

Love Wins (Pontius Pilate)

John 19

#45 in John Series, Easter

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Crier: All rise. Good people of Denver, I give you the Governor of the Roman Province of Judea.

[The song “Hail to the Chief” plays while secret service agents enter from the back of the sanctuary. They set up the presidential podium labeled with an official seal of the state government of Roman Justice. Images of airplanes flying in formation and helicopters are shown overhead with bombs going off. Then, the governor, Pontus Pilate (played by Peter Hiatt) enters wearing a black suit, white shirt, and red tie. The audience claps and cheers. Throughout the entire service, a secret service agent stands behind the “governor.”]

Thank you. You may be seated. My name is Pontius Pilatus. Pontius was a common family name in central Italy 2,000 years ago. Pilatus means, “armed with a spear” and that’s fitting: I’m a military man. I love the arena and the gladiators, the games.

Through powers, which you cannot comprehend, it has been arranged for me to speak with you today. The events of which I speak are recorded in the Gospel of John, which I understand you have been studying. Chapters 18 – 21 tell the story.

In 26 A.D., I was appointed to my post by Emperor Caesar Tiberius himself. I was what was referred to as a “friend of Caesar.” My post was that of Governor to the Province of Judea. Provinces deemed peaceful were governed by the Roman Senate. Those deemed trouble, were governed by “strong arm governors” like myself. And Judea was trouble. It was in the Middle East, of strategic interest to Rome, yet packed with religious fanatics and terrorists.

I hope you realize that the Roman Empire and your empire are not that different. Your government is based on the principles of Roman law. Even your national symbol is our national symbol: the eagle. And, whether you conquer with military or economic force, you still wield imperial power. I’m saying that of all the characters in the Bible, I am most familiar to you Americans as: the governor, the prefect, the procurator, the President of Roman Judea.

I’ve received a great deal of bad press . . . but let me say:

- “I am not a crook. I am not a crook (said like Nixon holding up both hands in peace signs above his head and shaking his jowls).”
- “On track . . . (holds both pointer fingers up) Stay the course . . . (meshes his hands together) A thousand points of light . . . (Right pointer finger up) Stay the course. And read my lips – no new taxes (said in a Texas accent like Bush Sr. and holding up his pointer finger)!”
- “Ya know, people say that the death of Jesus is my fault. Well, it depends . . . on what the meaning of is . . . is. And I’m gonna say this again (hitting podium emphatically) I did not have sexual relations with that woman (said in a southern accent like Clinton’s)!”

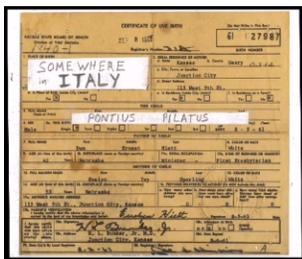
- “Well, a little historical perspective is in order. (Raises his eyebrow on his left eye and leans in) 63 B.C. Rome had ‘ocu(a)pied’ Judea. Our intelligence had unequivocal(b)lly ‘indi(bi)cated’ that the Jews had a weapon of mass destruction – a WMD (said in Texas accent like George W. Bush’s).”



Look at this irrefutable military surveillance map: You’ll see (a red bulls-eye blinks over the sanctuary part of the map) that the Jews kept the WMD in a massive stone bunker, which they referred to as “the temple.” In an inner room in that bunker that they referred to as “the sanctuary,” the WMD itself, they called “the Ark of the Covenant.” Historical ‘recordation’ clearly indicated that this WMD was more powerful than a million ‘nuclear’ warheads. And so we launched Operation Desert Storm, Operation Infinite Justice, and Operation Enduring Freedom . . . Mission accomplished. . . .

(An onlooker stands and yells): “This is a good-bye kiss from the Judean people, dog!” (He throws shoes hitting “the governor.” A secret service agent runs up in front Pontius Pilot.) “This is for the widows and orphans of Judea!” (Several Secret Service agents in suits, dark sunglasses, and ear-plugs rush him, tackle the guy, handcuff him, and take him away.) Mission accomplished . . . We stabilized the region.

