

# THE TRIAL OF JESUS

By: Darryl Bloodworth

## I. Introduction

As Christians we are all well aware that Jesus died on a Roman cross, was buried, and on the third day rose from the dead. We are also well aware that Jesus died for our sins in accordance with the Father's will, and it is by faith in him that we find salvation and become part of the family of God. In short, we usually look at these events through a spiritual lens, based on faith, and emphasize the spiritual benefits that these events brought.

What we are less aware of are the secular forces and events that led to the arrest, Jewish and Roman trials, and convictions that led to Jesus' death sentence—the gruesome Roman cross. It is important that we understand the circumstances and forces at work that led to Jesus' death because even events with great spiritual significance always play out in the real world with real people, usually believing they are doing what is best for their country, their group, or their viewpoint. We need to understand how sincere people such as the members of the Jewish Great Sanhedrin Court could bring themselves to ignore their own law and their own procedures, designed to help ensure justice, to bring about the biggest travesty of justice in the history of jurisprudence.

Additionally, if we ever expect to reach the lost, we will have to be able to assure them that although our belief in God and in the Lord Jesus Christ is based on faith, it is not a *blind* faith. Our faith is based upon actual historical events that can and have been verified according to the same standards applicable to all historical events. Those who claim that scripture is nothing more than a collection of fables and myths are uninformed about the historical record, and they usually apply different standards to the reliability of the Bible than they do to all other historical documents.

Finally, we will examine the events leading to the crucifixion of Jesus from a legal standpoint rather than from a spiritual or faith standpoint. We do well to remember that as these events played out, none of the participants except Jesus himself believed God's will was being done, with the possible exception of those Jewish leaders who ensured Jesus would die on a Roman cross. Only after the resurrection did the disciples who had been with Jesus for three years come to understand why Jesus had to be crucified.

## II. Background

To analyze almost any event taking place in the New Testament, we must understand that Israel, which included Judea (the area around Jerusalem) and Galilee (the area around the Sea of Galilee, including the Golan heights), was occupied by the Romans. Although the Romans allowed some limited self-government, those governments were always subject to Roman oversight. The Jewish self-government was headed by a group called the Great Sanhedrin Court which consisted of 71 leaders, whose members included Sadducees and Pharisees, as well as other priests and elders. They were the religious leaders, judges of the Jewish courts, and the administrators of the Jewish government. They had no separation of powers as we do in our government. Theirs was a theocracy, not a democracy. The Sadducees were the most influential politically, and they usually were collaborationists who tended to cooperate with the Romans more often than the Pharisees. They were particularly protective of their power to continue to lead the nation as members of the Sanhedrin so they could ensure that Jews could continue to worship freely without interference from the Romans.

By the time of Jesus' trial, Pontius Pilate had been Procurator (or Governor) of Judea for several years. He probably obtained this position by virtue of the fact he was married to Claudia, the granddaughter of Caesar Augustus. Before Jesus was brought before him, he had already had several confrontations with the Jewish leaders which led to uprisings. The first dispute was over Pilate bringing his standards into Jerusalem. It had a bust of Caesar on it, and the Jews considered the bust a graven image. The second confrontation arose over Pilate taking monies from the Temple treasury to finance a new aqueduct to improve the water supply for Jerusalem. Both confrontations were very public and led to the Jewish leaders complaining to Caesar (with support from some of Pilate's political rivals). It made Pilate particularly sensitive to any reports of an uprising or rebellion. Although the Romans would usually allow limited self-government, they would brutally put down any uprising, and they were aggressive in punishing anyone challenging the power of the Roman government.

