENT: "WEEP FOR YOURSELVES"

Not once through all the hateful events of the long night and morning had one word of sympathy been offered. If any pity was felt, it was carefully hidden. In fact, to sympathize openly with a condemned criminal was forbidden, yet these women were conspicuous in their undisguised sympathy. No doubt there were private tears among the disciples, but these women pressed into the throng and their tender pity brought them so close that Jesus heard their crying. No one ever seemed more deserving of sympathy. Yet Jesus' response was a mild rebuke. "Weep not for me, but weep for yourselves" (Luke 23:28). There was nothing inherently wrong with shedding tears for the Savior, but their tears were misplaced. What they were seeing that day as an example of Rome's cruel tyranny would hardly compare to tragedies yet to come.

The Via Dolorosa

Tradition identifies the route from the Praetorium court as the Via Dolorosa, meaning "sorrowful road," but there is considerable question whether the actual route can be determined. Whatever path might have been used, it was a sad procession as Jesus was taken from the governor's palace

through the narrow streets of the city to a place outside called Golgotha, "and there followed him a great company of people" (Luke 23:27).

We can assume the chief priests kept pace with the procession. Included must have been many from the mob that had shouted, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" Word-of-mouth reports rushed through the city and the crowd doubtless grew at every turn. Shops were closed for Passover and by that hour (8:00–9:00 A.M.) the streets would have been filled with both locals and Passover pilgrims. Such a notable victim would attract a mixed multitude of friends and foes, as well as the curious and those who were simply caught up in mob excitement. As the throng moved toward Calvary, he heard the women who "bewailed and lamented him" (Luke 23:27).

Many stirring sermons have been preached about the various persons and kinds of people who came to see Jesus die. An old spiritual asks, "Were you there?" with the point that we were all represented, with our own particular sins. In the crowd were cowards and calloused men, but there were also many who followed with broken hearts. It is hard to imagine that any in that city might have been completely disinterested and indifferent.

Daughters of Jerusalem

Certain women from Galilee had been noted for their loyalty and attention toward Jesus, even providing financial support as they were able (Luke 8:2–3). These witnessed the crucifixion from a distance (Matthew 27:55–56; Mark 15:40–41; Luke 23:49). They were not the ones Jesus addressed as "Daughters of Jerusalem."

It is possible that these women, who came so close and who were so vocal in their sympathy, were themselves Christ's devoted followers. But it is also possible that they were simply women with natural feminine compassion for any human being about to be so cruelly tortured. Some have thought they were part of a society of charitable women who were involved in various good works, including consoling and

lamenting the dying. They might have regularly followed and wept for any of their countrymen who were to be executed under the heartless tyranny of Rome.

"Weep Not for Me"

In Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane he committed himself to drink the full cup of suffering (Matthew 26:39). Later on the cross when offered the wine and myrrh mixture (a kind of anesthetic), he refused it, determined to endure the devil's worst (Matthew 27:34; Mark 15:23). So also, he chose to wrestle with suffering and death untempered by even the well-intentioned pity of these women. "Weep not for me" (Luke 23:28). The cross was his and his alone. Jesus' resolve was not mere stoicism or manly resolve. He was looking past the suffering, and "for the joy that was set before him endured the cross" (Hebrews 12:2). That his enemies acted so wickedly was tragic, but the death of Jesus of Nazareth was not a tragedy. We rightly feel sorrow when a loved one has died. We are not sorry that Jesus died. His death was the key event in the redemptive purposes of God. The calamity over which they cried would mean the victory that ultimately could "wipe away all tears from their eyes" (Revelation 21:4).

It is significant that nowhere in the Bible are we called to pity, to feel sympathy for the suffering of the Savior. It is expected that we acknowledge the cross with gratitude and love. He wants us to understand its purpose. But never does he ask for pity or tears of sympathy. Some teachers have felt it necessary to excessively enlarge on the details of his agony, going far beyond the restraints placed on the Gospel records by the Holy Spirit. Much can be assumed about the physical and emotional trauma associated with death by this horrible method. Medical science can explain the effects of crucifixion on the organs of the body, horrible in every detail. But the Gospel witnesses provide little to generate excessive pathos or satisfy morbid curiosity.

This does not mean that it is inappropriate that we feel or express emotion over the enormity of his suffering, rather

that pathos is not a substitute for genuine lifelong commitment. Too much of what is assumed to be spirituality is little more than sentimentality. Sensational descriptions may produce shock and tears. But in too many cases tears aroused by emotional descriptions will soon dry. Emotionalism is never proof of justification. The challenge of Calvary is not how it makes us feel, but how we respond with our lives. "And that he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again" (2 Corinthians 5:15).