“Upon occasion, . . . some . . . have doubted . . . my integrity, and so . . . I present to you . . . this document (Speaking like Obama):



My certificate . . . of live birth . . . unaltered or tampered with . . . in any way. Upon occasion, . . . some have said . . . ‘You Romans. . . cannot . . . rule the whole world,’ and to that I say . . . Yes we can. Yes we can.”

My point being: of all the characters . . . in sacred Scripture I, Pontius Pilate, may be most familiar to you, my fellow Americans.

I was a politician, but something of a philosopher as well. I grew up on Heraclitus, Plato, and Aristotle. They spoke of the *Logos*, the reason, the truth behind all things. But the question: “What is the truth?” is very difficult to answer, for how could one prove that the truth is true?

If there is “truth” it can’t be proven – it must be recognized. By 30 A.D., I despaired of ever finding the truth. I figured brute strength must be closest to the truth – it must be best. A strong arm, the Roman Empire, power and glory – that is best. So my mentors were not only Heraclitus, Plato and Aristotle, but ancestors even more ancient than these.

Conan the Barbarian clip:

Man: *Conan! What is best in life?*

Conan (Arnold Schwarzenegger): *To crush enemies, see them driven before you and to hear the lamentation of the women.*

Men surrounding: *Arrrr!*

Man: *That is good.*

Behold the man. That man would make a great governor, and I was a great governor. And yet I was haunted by this thought: “We Romans rule the world and yet everywhere we go, people want to throw their shoes at us.” To rule, not only the world, but a human heart that would be true power and true glory.

To be honest, I longed for a truth – a power – a glory sufficient to rule my heart. I knew Caesar: they claimed that he was a god or a son of god – a god man, and granted, he did have a salad named after him . . . but, if he was a lord, he was a lord incapable of capturing one heart.

[Pontius Pilot (Peter) begins singing.] “Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord. He is tramping out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored. He has loosed the fateful lightening of his terrible swift sword. His truth is marching on.”

What is that power, what is that glory, that vineyard, that sword: the truth? I figured it must be the last one standing, “the trumpet that shall never call retreat.” And that’s what I looked for in a soldier and in a man. I looked for a man who would not abandon his post, for when I saw it I figured I would be closest to the truth.

Well, enough about me.

I’m here to tell you about the trial,

The judgment seat,

And the man who would not surrender his post.

It was Friday of Passover week. Hundreds of thousands had journeyed to Jerusalem for the feast and I had come and taken up residence in the praetorium located just to the north of the temple, where we could keep a close eye on the Jews.

I hated Passover, The Kidron Valley literally became a river of blood. On this Friday (as John tells it), at high noon, the priests would begin slaughtering thousands of lambs. It was said that the blood atoned for sins – you see: the Jews were fanatics, but I so admired their resolve. Six years earlier, I had trapped a few hundred in the arena in Caesarea demanding they honor the Emperor. They bared their necks and cried, “We have no king . . . but God!” Fearing an uprising, I relented that day, but make no mistake, I slaughtered hundreds on other days.

Well, it was early on this particular morning that a mob led by the chief priests came to the praetorium. They would not enter for fear that I would “defile them” and yet, they threw a pretty defiled and wretched looking man at my door. The man had already been beaten. They said he was an “insurgent,” but they were all insurgents. They said he claimed to be king, but they all wanted to be king. They were jealous. They wanted me to judge him and I knew why. They wanted him crucified, for in their law, that meant he would be cursed. They hated this man and were terrified of this man, as if he really could be king. And then, they would not be king.

Only five days before, he had been worshipped by thousands. I called the man into the praetorium and with disdain, I said, “Are you the king of the Jews?” (John 18: 34) What happened next took me completely by surprise. He raised his battered head (covered in bruises and spit) and as his eyes drilled into mine, he said, “Pilate. Did you say this of your own accord or did others say it to you about me?” (Not a hint of insolence, sarcasm or bitterness.) It was like he truly wanted to know, like he genuinely cared about me and my answer.

And that’s when the battle began. With the charge of insurrection, the Jews had me trapped. If I showed mercy to a man who even hinted of a kingdom not in subjection to Caesar, and then word got back to Caesar, I could be crucified . . . so I knew that I must crucify. You should know I had tried and judged and crucified thousands. And in every instance I felt justified, for in every instance no matter how generous and kind a man seemed once he was trapped by fear, felt the sting of my whip, and was subject to my derision and reviling, invariably, he would revile in return. See? Before you kill a man – you must make him evil in your own eyes. And with every man I’d ever met – (even the one in my mirror), - with every man that was very easy to do.