During the time of Jesus' ministry, the prevailing Jewish zeitgeist was that the people were anticipating the coming of the Messiah, who would be both a religious leader and a military leader, someone similar to King David. Indeed, on Palm Sunday as he entered Jerusalem, Jesus was proclaimed the "Son of David." The people believed that when the Messiah came, he would overthrow the Roman occupiers and Israel would be restored to its rightful place in the world, with the Messiah ruling from Jerusalem. The Romans, of course, were well aware of the expectations of the Jewish people, and they had put down a number of uprisings led by men who claimed to be the Messiah, or who just hated the Romans. The Roman officials didn't care what the Jews believed as part of their religion,

but anything that led to an uprising against Rome or challenged Roman authority would immediately draw their attention, and they would suppress it brutally.

Jesus did not draw the ire of the Jewish leaders initially in his ministry, but as his fame spread, primarily from his miracles, more and more people followed him. Some of the Jewish leaders, such as Nicodemus, a Pharisee, were anxious to understand him and his message since his teaching was quite different from theirs. As Jesus healed more people and performed more miracles, his popularity increased, causing the Jewish leadership to become more interested in him and more concerned over whether he might lead a rebellion against the Romans. The majority of the Jewish leaders—particularly the Pharisees—were convinced Jesus was not a leader sent by God because he performed many of his miracles on the sabbath, which they considered “work.” Since they viewed Jesus’ disregard—in their view—of the law regarding the sabbath as sin, they thought he couldn’t possibly be the Messiah.

By the third year of Jesus’ ministry, a warrant had been issued for Jesus’ arrest by the Sanhedrin Court, so his disciples urged him not to go near Jerusalem when his good friend Lazarus fell ill. (John 11:8). Then, when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, it was an event that electrified all of Israel, and the political atmosphere became even more highly charged. Most of the people assumed Jesus would announce his messiahship at any time, and then he would lead the rebellion against the Romans. Some of those who had witnessed the raising of Lazarus went to the chief priests and reported what Jesus had done, which caused them to call a special meeting of the council. Their concern is set forth in John 11:47-48. “What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation.” So, their concern was primarily a political one. The response of Caiaphas—the Chief Priest—to this statement is telling and very political: “It is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.”

In short, it was a cold, calculated decision to get rid of Jesus for political reasons so the Romans wouldn’t destroy the temple and take away their authority as leaders of the country. Note there was no suggestion by anyone that they should pray about how to deal with Jesus or that perhaps Jesus was correct in what he was preaching. The decision was made in a manner recognizable to most secular governments.

They determined to get rid of Jesus, if possible, during the Passover celebration, which was a week-long event. The question was how to arrest Jesus, try him, and then get the Romans to crucify him without a rebellion of the people breaking out. This concern intensified following the events of Palm Sunday when Jesus made his triumphant entry into Jerusalem, and the people declared him the king of Israel and the son of David, all of which

had messianic overtones. The Pharisees' concerns were palpable on Palm Sunday. John 12:19 says the Pharisees observed that "the world has gone after him!"

The Jewish leaders' challenge of how to arrest Jesus without starting a riot was made easier when Judas Iscariot, one of Jesus' disciples, came to them offering to lead them to Jesus at a time they could arrest him out of the public eye—for a price (Matt. 26:14-16). He knew that after the Passover dinner on Thursday night Jesus would lead his disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane where they often went when in Jerusalem, and there they could arrest him in private. So, for thirty pieces of silver—worth about \$300 in today's money—Judas betrayed his teacher of the previous three years.

So, this is the background leading up to the events of April 6 and 7, in the year AD 30. The timeline for the events of the evening of April 6 and the early hours of April 7, resulting in Jesus going to the cross, is as follows:

6:00 PM, 4/6/30	Jesus and disciples begin the Last Supper
11:00 PM	Jesus and disciples depart for Garden of Gethsemane, which is outside the walls of Jerusalem
12:00 AM, 4/7/30	Jesus is arrested at Gethsemane, guided by Judas
12:30 AM	Jesus is taken to Annas (former high priest), then to Caiaphas, (current high priest) for preliminary examination.
2:00 AM	Formal arraignment of Jesus before the Sanhedrin Court at palace of Caiaphas, formally tried, and convicted of blasphemy against Jehovah. Penalty is death, but Jews didn't have the authority to impose the death sentence. Only Roman government could. Peter denies Jesus three times.
6:00 AM	After a temporary adjournment of the first session, Sanhedrin reassembles to confirm the conviction and decide how Jesus should be charged before Pilate to obtain death sentence.
6:30 AM	Jesus is taken to Pilate on charge of high treason against Caesar. Pilate finds him innocent, but rather than release him, sends him to Herod, Tetrarch of Galilee, who was then in Jerusalem, to try to appease the crowd.
7:30 AM	Herod holds a brief informal hearing at which Jesus is mocked and then sent back to Pilate.

8:30 AM

Pilate reminds the chief priests and elders that he has found Jesus innocent but offers to scourge and release him. Jesus is scourged, but the Jews object to releasing Jesus, saying Pilate is no friend of Caesar if he releases Jesus who claimed to be a king. Pilate suggests that Jesus be the one prisoner released by him at Passover, but the crowd demands Barabbas be released instead. Pilate finally succumbs to the demands of the crowd and orders Jesus to be crucified.

9:00 AM

Jesus is led away to be crucified.

### III. The Jewish trial

Many of the reasons the Jewish trial was illegal are due to *procedural* requirements of Jewish law. Some people tend to denigrate procedural safeguards, deeming them less important than substantive requirements of the law. However, the requirement that due process of law be followed in order to obtain a legally justified judgment is found in virtually all legal systems, including our own. It is these procedural safeguards that ensure a judgment is reached only after a fair judicial proceeding in which the accused is presumed to be innocent until actually proven guilty by reliable evidence. Jewish law at the time of Jesus trial included a number of procedural and substantive safeguards to protect the rights of the accused. Some of them are quite different than the ones we have today. Nevertheless, their procedural safeguards were not just legal niceties that could be abandoned at will. Some of them went directly to the question of whether the Sanhedrin court had jurisdiction to act in the manner they did. As discussed above, the Jewish highest court believed that Jesus constituted an existential threat to the nation, and that belief led them to deliver an arrest and trial of Jesus which was illegal on numerous grounds.

- A. **Point I: The arrest of Jesus was illegal.** The arrest was illegal in three ways: (1) It took place at night. Jewish law prohibited any portion of a capital trial—including the arrest—from occurring at night; Jesus' arrest took place around midnight. (2) The arrest was effected through the efforts of a traitor and informer—namely Judas—in violation of the Mosaic code and a Rabbinic rule based on it; (3) The arrest was not the result of a legal mandate from a court that intended to conduct a fair trial to reach a righteous result. Just as in our time, an

illegal arrest would nullify a guilty jury verdict. Any one of these violations renders Jesus' verdict illegal.

- B. **Point II: The private examination of Jesus before Annas and Caiaphas was illegal.** There are three reasons for this. (1) The examination was conducted at night in violation of Jewish law; (2) No judge or magistrate sitting alone could interrogate an accused judicially or rule upon his rights; (3) No preliminary examination of an accused was permitted under Jewish law.
  
- C. **Point III: The indictment against Jesus was illegal in form.** This was so for two reasons. First, the accusations against Jesus were vague and indefinite. They simply accused him of sedition—inciting the people to revolt against lawful authority, namely the Jewish leaders—and blasphemy, claiming to be equal to God. The second problem was that the charges were made by Caiaphas, who was one of the judges. Jewish law forbade anyone but the leading witnesses to present the charges against an accused; it was not the role of the chief judge to assert the charges. He was supposed to remain impartial.
  
- D. **Point IV: The trial was illegal because it was conducted at night.** Jewish law absolutely forbade the trial of a capital case at night. No Jewish court had jurisdiction to act at night in such a serious case. Therefore, since the Sanhedrin had no jurisdiction, any judgment they rendered was illegal.
  