Misplaced Tears

The things that most distress us are not always the things that ought to be most distressing. We live in an unbalanced world, and we would be naive to think that our personal perspective is not often affected. Isaiah's warning also fits the modern scene: "Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!" (Isaiah 5:20). For Christians the concern may not be that we embrace a total reversal of values, but rather the temptations which maximize what is commonplace while minimizing what is truly important, of exaggerating the temporal and taking for granted the eternal, of weeping over things that are secondary.

In nothing is this more evident than in worldly attitudes toward sin. Unrighteousness laughs when there ought to be crying. "Be afflicted, and mourn, and weep: let your laughter be turned to mourning, and your joy to heaviness" (James 4:9). More to be pitied than Jesus were the rulers that called for his death, the mob that supported them, and the wishy-washy crowds that praised him when he entered the city and scorned him as he left.

"A Green Tree" or "a Dry"

A proverbial expression explained why they should weep for themselves and their children: "For if they do these things

in a green tree, what shall be done in the dry?" (Luke 23:31). Their tears were for a victim of ruthless Roman brutality. So many times they had witnessed the harsh oppression of their conquerors. Fresh in Jewish memory was the outrage of Pilate having men killed at the altar, letting their blood spill with the blood of the sacrifices (Luke 13:1). The Roman occupation of their land was one of cruel oppression. Crucifying Jesus was yet one more example. But the atrocities they had seen so far could not compare to the horrors that would come later. A green tree is slow to burn. As awful as it was, what Rome was doing then was a slow burn compared to the conflagration that would eventually come to Jerusalem and Judea. The dry tree is a metaphor for the time appointed for destruction. If Jesus in his absolute sinlessness could be so abused, how much greater might be the suffering to come on those who deserve judgment? The world doubts that it must really suffer because of guilt. How can the world be so foolish when the only wholly righteous one so suffered in his innocence?

Peter gave a similar warning:

> For the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God: and if it first begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God? And if the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear? (1 Peter 4:17–18).

He Had Wept for Them

It might seem out of place that in these circumstances he would speak particularly of Jerusalem's future calamity. Actually, this was the longest of all the "words" at Calvary. Why so much attention to events that were yet a generation removed? Two things need to be appreciated.

First, their rejection and murder of the Messiah was the consummate transgression. All the sins of a rebellious world were brought to climax in the murder of their only hope. As a people chosen to be the Messianic nation, in a country chosen to be the Messianic land, in the very city of the great King,

the coming destruction of Jerusalem would be one more vindication of his Messiahship and a dreadful demonstration of the magnitude of their transgression. They had said, "His blood be on us, and on our children" (Matthew 27:25), and secured ruin for themselves, with everlasting shame and contempt.

Also, we need to be impressed with the prophetic accuracy in the several occasions when he spoke of Jerusalem's coming destruction and the end of Israel's favored position. Their advantage was in having had the oracles of God (Romans 3:1–2) and that the gospel was offered to the Jew first (Romans 1:16). His reference in Luke 23:28 to their being "of Jerusalem" was more, therefore, than just to identify where they lived. Jerusalem was set on a course to ruin, and they were daughters of a doomed city. Jesus not only knew that the Jewish rejection of their Savior would bring punishment, but he also prophesied what would be the nature of that punishment as regards that city and nation. Inasmuch as one could not have foretold these things without divine insight, their fulfillment is further proof of his being God's Son. "Behold, I have told you before" (Matthew 24:25).

Although now they were weeping for him, only five days before he had wept for them. It was the previous Sunday, the day of his triumphal parade into the city:

> And when he was come near, he beheld the city, and wept over it, saying, If thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things which belong unto thy peace! but now they are hid from thine eyes. For the days shall come upon thee, that thine enemies shall cast a trench about thee, and compass thee round, and keep thee in on every side, And shall lay thee even with the ground, and thy children within thee; and they shall not leave in thee one stone upon another; because thou knewest not the time of thy visitation (Luke 19:41–44; cf. Matthew 23:36–39; 24:1–22; Luke 21:20–24).

This pointed to the destruction that would come to Judea in A.D. 70, following the attempted overthrow of Roman rul-

ers. The terrible paradox was that they who now handed him over to the Romans would themselves perish by the same cruel hands.