And so the battle began. To his kindness, I mocked, “Am I a Jew?” “Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done?”

John 18: 36 “The man answered, *My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world.*”

I sneered, “So you are a king.” Then he said, plain as day and without sarcasm: “*You say that I am king.*” But I didn’t say that . . . or did I? Why did this man unnerve me so?

“You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world – to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.”

At that I closed my eyes. I closed my eyes, hung my head (18:38) and muttered, “What is truth?” He didn’t answer . . . because he is the answer. I closed my eyes – then went back outside to the Jews – I had an idea.

John 18: 16-40a I called out,

“I find no guilt in him. But you have a custom that I should release one man for you at the Passover. So do you want me to release to you the King of the Jews?” They cried out (over and over in unison) “Not this man, but Barabbas.”

Now Barabbas was a murderer (*lestes*). He truly was an insurgent. Of course, they called him a “patriot,” a “freedom fighter,” but we called him a “terrorist.” And then I saw it: Conan the Barbarian, Caesar, me, Barabbas, the chief priests, and the Jews – we were all exactly alike . . . We just had different slogans on our t-shirts. We were all terrorists . . . except perhaps for this Jesus. And I would soon find out (John 19: 1-4).

I had him flogged. It often exposed a man’s bones and even bowels. It was enough to kill a man. The soldiers mocked him: they placed a crown of thorns on his head and a purple robe on his lacerated back. They cried, “Hail King of the Jews!” as they beat him with their fists. They reviled him and he would not do the same.

I was in awe of him – becoming terrified of him. (John 19: 5-7). Once again, I took him out to the crowd, but this time beaten to a pulp and dressed like an “anti-king” a “mock-king.” I said, *“I find no guilt in him.”* And I was desperate to find guilt in him. (If I found fault in him, it could excuse the fault in me.) *“I find no guilt in him,”* and then I cried, *“Look at the man!” “Behold the man.”* “Behold the man.” They did and just cried all the more, *“Crucify him – crucify him.”* I yelled, *“You crucify him!”* They answered (John 19:7), *“We have a law, and according to that law, he ought to die, because he has made himself the Son of God.”*

When I heard that, I was terrified – “a God-man.” I took him back inside the praetorium and pleaded, “Where are you from?” He didn’t answer. How could he? He is from everywhere and nowhere, beyond space, beyond time. He is the *Logos*, the Truth, the Word of God. I said to him:

John 19: 10

“You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?”

He was unmoved, but looked at me with the deepest compassion. He said,

“You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin.”

He said it as if he forever wanted to quiet the agony in my soul. And yet, that produced even greater agony in my soul. He was kindness utterly devoid of fear and it burned me, like a consuming fire. (John 19:12). I sought to release him, but the Jews, who hated me and despised Caesar, cried out, “If you release this man you are not a friend of Caesar. Everyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar.” And they had me . . . I would die or Jesus would die (John 19:13-16). I brought Jesus out, and I sat on the *Bema*– the judgment seat, at a place called the stone pavement.

Now it was Friday at high noon. And so the priests began to sacrifice the Passover lamb. I said, *“Behold your king.”* And they cried out, *“Away with him, away with him, crucify him.”* I said to them, *“Shall I crucify your King?”* And the chief priests answered, *“We have no king but Caesar . . .”* (John 19:16).

So then, in agony, I judged him, and I damned him to crucifixion. But he would not judge me . . . he would not damn me. And yet, by that very fact, I was judged, I was damned, WE were damned, damned to outer darkness with no King but Caesar, ourselves, and the Evil One.

(John 3: 19), *“This is the judgment, the light has come into the world and man loved darkness rather than the light.”* Even as we nailed him to that horrid tree, reviled, he would not revile; cursed, he did not curse; damned, he did not damn; rejected by all, he would not reject. He cried, *“Father forgive them.”*

Even loaded with the sin and shame of an entire world, even though he felt forsaken by God, even though he was tormented by satan from the pit of hell, he would not abandon his post. And what is his post? In a word, it is love and He is the Word of love. God is love, and Jesus is the Word of love. And even though all deny him, he will not deny himself. He does not change. He is “the last man standing.” In the words of St. Paul, *“Love remains, love abides.” “Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.”* God is love and Jesus is the Word of love. Jesus is the Truth. He is the *Logos*. He is the Beginning and the End. He is the last man standing. *“Behold the man”* the man, and he is the judgment.