- E. **Point V: The court lacked jurisdiction because it convened before the offering of the morning sacrifice.** Remember, this was a theocracy, not a democracy. Jurisdiction only attached to the court once the morning sacrifice had been offered, and that had not happened. Remember, a new day began at sundown, so no morning sacrifice had yet been offered when Jesus was arrested or when his trial took place.
  
- F. **Point VI: The proceedings were illegal because they were held on the eve of a sabbath and of the Passover.** This rule was in place because in a capital case a final verdict could not be issued on the same day as the trial; the judges were required to consider their decision overnight for reflection in the pursuit of justice before a final ruling, which could not take place on the sabbath or a feast day. Furthermore, no court of Israel could adjourn once a trial began. Thus, a trial had to be completed before a sabbath or feast day arrived.

- G. Point VII: The trial was illegal because it was concluded within one day.** In a capital case, the law required the trial to take at least two days so the judges would have sufficient time for due deliberation and reflection. Jesus was arrested, tried (twice), convicted and sentenced all within a single day—from sundown on Thursday to sundown on Friday.
- H. Point VIII: The sentence of death was illegal because it was based upon Jesus’ uncorroborated confession.** Unlike our law today, which does permit a judgment based upon the accused own testimony, Jewish law did not permit this. Caiaphas was unable to get any corroborating testimony from witnesses who agreed. Therefore, he directly addressed Jesus and demanded that he tell the Sanhedrin whether he was the Messiah, the Son of God, or not. Jesus had no legal obligation to respond, but he did, and his testimony was the basis of the conviction.
- I. Point IX: The verdict was illegal because it was unanimous.** This one is a strange rule to modern minds. We usually require unanimous verdicts. But the Sanhedrin consisted of 71 members and there was no lawyer to represent the accused. Therefore, the members of the court were the protectors of the rights of the accused, and to the Jews a unanimous verdict suggested a conspiracy rather than a fair trial. This trial provided strong support for the existence of such a rule.
- J. Point X: The proceedings were illegal because 1) they occurred in a place forbidden by law; 2) the high priest rent his clothes; and 3) the balloting was irregular.** 1) Jewish law required that all capital cases occur nowhere else but in the area of the temple known as the Hall of Hewn Stones. In violation of this rule, Jesus was tried in the palace of the high priest, Caiaphas. 2) Caiaphas was the high priest conducting the trial and had an obligation to act in an impartial manner; an act such as renting his clothes clearly revealed his lack of impartiality as a judge of the accused. 3) The procedure to be followed in a capital case was that each judge of the Sanhedrin would stand, declare his vote of guilt or innocence, and state his reasons therefor, beginning with the youngest member all the way to the high priest. What happened here was more like a mob response to the urging of a guilty verdict by the high priest.
- K. Point XI: The conviction was illegal because the defendant was given no opportunity to present evidence on his behalf.** The record is quite clear that

once Caiaphas demanded that Jesus tell the court whether he was the Christ, the Son of God, and Jesus responded in the affirmative, Caiaphas said, in effect, “We don’t need any further witnesses; what is your verdict?” Whereupon the Sanhedrin members all in one voice proclaimed Jesus guilty. We don’t know whether any witnesses would have come forward for Jesus—but perhaps that is why Peter and another disciple followed Jesus after his arrest—to be available to testify on his behalf. We can’t know for sure, but that is not an unreasonable assumption. In any event, a trial under virtually any judicial system provides for an opportunity for the accused to present evidence of his innocence, but Jesus was denied that opportunity.