Unbearable Grief

For women whose culture made barrenness a reproach (Genesis 30:22–23; 1 Samuel 1:6–7), it would be hard to picture a time when there would be such fear and panic that childlessness would be counted a blessing. "For, behold, the days are coming, in the which they shall say, Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bare, and the paps which never gave suck" (Luke 23:29). In another place Jesus foretold that it would be a time of "woe unto them that are with child, and to them that give suck in those days!" (Matthew 24:19).

In that time death would be preferred over life: "Then shall they begin to say to the mountains, Fall on us; and to the hills, Cover us" (Luke 23:30). Those who remembered and heeded the Lord's warnings would be able to escape. "Then let them which are in Judea flee to the mountains; and let them which are in the midst of it depart out; and let not them that are in the countries enter thereinto" (Luke 21:21). But for those who would not heed, in

> these be the days of vengeance . . . there shall be great distress in the land, and wrath upon this people. And they shall fall by the edge of the sword, and shall be led away captive into all nations: and Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled (Luke 21:22–24).

Thus, Jesus had spoken explicitly about the destruction of Jerusalem almost forty years in advance. Secular records confirm the fulfillment, detailing every horrible atrocity the Lord had foretold. "For then shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be" (Matthew 24:21). These passages are sometimes misinterpreted to point to events which are yet to occur, but in fact they refer to the war of Rome against the Jews

in A.D. 70 and the end of Israel's favored position. About fifteen centuries earlier, Moses had warned that failure to observe the commandments of God would bring upon the nation terrible curses (Deuteronomy 28:49–68).

Josephus, who lived during the time and who recorded it in his *Wars of the Jews*, describes some of the horrors. The following are a sampling of lines from this Jewish historian:

> That neither did any other city ever suffer such miseries . . . The madness of the seditious did also increase together with the famine and both these miseries were every day inflamed more and more . . . The famine was too hard for all other passions . . . insomuch that children pulled the very morsels that their fathers were eating out of their mouths, and what was still more to be pitied, so did the mothers do as to their infants.

Over a million people perished, and close to a hundred thousand survivors were made slaves. So many Jews were crucified—often five hundred a night—that the Romans could no longer find wood to make crosses. Corpses within the city that could not be buried were thrown over the walls. The putrefying sight was such that even the otherwise harsh Roman commander was sickened and called on God to witness that this was not his doing. Those who tried to sneak through the line to escape were captured and killed. Frequently their bellies were cut open by soldiers searching for gold that might have been swallowed. After months of these ghastly horrors, the city and temple were totally destroyed, just as Jesus had foretold.

Meaningful Tears

The lesson from God's final rejection of Israel is more than an explanation of history. It stands as a monument of divine retribution. He judges every nation, yes, every man with the same measure of justice (Romans 2:6–11; Colossians 3:25). A "dry tree" among Gentiles will be as readily consumed as a "dry tree" among the Jews.

Of the several statements connected to Calvary, his word to the women was the only declaration of retribution for the crime of the ages. The cross is the ultimate demonstration of divine love and mercy, but even this supreme act of grace does not disallow the reality of divine justice. The consequences of unresolved sin are just as certain, if not more certain, than if heaven's sacrifice had never happened.

While it is a mistake to misapply Christ's prophecies of the destruction of Jerusalem to the end of the world and the final judgment, they nevertheless serve well as reminders that when the time does come for the judgment of the whole world Christ will be

> revealed from heaven with his mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power (2 Thessalonians 1:7–9).

Questions

1. How does Jesus' response to the women remind that true devotion to the Lord is more than sentimental feelings?

2. In what ways are tears misplaced in today's world?

3. Why should the death of Jesus not be viewed as a tragedy?

4. What is meant by the "green" and the "dry" trees?

5. What events in later history fulfilled the predictions given by Jesus?

6. What practical lessons can be learned from the retribution which came to the unbelieving Jews?

Notes

And set up over his head his accusation written,
THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS.
Matthew 27:37

And the superscription of his accusation was written over,
THE KING OF THE JEWS.
Mark 15:26

And a superscription also was written over him
in letters of Greek, and Latin, and Hebrew,
THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.
Luke 23:38

And Pilate wrote a title, and put it on the cross.
And the writing was,
JESUS OF NAZARETH THE KING OF THE JEWS.
This title then read many of the Jews:
for the place where Jesus was crucified
was nigh to the city: and it was written in
Hebrew, and Greek, and Latin.
Then said the chief priests of the Jews to Pilate,
Write not, The King of the Jews;
but that he said, I am King of the Jews.
Pilate answered, What I have written I have written.
John 19:19–22