(John 12: 49) Speaking of that Friday, he said, *“Now is the judgment of this world.”* Do you understand what I’m saying? The world thinks that I judged Jesus that day. But Jesus wasn’t being judged, - I was, we were. He doesn’t change, we do. And one day, we all must face him (lifted up on his cross), the slaughtered Lamb (standing on the throne), God’s judgment of love.

That’s what you empire loving Brits and Americans have such a hard time understanding. You read about the day of vengeance in Isaiah and his coming with eyes of fire in John’s Revelation – trampling the wine press and swinging the sword that smites nations, and you think he changes. You think he gives up his post. You think the steadfast love of the Lord ceases and his mercies come to an end. You think Jesus changes, and some of you want him to change. And change into what? God forbid, - me, or Caesar, or Conan the Barbarian, a king of this world who will fight with the weapons of this world.

- Which means you still chant for Barabbas.
- Which means you still don’t see Jesus
- Which means you still close your eyes to the glory of God
- Which means you still must face the judgment
- Which means you still are not ready for Easter.

I’m saying that as Jesus stood before me that day, I stood before Jesus and I saw the eyes of fire. I’m saying, (Singing) *“Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord. He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored. He has loosed the fateful lightening of his terrible swift sword. His truth is marching on.”*

Read Isaiah 61, 64, Luke 4, Revelation 14 and 19 and you will see the day of vengeance is the day of salvation, which is the day Jesus tramples the winepress outside the city of Jerusalem. And that wine is blood and that blood is wine. That wine press is his cross.

- Where he bears his own vengeance on our behalf,
- Where he takes our sins and transforms them into grace,
- Where he is crushed and his life blood becomes our salvation.

Revelation 19, He *is* the “terrible swift sword” the Truth, the Word that smites the kings of the earth and all people. Isaiah 53, the slaughtered Lamb is the strong arm of the Lord. He is the WMD (Weapon of Mass Destruction) from behind the curtain in the stone bunker. As he died, that curtain, in the temple, ripped from top to bottom and he got out. That day that he stood before me, I felt the power and I saw the glory. And I shut my eyes – shut my heart and I ran.

I wanted him to change, so I wouldn't have to change. But he wouldn't change – he wouldn't run – so I ran and I hid . . . in death. Revelation 6: 15, I hid – The kings of the earth hide under the earth – from the glory of the slaughtered Lamb. All my life and into death, his eyes of burning love pursued me and I hid in *sheol* - I hid in hell – trapped in fear and shame.

Some say that's the end, but Scripture says that he is the end. Listen to Solomon (Song of Solomon 8: 6) “*Love is strong as death. Its passion fierce as sheol.*” “*Its flashes are flashes of fire, the very flame of God.*” Isaiah, Romans, Philippians, they all say it. “*Every knee shall bow and every tongue give praise.*” What could that mean, but that every heart will believe, for every heart will be conquered by the King of Love?

Jesus said, “*Now is the judgment of this world,*” “*Now will the ruler of this world be cast out*” “*And I , when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.*” Revelation 19: 12, Jesus pursues and destroys “the kings of the earth” – that's me! Revelation 20: 24, “The kings of the earth” bring their glory into the eternal city – that's also me. I die with him and rise with him.

Do you understand?

Jesus is the WMD (Weapon of Mass Destruction) only because first and foremost, he is the WMC (Weapon of Mass Creation). He is the Word of God – through whom all is created – sustained. He is the first and last – He is the “last man standing” . . . and the “first Man standing in the New Creation.” And that, my friends, is Easter, the dawning of the new creation, the dawning of the Kingdom of love . . . Kingdom of life.

So you cannot have Easter until your heart surrenders to Love. And if you reject Love, you reject Light, and Life, and Truth and you descend deeper and deeper into darkness. You deny him, but he will not deny himself. He will not abandon his post. Love never stops loving you. “*Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things,*” next verse, I Corinthians 13: 8, “*Love never fails.*” Love wins. He never abandons his post. And, unless we believe that, we will abandon the post, we will abandon Love and turn our God into a monster as we become monsters too. But when we love no matter the cost, the TRUTH IS MARCHING ON. It defeats every kingdom of this world, but not with the weapons of this world.