As we can see from the numerous violations cited above, many of them are procedural requirements which may not seem too important to modern ears, although some of them were jurisdictional in nature. However, remember that the entire focus of the Jewish faith at the time was to be obedient to every detail of Jewish law, including such trivialities as how many steps someone could take on a sabbath before it became “work.” What we see in the trial of Jesus before the highest court in the land is the abandonment of their adherence to the law in order to get rid of a man they viewed as an existential political threat to their nation and to their authority to lead that nation. A court that was charged with upholding justice pursuant to the Mosaic law decided before the trial began what the result would be—the opposite of what a trial is supposed to be all about. And one of the reasons they ignored their law was to enable them to rush through the trial and then get Pilate to impose the death sentence before Sundown on Friday, which would allow them to remain ritually pure to celebrate the Passover, the holiest day in the Jewish year.

#### **IV. The Roman Trial**

The Sanhedrin Court reconvened in the early morning hours for two purposes. First, they affirmed their verdict of several hours earlier that Jesus was guilty of blasphemy. The second purpose was to decide what charges to bring against Jesus if Pilate was not willing to simply affirm their verdict of guilt and order the crucifixion. They decided on three charges under Roman law to present, if necessary, as outlined in Luke 23:1-2. The three charges were: 1) Sedition—inciting the Jews to rebel against lawful authority, namely the Romans; 2) Forbidding Jews from paying tribute (taxes) to Caesar; and 3) Claiming to be a king, which amounted to high treason against the Roman emperor. No one could be a king unless Rome appointed him a king.



With this plan in mind, the chief priests brought Jesus before Pilate in the early morning hours of Friday. They insisted that Pilate meet them outside the palace since they would be ritually defiled if they entered the heathen building on the eve of Passover, and therefore they would be unable to celebrate the Passover dinner. Pilate accommodated their demand to meet outside the headquarters building; he asked them, “What accusation do you bring against this man?” That was not what they wanted to hear. They hoped Pilate would simply accept their verdict of guilt and impose the death penalty. But by asking what the charge was, Pilate was telling them he wanted to ensure there was a charge that violated Roman law. Pilate knew what they were up to, and he was unwilling to impose a Roman penalty on someone for violation of a strictly Jewish law.

Their response was telling: “If this man were not doing evil, we would not have delivered him over to you.” (John 18:30) They were asking Pilate to simply endorse what they had done and sentence Jesus to death. But sensing that whatever law was violated was Jewish, Pilate responded, “Judge him by your own law.” This brought forth the response from the chief priests which alerted Pilate to the true motive for this hearing: “It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death.” (John 18:31)

Realizing they would have to convince Pilate that Jesus had violated Roman law, the chief priests presented the three charges they had earlier agreed upon. Of the three charges, the one that caught Pilate’s attention was the last one—Jesus claimed to be a king, which would constitute high treason. This was not a charge that Pilate could afford to ignore. Given his previous history with the Jewish leadership complaining to Caesar about him, Pilate knew they would promptly report to higher authorities—including Caesar—any refusal of his to at least investigate this charge.

So, Pilate took Jesus into his headquarters to interrogate him privately. Keep in mind, they did not have an adversarial system in which the prosecution and defense each had their lawyers to present the evidence. It was an investigatory system in which the judge—in this case, Pilate—would conduct an examination to glean the facts. John 18:33-38 describes this examination. He asked Jesus if he was the king of the Jews, to which Jesus responded with a question, asking whether he asked on his own accord or was he repeating what others had asked. Pilate responded by saying, in effect, “Look, the leaders of your own country have accused you and brought you to me. What have you done to bring these charges against you?” Jesus’ response was straightforward. “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my followers would have been fighting on my behalf. But they haven’t because my kingdom is not of this world.” Pilate was intrigued. “So, you are a king?” He asked. Jesus’ replied, “Yes, for this purpose I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth, and anyone who is of the truth listens to me.”(See John 18:28-38)

It's at this point in the proceedings that Pilate uttered his famous and highly cynical statement, "What is truth?" But despite this comment, he apparently had come to the conclusion that Jesus was a teacher dealing with abstract philosophical questions and that there was no credible evidence indicating Jesus was a threat to the Roman government. He went back outside and informed the chief priests, "I find no guilt in him." He had just rendered a verdict of *not guilty*.