Chapter Two

THE WORD OVER HIS HEAD: "KING OF THE JEWS"

An ancient Latin version of the Psalms has an unusual rendering of Psalm 96:10. The King James Version says, "Say among the heathen that the Lord reigneth." But the old Latin read, "The Lord reigneth *from the tree*." Textual scholars are agreed that this added phrase is not from the original, but some early believers were convinced that it was a genuine prophecy that Christ would be King even when hanging on the cross. Justin Martyr even thought the Jews had removed the phrase because they would not accept a crucified Messiah. Regardless, the words remind us that it was on the cross, over his head, that Pilate wrote, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews" (John 19:22).

All four of the Gospel writers considered the inscription significant. Their wording varies, but this is to be expected when we consider that it was in three languages and each writer intended only to give the essential point. It is in John's record that we find the complete inscription:

> And Pilate wrote a title, and put it on the cross. And the writing was, JESUS OF NAZARETH THE KING OF THE JEWS.

Pilate knew that because of envy the Jews had fabricated the charges against Jesus (Matthew 27:18). Finding no guilt in him, the governor was willing to release Jesus, but the Jews forced his hand by implying that if he allowed Jesus to live he would be countenancing rebellion against Caesar (John 19:12–15). Theirs was a pretended loyalty to the Roman emperor, but they had shrewdly exploited the governor's political fears and manipulated him into ordering the crucifixion.

> Pilate therefore, willing to release Jesus, spake again to them. But they cried, saying, Crucify him, crucify him. And he said unto them the third time, Why, what evil hath he done? I have found no cause of death in him: I will therefore chastise him, and let him go. And they were instant with loud voices, requiring that he might be crucified. And the voices of them and of the chief priests prevailed. And Pilate gave sentence that it should be as they required . . . he delivered Jesus to their will (Luke 23:20–25).

Thus, the governor became the governed. He had held deep-seated contempt for his subjects since taking the office. They would not even condescend to enter his court room, "lest they should be defiled" (John 18:28). Yet they had the audacity to bring for trial a prisoner which they had already found guilty and sentenced to death. They sought no just verdict; they wanted only to legalize their own predetermined scheme. How great must have been his chagrin that these supercilious fanatics had so used him. He might, however, have a small way to retaliate by turning their accusations into an insult against them. He would let the world know that the Roman governor was crucifying their king, the King of the Jews. Irony was added by saying he was of Nazareth, a contemptible place from which nothing good might have been expected (John 1:46).

The insult was felt immediately. Their victory was less sweet.

> This title then read many of the Jews: for the place where Jesus was crucified was nigh to the city: and it was writ-

> ten in Hebrew, and Greek, and Latin. Then said the chief priests of the Jews to Pilate, Write not, The King of the Jews; but that he said, I am King of the Jews. Pilate answered, What I have written I have written (John 19:20–22).

Their protest was technically correct because their accusation had been what Jesus claimed to be, not what they thought he might be, but Pilate had in mind more than what label to put on Jesus. It was a mockery of Jesus, but it also implied something terribly demeaning about these Jews—their subjugation to Rome.

Pilate the Stubborn

Stubbornness is a virtue when one's cause is right. A great example of this was in the prophet Micaiah. Ahab's messenger urged him to abandon conviction and compromise in agreement with the false prophets. But Micaiah's bold response was, "As the Lord liveth, what the Lord saith unto me, that will I speak" (1 Kings 22:14). We remember also the courageous determination of Daniel when he refused to eat the king's dainties, and the bravery of his three Hebrew brethren when they refused to bow before Nebuchadnezzar's image.

Pilate may have thought himself quite a man in his blunt rejection of their request. No doubt he had a tone that was adamant, perhaps pounding on the table or pointing a finger. He would not be moved. Their appeals would not sway him. He would show them that he was made of sterner stuff than to be pressured further by these Jewish complainers. We can visualize him as he holds himself erect, and with solemn face and glaring eyes suggesting, "I am a man, what's more the governor; and I will not be pushed around. What I have written I have written." This was a miserable anticlimax after letting himself be pressured into condemning an innocent man. The problem was that when it really counted he had been a cowardly politician (John 19:8). Wicked though he was, it was not so much wickedness as it was his weakness that causes his name to be cursed.

