

John 18:28–32

Introduction

When we were last in John, we saw Peter’s “I am not” in the courtyard of the High Priest in contrast with Jesus’ earlier “I am He” in the garden of Gethsemane.

Jesus’ arrest in the garden took place late Thursday night, after eating the Passover meal with His disciples in the upper room. After relating Jesus’ arrest, John tells us about Jesus’ night-time interview with Annas, the High Priest, and the father-in-law of Caiaphas (who was the “official” High Priest appointed by the Romans). John then skips the formal trial before Caiaphas (cf. 18:24, 28). It would seem from the testimony of Matthew, Mark, and Luke that a good deal of this second “trial” before Caiaphas took place still in the very early hours of Friday morning before the sun had risen (which was illegal according to Jewish law), but then once morning came (perhaps around 6 AM?), they “repeated” the trial to make it “legal” (Mat. 26:57-68 & 27:1-2; Mk. 14:53-65 & 15:1; Lk. 22:66-23:1). So now we pick up again in verse 28 of chapter eighteen.

I. John 18:28 — Then they led Jesus from Caiaphas into the Praetorium [the governor’s residence in Jerusalem], and it was early [likely between 6 AM and 7 AM on Friday morning]; and they themselves did not enter into the Praetorium so that they would not be defiled, but might eat the Passover.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all state explicitly that Jesus had already eaten the Passover meal with His disciples the previous night (Thursday night; Mat. 26:17-19; Mk. 14:12-16; Lk. 22:7-17). So how can John say that the Jews were wanting to avoid defilement so they could eat the Passover if the Passover had already been eaten? “Passover” can refer not just to the Passover meal itself but also to the seven-day Feast of Unleavened Bread that followed the Passover meal.

➤ Luke 22:1 — Now the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which is called the Passover, was drawing near.

The point seems to be that the Jews didn’t want to contract any ritual defilement so that they could observe the entirety of this feast – so they could eat “the Passover” for all seven days. And what was it that defiled a Jew if he entered a Gentile’s house? In Acts chapter ten, Peter said to Cornelius and the others who were gathered at his house:

➤ Acts 10:28 — “You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a man who is a Jew to associate with a foreigner or to visit him.”

The concern, in this case, might have been the possibility of becoming defiled by touching or eating unclean foods (a one-day defilement; cf. Lev. 11:8). Here in John, at the time of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the concern might have been contact with leaven (entering a house that had not been thoroughly purged of leaven [also a one-day defilement; cf. Exod. 12:19; 13:7; Carson]). Another fear might have been that Gentiles were believed to bury aborted babies in their homes, or flush them down their drains, and to enter a house where there was a dead body

rendered a Jew unclean for seven days (cf. Carson and Ridderbos; Num. 9:6-11). In other words, the Law didn't actually say that a Jew couldn't enter a Gentile's house. The Jews were simply taking extra precautions since in a Gentile house they were far more likely to become ritually or ceremonially defiled. Therefore, "...they themselves did not enter into the Praetorium so that they would not be defiled, but might eat the Passover."

But is the irony of this obvious to us? One of the early "church fathers" writes:

[They thought their Passover 'worship'] offered service to God [Jesus said, 'an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God'; Jn. 16:2], [but in fact it only made them] more [defiled] than they were before they purified themselves (Origen of Alexandria; quoted in Michaels).

The Jewish leaders were so deeply concerned with ritual and ceremonial *purity* and not missing any part of the Passover Feast and worship that they wouldn't step foot inside a Gentile's house. And yet all the while, they were seeking from this same Gentile death for an innocent man.

They hold fast to the ceremonial law while they seek the execution of the promised Deliverer of Israel, the Son of God and Savior... in their zeal to eat the Passover... they unwittingly help to fulfill its significance through their demanding the death of the Lamb of God, at the same time shutting themselves out from its saving efficacy (Beasley-Murray).