This should have been the end of the Roman trial against Jesus. Once there is a determination of no guilt, that normally concludes the legal proceeding. However, this was where the politics of the situation took over. Although he believed Jesus was innocent of the charges, Pilate didn't want the Jews to complain to Caesar about him yet again, so he was looking for a way to pacify them without having to convict an innocent man. However, Luke 23:4-5 tell us that when Pilate announced that he found no guilt in Jesus, the chief priests and the crowd responded forcefully, saying, "He stirs up the people, teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee even to this place." Hearing that Jesus had taught in and was from Galilee, Pilate attempted to get this confrontation with the Jewish authorities off of his plate by transferring the case to King Herod. Galilee was not part of the area over which Pilate had jurisdiction; it was part of King Herod's jurisdiction. So, Pilate decided to have what we today would call a "change of venue." He sent Jesus to Herod who happened to be in Jerusalem at the time for the Passover celebration. Pilate was hopeful Herod would deal with Jesus and he—Pilate—would be off the hook.

Luke chapter 23 tells us Herod was glad Jesus was brought before him because he had heard of Jesus' and wanted to see some miracles. Herod then interrogated Jesus "at some length," as Luke says, but Jesus gave him no answers. This was not unusual; this was a criminal proceeding, and even in the Jewish and Roman courts the accused had no obligation to respond to questions; Jesus exercised his right not to testify, remaining silent while being questioned. The chief priests and scribes from the Sanhedrin were there, Luke says, and were "vehemently accusing him." Once Herod realized he was not going to see any miracles from Jesus, he and his soldiers treated Jesus with contempt, mockingly dressed him up as king, and sent him back to Pilate. The legal effect of this was that Herod declined to exercise jurisdiction over Jesus to try the charges against him. Instead, he sent Jesus back to the court which originally had jurisdiction—Pilate's court.

When Jesus was brought back to Pilate, he repeated to the chief priests that he had examined Jesus and found him not guilty of any of the charges the Jews had asserted against him, as had Herod who returned Jesus to him without a conviction. Again, this should have been the end of the legal proceeding against Jesus. But, in order to try to pacify Jesus' accusers, Pilate made another non-judicial offer that he hoped would resolve

the situation; he reminded them that he had a practice of releasing one criminal to them at the Passover; he asked if they would rather have him release Jesus or Barabbas, a convicted insurrectionist and murderer. Pilate obviously thought they would elect to have Jesus released rather than Barabbas, but instead they demanded he release Barabbas and crucify Jesus. Think about that for a minute. The Jewish leaders were so determined to get rid of Jesus they preferred that a known insurrectionist and murderer go free rather than Jesus.

Pilate was surprised that the chief priests preferred that Barabbas be released, but he was not yet prepared to crucify Jesus. Instead—apparently in the hope he could satisfy the chief priests, he ordered Jesus flogged (even though there was no conviction to warrant any punishment), which sometimes was enough to kill a man. The soldiers would strike the prisoner repeatedly with a whip of leather strips that had glass and rocks embedded. They would continue to whip him until the back was shredded; sometimes the prisoner would be disemboweled. After doing this to Jesus, they put a purple robe on him and jammed a crown of thorns on his head, and Pilate brought Jesus back before the chief priests and the crowd. Pilate said again, “I find no guilt in him.” But he was also showing them how he had punished Jesus severely based on their accusations. He said, “Behold the man,” which meant, “Look at what I have done to him.” This still didn’t satisfy the chief priests or the crowd. They again demanded that he crucify Jesus.