The Romans had a saying: "Let justice be done, though the heavens fall," but this Roman fell far short of that ideal. Courage and justice demanded that he release Jesus and even protect him from the Jews. But whatever conscience he had was drowned out by their hateful cries for crucifixion. Tragically, instead of doing his duty, he sent Jesus to Herod, tried the ploy with Barabbas, ignored his wife's warning, and tried to appease the mob by ordering Jesus unjustly scourged. Finally, he asked the mob to decide: "What shall I do then with Jesus?" The judge was reduced to asking an angry throng to guide him in meting out justice. Yielding to their demand, the execution warrant was given, as he validated his cowardice by washing his hands. Having surrendered every step of the way, this abstinence over the sign was not noble; it was no better than disgruntled temper trying to get in the last word.

Solemn Reality

The governor's adamant answer was, "What I have written I have written." (John 19:22). On the surface the words seem little more than a feeble attempt at manhood, but in fact they contain a reality that Pilate was not considering. He had written a record of himself that day, just as we all do every day. Hardly before the day had begun, he had written what will stand forever as his autobiography of infamy.

Both Josephus and Philo tell of various crimes Pilate committed against the people of Palestine during his ten-year tenure as procurator. He tried to force the acceptance of Roman emblems which the Jews considered idolatrous. He stole money from the temple treasury and had his soldiers kill rioting protestors. (This may be the incident referred to in Luke 13:1.) He ordered an attack against Samaritans at Mt. Gerizim that resulted in so many deaths that it cost him his governorship. Little can be said in favor of his administration and much against it. We might see most of this as just so much dusty history, but one thing the world will never for-

get is what he wrote about himself when he wrote that death warrant for Jesus.

We write our own life stories in our daily words and deeds, and all is irrevocable, written in indelible ink; even though we write it with our own hands, we are unable to erase or amend.

> The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ,
> Moves on: nor all thy Piety nor Wit
> Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,
> Nor all thy Tears shall wash out a Word of it.
> —Omar Khayydm

Most writers now have access to spell checks and grammar checks. Whole lines can be adjusted, rewritten, and improved. Not so in the record of life. As with Pontius Pilate, so with all. Yes, all sin can be forgiven and heaven's charges against us can be forgotten (1 John 1:9; Hebrews 8:12), but there is still that awful reality: "What I have written I have written."

In Christ, a new creature has been saved from the guilt of every stain. We may remember past sins, but need have no fear that the judgment will reveal what has been washed by the blood. Our point, though—and it is an awesome reality—is that no one is granted the opportunity to "do it over again." Words spoken cannot be recalled. Deeds done cannot be undone. The Hebrews writer named Esau's folly as an evident proof (Hebrews 12:16–17). So many of the follies of life fit the reality of the nursery rhyme:

> All the king's horses and all the king's men
> Couldn't put Humpty Dumpty together again.

Even forgiven sins can continue to affect our own lives and the lives of others.

Pilate's Insult Was Heaven's Truth

Modernists claim that Jesus was no more than an influential teacher and that he never claimed to be either the Son of God or the King of the Jews. If this were true, why was he crucified? Before the Sanhedrin he could have corrected any

notion that he claimed to be God's Son. But when they asked, "Are You then the Son of God?" his answer was without apology: "You rightly say that I am" (Luke 22:70 NKJV). So, also before the governor he might readily have acquitted himself by saying in no sense was he a king. But he could not deny what was true. Before both religious and civil tribunals he had let the accusations stand.

In affirming his kingship, however, Jesus also explained the nature of his kingdom:

> My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is my kingdom not from hence (John 18:36).

His kingdom does not stand on the efforts of men, such as would be attempted in an insurrection that Pilate might have feared. Further, its rule is not pressed upon anyone. By saying his servants would not fight to keep him from being delivered to the Jews, Jesus implied that even his enemies were allowed a choice. His kingdom was to be neither political nor military. Instead, he would rule by the authority of truth. Pilate asked, "Art thou a king then?" The Lord explained:

> Thou sayest that I am a king. To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Every one that is of the truth heareth my voice (John 18:37).

He rules in hearts and lives when people heed his truth.