John doesn't explicitly make this point, but we hear in his words the intended irony: "...they themselves did not enter into the Praetorium *so that they would not be defiled, but might eat the Passover.*"

But what is it that truly and ultimately defiles a person? Jesus said that it's what "proceeds from the heart" (Mat. 15:18) — a spiritual defilement. How often are we blinded to the true nature of our sin by an external self-righteousness? How often are we so zealous for the outward forms of righteousness and all the "finer points" of religion that we miss entirely the far more significant sins that we daily pursue? As the commentator I just quoted says of our passage, "No more eloquent example than this can be found of the ability of religious people to be meticulous about external regulations of religion [which isn't itself wrong] while being wholly at variance with God." What a sobering thought this is. How diligently, then, should we be praying as the psalmist prayed:

- Psalm 19:12–13 — Who can discern his errors? Acquit me of hidden faults. Also keep back Your slave from presumptuous sins; let them not rule over me; then I will be blameless, and I shall be acquitted of great transgression.

Of course, John's primary point is not that this should serve as an example or a lesson for us. His main purpose is to show the total hypocrisy of Jesus' accusers in order to emphasize all the more the injustice of everything surrounding His arrest, and His trial, and His execution. The Jews would not enter Pilate's residence:

II. John 18:29 — Therefore Pilate went out to them and said, “What accusation do you bring against this man?”

Pilate was at that time the Roman prefect, or governor, of Judea. Carson describes him from the historical evidence as a “morally weak and vacillating man who... tried to hide his flaws under shows of stubbornness and brutality. His rule earned him the loathing of the Jewish people, small groups of whom violently protested and were put down with savage ferocity.” We read in Luke about certain Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices (Lk. 13:1). It’s this Pilate who went out to the Jews early on that Friday morning. Roman courts opened much earlier than ours do, and Pilate, no doubt, already knew about the arrest of Jesus because Roman soldiers had been involved (18:3). He went out to them and said, “What accusation do you bring against this man?” These are formal words that mark the opening of a formal trial; but this isn’t at all what the Jewish leaders wanted, or even what they expected.

III. John 18:30 — They answered and said to him, “If this man were not an evildoer, we would not have delivered Him to you.”

The Jews had expected Pilate to simply put his rubber stamp on the verdict they had already pronounced. They’re not interested in a Roman trial, they just want the Roman verdict and the Roman execution. Why should their accusation against Jesus be of any concern to Pilate? The real problem, of course, is that Jesus has been condemned in the *Jewish* court for blasphemy (19:7; cf. Mat. 26:63-66), but they know that in a *Roman* court this charge will never hold up. So, at first, they refuse to give Pilate any clear answer: “If this man were not an evildoer, we would not have delivered Him to you.” Just take our word for it: he’s a dangerous man who needs to die. But Pilate isn’t in the mood to be “used” by his own subjects for their own ends. He’s not concerned about justice, but about winning a round and proving his own superiority. And all the while, where is Jesus? He’s standing silent, out of sight inside Pilate’s residence – “backstage,” as it were.

IV. John 18:31a — So Pilate said to them, “Take Him yourselves, and judge Him according to your law.”

If the Jewish leaders aren’t interested in a Roman trial, why should they want a Roman verdict and a Roman execution? They had their own courts, and they were perfectly free to enforce their own penalties. They could imprison Jesus (cf. Acts 5:18). They could inflict corporal punishment (flogging; cf. Acts 5:40; 2 Cor. 11:24). *Maybe* Pilate is even daring the Jews to find out if he might look the other way if they put Jesus to death by stoning (which was the Jewish method of execution). Again, if they’re not interested in a Roman trial, why should they want a Roman verdict? So let them take Jesus themselves and judge Him according to their own law. Obviously, Pilate is motivated not by any desire for justice, but only by animosity toward his Jewish subjects. And once again, while the Roman governor and the Jewish chief priests are engaged in their maneuvering, Jesus, the object of all their maneuvering, stands silently, “backstage.”

V. John 18:31b [TAKE ONE] — The Jews said to [Pilate], “It is not lawful for us to kill anyone”...

I think there are two levels at which we can read this. At one level there’s the plain meaning of the Jews, which we’ll come to in a moment. At another level, I think John intends for us to see more irony here (cf. Michaels).