Religious institutions may advance through emperors and presidents and massive armies, but the Kingdom of God advances through people who will not abandon the post: “*...through the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony.*”

By the 5th Century A.D., the empire was nominally Christian, as is yours, and yet the greed, lust, hatred, and violence continued, the gladiator games continued . . . until one day when a little Syrian monk wandered into the coliseum. He felt drawn there by God and when the games started, he knew why. Gladiators entered the arena, saluted the emperor and shouted, “Glory to Caesar.” As the fighting started, Telemachus jumped to the perimeter wall and cried, “In the name of Christ, stop!” No one noticed. He looked like a clown.

He jumped down to the arena floor and ran between two giant men shouting, "In the name of Christ, Stop!" One hit Telemachus with his shield sending him flying like a rag doll. The Roman mob cheered. But Telemachus would not stop, he would not retreat. As he interfered, the crowd grew angry. They began to chant, "Run him through. Run him through." Telemachus stood his ground before one of the gladiators. The crowd chanted. Telemachus pleaded.

The gladiator was "Pilatus" meaning, "armed with a spear." He raised his *pilus* (his spear) and thrust it into the heart of Telemachus. The coliseum grew silent as Telemachus fell to the sand. The monk's blood, Christ's blood, blood from the winepress spilled out on the coliseum floor. And with his last breath, Telemachus swung the sword. He spoke the Word, "In the name of Christ . . ." and then they all sat gazing on body broken and blood shed. They gazed on Love until one by one, including the emperor; they got up and left the arena.

It was the last recorded gladiator fight in the Roman coliseum. Telemachus was the last gladiator, (but Telemachus is the Body of Christ). Christ Jesus is the last gladiator. He is the last man standing...and the first—the dawn of the new creation and Easter. He is last and first because God raised him from the dead.

There is no greater power than God.
There is no greater glory than God.
And God is love.

One day you will see it: Love wins—every where—every when, and every how.
Easter cannot be stopped.

Communion

For on the night he was betrayed, the Truth—the Word—the Logos, for whom and by whom all things are created, took bread and broke it saying, "Take and eat. This is my body given to you. Take and eat in remembrance of me." And in the same manner after supper and having given thanks he took the cup saying, " This is the covenant, the blood of the covenant, the new covenant in my blood, poured out for the forgiveness of sins. Drink of it, all of you. Do this in remembrance of me."

Prayer

Pray with me, "Lord, we confess to you that we have despised Love, and that's called sin. Forgive me for despising Love." "I surrender to love." "I surrender to you Jesus, the King of Love." That's called repentance. "And now we call on you Love, to pour yourself out on us, to forgive us our sins and our iniquities, and fill us with your very self. Fill us with your nature, your Spirit, your Truth, your Life, fill us with Love. And that's Grace. In Jesus' name. Amen. We invite you to come forward, tear off a piece of the bread and dip it in the cup. The dark cups are wine and the light cups are juice.

Look: "He's already forgiven you." "Do you see the glory?"

Benediction

All praise and glory to the Lamb, for he is a king that is worthy of your heart. And Love wins. Love wins, and it's important for you to believe that Love wins, so you don't abandon the post, so you don't resort to other weapons, to other means.

You see, when we abandon that post and resort to other things; that's called sin. But love wins. In this world it's being tried, and tested, and formed within us. Love wins. And so, believe the

gospel: Love wins. And do not abandon the post. Even when your marriage is really, really hard, don't abandon the post. Even when your friends forsake you and revile you and throw insults at you, don't abandon the post. Even when this entire world is arrayed against you, and breathing threats upon your life, don't abandon the post. For in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet, just one breath away...is Easter. And you are being made for Easter.

In Jesus' name, believe the gospel and live the gospel. Amen.

Disclaimer: This document is a draft and has not been edited by the author. Therefore, there may be discrepancies. Some discrepancies may be minor; some may have to do with theology. When in doubt, please refer to the audio version of the sermon on this website and don't be shy about informing us of errors.