The governor neither understood nor appreciated these concepts, but he knew Jesus was not guilty of treason. His question, "What is truth?" was not asked for explanation, but in ridicule that such concepts should demand his attention. The idea of such a king would have been laughable except for the blackmail implied in the Jews' threat, "Thou art not Caesar's friend" (John 19:12). The idea became, therefore, a scornful mockery with which to taunt the Jews. We can sense the sneer in his words as he taunts the Jews with repeated

reference to this "king." "Will ye that I release unto you the *King of the Jews?"* (Mark 15:9; cf. John 18:39). "What will ye then that I shall do unto him whom ye call the *King of the Jews?"* (Mark 15:12). "Behold *your King?"* (John 19:14). "Shall I crucify *your King?"* (John 19:15). Then, with one more humiliating insult he placed a sign in three languages above the bloody head of a naked, brutalized, helpless, and dying man: "Jesus of Nazareth the King of the Jews."

But what Pilate considered little more than a foolish dispute and irritating disruption was in fact the climax of God's plan through the ages. A king had been promised from the tribe of Judah (Genesis 49:10). Another prophet had said, "There shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel" (Numbers 24:17). David's seed would occupy the throne forever (2 Samuel 7:12–13). Such a king would sit on the right hand of the Father until every enemy is put under his feet (Psalm 110:1). Zechariah prophesied that he would reign as a priest upon his throne (Zechariah 6:13). Foreseeing that Bethlehem would be the place of his birth, out of that poor village would "come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting" (Micah 5:2).

> The government shall be upon his shoulder . . . Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this (Isaiah 9:6–7).

Jesus had told Pilate he was born to be king, which recalls Gabriel's announcement to the virgin mother:

> And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name Jesus. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: and he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end (Luke 1:31–33).

Only five days before Jesus was arrested, he had entered Jerusalem with the adoring crowds shouting, "Hosanna: Blessed is the King of Israel that cometh in the name of the Lord" (John 12:13; cf. Luke 19:38). Now, he was led out of the city with a superscription for his cross: "Jesus of Nazareth the King of the Jews."

The King on a Tree

The phrase in the old Latin version of Psalm 96 is spurious, not in the original Hebrew, yet it reminds us of two wondrous truths about the one who was crucified.

Jesus is King *in spite of* the tree. Death could not hold him. Satan and his minions appeared to have won the day, but in fact they lost the battle. Jesus was not the victim, but the victor, because by dying he destroyed him who had the power of death (Hebrews 2:14) and took control of the "keys of Hades and of Death" (Revelation 1:18 NKJV). His resurrection declares him to be "the Son of God with power" (Romans 1:4; cf. Acts 17:31). He "is gone into heaven, and is on the right hand of God; angels and authorities and powers being made subject unto him" (1 Peter 3:22; cf. Ephesians 1:20–22).

Again, we rejoice in the truth that he is our King *because of* the tree. This is what Jesus had foretold when he said, "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me" (John 12:32). The point is that his absolute authority is by virtue of his absolute self-sacrifice. The only one with unquestioned right to rule is the one who gave himself for us. He is the "Lion of the tribe of Judah" because he is the "Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world" (Revelation 5:5–6; John 1:29). Metaphorically it might be said that his throne had to be constructed out of the wood of the tree. The Bible never names his crown without also naming his cross. Thus, he does not rule with an iron fist, but by touching men's hearts. The ultimate appeal is the drawing power of the cross. "We love him, because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). He is "the prince of the kings of the earth" because he "loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood" (Revelation 1:5).

Certainly Pilate intended no prophecy, nor was his use of the three great languages of civilization any more than the means of informing the mixed population in Jerusalem at the season of Passover. Latin was the language of Rome, the language of law. Greek was the universal language, the language of literature and philosophy. Hebrew was the language of Scripture. Pilate intended a universal proclamation, as universal as he could make it. It happens, though, that history sometimes makes men's words of greater significance than originally intended. In these mocking words he scornfully published what Peter would soon preach with reverence and power (Acts 2:33–36). What Pilate wrote on an execution post at Calvary in tiny Judea would soon be written everywhere and for all times, not merely in three languages of ancient civilizations, but in all the world's tongues and dialects. For Jesus was on that tree to redeem by his blood men and women "out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation" (Revelation 5:9).

Tell all the earth the Lord is King!
Lo, from the Cross a King He reigns.
—Author unknown

Questions

1. In what way did the governor become the governed?

2. What was Pilate's purpose in the way he worded the charge against Jesus? Why was this unsatisfactory to the chief priests?

3. What are some examples of stubbornness as a virtue?

4. What practical lessons can be learned from how Pilate responded to the request made by the chief priests?

5. Since sin can be forgiven, why should we be concerned with the reality that things we do can never be undone?

6. In what way were Pilate's words more significant than he intended?