There’s a specific Greek word for murder (*phoneuo*; cf. Exod. 20:13). Obviously, the Jews don’t use that word here. They’re not explaining to Pilate that it was not lawful for them to murder anyone. There’s another Greek word that refers to putting a person to death usually as the result of a *legal judgment* (*thanatoo*; cf. Mat. 10:21; 26:59). But the Jews don’t use that word here, either. They use a more generic word that means “to cause someone’s death, normally by violent means, with or without intent and *with or without legal justification*—to kill” (*apokteino*; Louw-Nida). In other words, this is a word that could go either way (murder or legal execution) depending on the context. We know that in this context, the Jews are speaking of killing with legal justification: “It is not lawful for us (under Roman rule) to carry out the death penalty.” But given their mood, and given the innocence of the man whose death they seek, we hear them unwittingly condemning themselves: “It is not lawful for us to kill (i.e., to murder) anyone.” In any other context, the words “it is not lawful”—on the lips of a Jew—would be a reference not to Roman law, but to their own law – the law of Moses (Mat. 12:2, 4; 14:4; 27:6; Jn. 5:10; cf. Acts 16:21). And so it’s in this light that we’re reminded of these other passages scattered throughout John’s Gospel:

- John 5:18 — For this reason therefore the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him [*apokteino*].
- John 7:1 (cf. 7:20, 25) — Jesus was... unwilling to walk in Judea because the Jews were seeking to kill Him [*apokteino*].
- John 11:53 — From that day on they planned together to kill Him [*apokteino*].

Jesus said to the Jews in chapter seven:

- John 7:19 (cf. 8:37-40) — “Did not Moses give you the Law? And yet none of you does the Law. Why do you seek to kill Me [*apokteino*; contrary to the law]?”

So now listen again to what the Jewish leaders said to Pilate: “It is not lawful for us to kill anyone [*apokteino*].” How can we not hear the Jews unwittingly condemning themselves by their own words, and by their own law? And yet they’re completely blinded—by the hardness of their own hearts—to the true nature of their law-breaking. On the one hand, they’re zealous for the Law. They’re careful to avoid any ritual or ceremonial defilement that they might pick up by entering a Gentile’s house. On the other hand, in the very midst of this zeal for the Law, they’re breaking that same Law by killing an innocent man – and we know, not just an innocent man, but the Son of God. What a fearful thing it is to see how blinded we can be. How often are we blinded, even in lesser ways, to the true nature of our sin by an external self-righteousness? How often are we so zealous for the outward forms of righteousness and all the “finer points” of religion that we miss entirely the far more significant sins that we daily pursue?

Once again, the primary point of this irony is not to serve as a lesson for us. The primary point is to show the hypocrisy of Jesus' accusers in order to emphasize all the more the unlawfulness of everything surrounding His arrest, and His trial, and His execution. And all the while, Jesus is still standing silent, out of sight inside Pilate's residence – "backstage," as it were.

Now let's look at the meaning of the Jews' words to Pilate as *they* intended them.

VI. John 18:31b [TAKE TWO] — The Jews said to [Pilate], "It is not lawful for us to kill anyone"...

The Jews' right to enforce the death penalty had been taken away by the Romans. But we know that they weren't always so concerned with what was "lawful" and apparently the Romans would, at times, turn a blind eye to a Jewish execution. This seems to be what happened in the case of the stoning of Stephen in Acts chapter seven (Acts 7:54-60). We read in John chapter eight:

- John 8:58-59 — Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am." Therefore they picked up stones to throw at Him, but Jesus hid Himself and went out of the temple.

In chapter ten:

- John 10:25, 30-31 — Jesus answered them... "I and the Father are one." The Jews picked up stones again to stone Him.

If twice before, the Jews have been on the verge of stoning Jesus, why, then, are they so intent now on abiding by Roman rules? Ever since chapter five, the Jewish leadership has been seeking to kill Jesus.

- John 5:18 — For this reason therefore the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him...
- John 11:53 — From that day on they planned together to kill Him.

We see the exasperation of the chief priests and the Pharisees in chapter twelve:

- John 12:10 — The chief priests planned to kill Lazarus also; because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and were believing in Jesus.