When Pilate once more reaffirmed he found no guilt in Jesus, the chief priests pivoted to accusing Jesus of blasphemy. They told Pilate Jesus should die because he claimed to be the Son of God. John 19:8 tells us that when Pilate heard this, he was afraid. One reason he may have been afraid was that, according to Matthew 27:19, he had received a message from his wife during the proceedings against Jesus that he should do nothing to “that righteous man” for she had dreamed about him that day and it had distressed her. In any event, after hearing the charge that Jesus claimed to be the Son of God, he took Jesus back into his headquarters to examine him further in his judicial capacity. Pilate asked him, “Where are you from?” He wasn’t asking where Jesus’ hometown was; he was asking whether Jesus was from another world. Jesus didn’t respond (John 19:9-10), which frustrated Pilate who asked, “Don’t you know I have the authority to release you or to crucify you?” Jesus finally responded, telling Pilate he would have no authority over him at all unless it were granted from above. “Those who delivered me to you have the greater sin.”

Again satisfied that Jesus was no threat to the Roman government, Pilate brought Jesus back out to where the chief priests and the crowd were. When Pilate announced he would release Jesus, the Jewish leaders responded, “If you release this man, you are not

Caesar's friend. Everyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar." (John 19:12). This was a blatant and pointed threat to report Pilate to Caesar for failing to punish someone who challenged the authority of the Roman government by claiming to be a king. Pilate's behavior that day clearly indicated he took that threat very seriously. He had repeatedly found no guilt in Jesus, but he was still searching for a way that would satisfy the Jewish leaders if he released Jesus. He was getting nowhere with the leaders or the crowd, and their demand to crucify Jesus kept getting stronger, to the point Pilate thought a riot might break out.

His final gambit to avoid ordering Jesus crucified was to sit on the judgment seat at the Stone Pavement, also called Gabbatha. He brought Jesus out before the crowd. By now, Jesus was in terrible shape. He had had no sleep for at least 36 hours. He had been beaten and scourged; he had a crown of thorns on his head which would have caused his face to be covered with blood, and he was mockingly dressed in a purple robe because he claimed to be a king. Pilate brought him out before the people, I believe, to show how pitiful his appearance was in the hope they would be satisfied he had been punished enough. He said, "Behold your king." In other words, "Look at him; he's no threat to anyone."

But this effort by Pilate was no more successful than the previous ones. The crowd, led by the chief priests, responded, "Away with him; crucify him!" Pilate's response indicated he couldn't believe they still wanted to crucify him. He asked, "Shall I crucify your King?" Their response showed the lengths to which the Jewish leaders were willing to go to destroy Jesus. They said, "We have no king but Caesar." By professing to acknowledge Caesar alone as their king, the chief priests betrayed their national heritage in which they recognized God alone as their king. Pilate, of course, recognized this and realized that if the Jewish leaders were willing to abandon their own heritage to see Jesus dead, they would stop at nothing to get rid of Pilate if he didn't crucify Jesus. Although Pilate apparently had a strong sense of justice that led him to believe Jesus was innocent of all of the charges against him, he didn't have the integrity to stand against the political forces arrayed against him, and he finally caved to their demands.

Matthew tells us a riot was about to break out, so Pilate washed his hands in the presence of the crowd, and announced, "I am innocent of this man's blood," to which the crowd replied, "His blood be on us and on our children." (Matt. 27:24-25) So, Pilate released Barabbas and delivered Jesus up to be crucified.

Thus, the trial of Jesus came to end with the Roman judicial officer conducting the trial publicly declaring the accused to be innocent, yet he yielded to the crowd to protect his own position and status in the Roman hierarchy. By his actions, Pilate acknowledged

the travesty of justice that took place and declared for all time that Jesus was innocent of the charges brought against him.

In the providence of God, of course, Jesus was guilty, but he was guilty of our sins, not his own. The earthly legal charges brought against him, as the record has shown, were driven by political and temporal concerns that resulted in the biggest miscarriage of justice in the history of mankind.

Note: The information regarding the legal aspects of the Jewish and Roman trials of Jesus is taken from "The Trial of Jesus from a Lawyer's Standpoint," by Walter M. Chandler, copyright 1956 by The Harrison Company.