Were the Jews planning all this time to have Jesus legally sentenced by Pilate? Not at all! So why haven't they killed Jesus already? Humanly speaking, the only reason is because Jesus was so well-known and popular with the people. Mark says:

- Mark 14:1-2 (Luke 20:19; 22:2) — Now the Passover and Unleavened Bread were two days away; and the chief priests and the scribes were seeking *how*, after seizing Him in secret, they might kill Him; for they were saying, "Not during the festival, *lest there be a riot of the people.*"

The general idea was to arrest Jesus secretly, away from any crowds, pass sentence, and then have Him stoned hopefully without attracting too much notice. Stoning was the punishment prescribed in the law of Moses for blasphemy (Lev. 24:16). But given that Jesus was such a public figure, this plan was proving not to be practical. And now it's Jesus Himself who has forced their hand by revealing to Judas in the upper room that He knows of His arrangement with the chief priests (cf. Mat. 26:14-16; Jn. 13:21-26), and telling him on the very night of Passover, "What you do, do quickly" (Jn. 13:27). So now the Jewish leadership has Jesus in custody in the middle of the Passover festival, when Jerusalem is thronging with Jews, many of whom are from Galilee where Jesus was most popular and most well-known (cf. Jn. 12:12-19). *This* is what forces the Jews to accept the fact that they'll have to do things "lawfully." If they can have Jesus sentenced to death and executed *by the Romans*, then maybe they can avoid any uproar by the crowds – and so also, the potential for any Roman reprisals. And in the end, won't a public Roman crucifixion make a stronger statement than a "quiet" Jewish stoning?

When Pilate says to the Jews, "Take Him yourselves, and judge Him according to your law," we understand, now, their response: "It is not lawful for us to kill anyone..." It's not really Roman law that the Jews care about. "It is not lawful for us to kill anyone..." Which is to say, "He must not be stoned by us [as had always been the plan]; He must be crucified by the Romans."

All the while, Jesus is still standing silent – "backstage," as it were. But in the midst of all the maneuvering and all the bad blood, and all the hypocrisy and all the plotting, and all the evil and injustice, who's in control? "The Jews said to him, 'It is not lawful for us to kill anyone'..."

VII. John 18:32 — ...in order that the *word of Jesus* which He spoke would be fulfilled, signifying by what kind of death He was about to die.

In this scene of wickedness and chaos, who's in control? It is Jesus who's in complete control, as He submits Himself to His Father's will (cf. Jn. 4:34). It's Jesus who is in complete control, as He accomplishes the work which the Father has given Him to do (cf. Jn. 17:4). It's Jesus who's in complete control, because outside Pilate's residence it's *His word* which *He spoke* that's being *fulfilled*.

John's point, here, isn't just the method of execution – crucifixion versus stoning. It is that, but it's more than that. So far in John, the word "cross" or "crucify" has never been used. So where is this "word of Jesus which He spoke... signifying by what kind of death He was about to die"? All the way back in chapter three, Jesus said to Nicodemus:

➤ John 3:14–15 — "As Moses *lifted up* the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be *lifted up*; so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life."

In chapter eight, Jesus said:

➤ John 8:28 — "When you *lift up* the Son of Man, then you will know that I am He, and I do nothing from Myself, but I speak these things as the Father taught Me."

In chapter twelve, Jesus said:

- John 12:32–33 — “And I, if I am *lifted up* from the earth, *will draw all men to Myself*.” But He was saying this to indicate the kind of death by which He was about to die.

Conclusion

Jesus’ life wasn’t taken from Him. He laid it down for us (cf. Jn. 10:17-18). He chose not only the time of His death, but even the manner of His death. He chose the cross (rather than stoning) in obedience to the Father and for the joy set before Him – in order that we might look to Him who was “lifted up: and have, in Him, eternal life.

In John, the weakness of the cross is the power of God. The foolishness of the cross is the wisdom of God. The shame of the cross is the glory of God. The suffering of the cross is the triumph of God. The curse of the cross is the salvation of God (cf. Deut. 21:23 and Gal. 3:13).

In John, the cross signifies the “lifting up” of Jesus so that whoever looks upon Him and believes will in Him have eternal life. In John, the cross signifies the “lifting up” of Jesus so that He might draw all men—people from every tribe and tongue and people and nation—to Himself.

And so we see that in the midst of all the maneuvering and all the bad blood, and all the hypocrisy and all the plotting, and all the evil and injustice, all along it’s Jesus—standing silent, backstage—who’s in control. It’s the word of Jesus, which He spoke, that’s being fulfilled. And all so that the *glory* of God might be revealed in the *cross* of Jesus Christ – for us and for our *salvation*. Are you looking to Him who was “lifted up” on a cross and who has now been “lifted up” to the right hand of the Father? Are we willing to deny ourselves and take up our own cross and follow Him (cf. Mat. 16:24)?