

“Behold the Guilty Guiltless Man”

John 19:I–II

¹Pilate then took Jesus and scourged Him. ²And the soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on His head, and put a purple robe on Him; ³and they began to come up to Him and say, “Hail, King of the Jews!” and to give Him slaps in the face. ⁴Pilate came out again and said to them, “Behold, I am bringing Him out to you so that you may know that I find no guilt in Him.” ⁵Jesus then came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, “Behold, the Man!” ⁶So when the chief priests and the officers saw Him, they cried out saying, “Crucify, crucify!” Pilate said to them, “Take Him yourselves and crucify Him, for I find no guilt in Him.” ⁷The Jews answered him, “We have a law, and by that law He ought to die because He made Himself out to be the Son of God.” ⁸Therefore when Pilate heard this statement, he was even more afraid; ⁹and he entered into the Praetorium again and said to Jesus, “Where are You from?” But Jesus gave him no answer. ¹⁰So Pilate said to Him, “You do not speak to me? Do You not know that I have authority to release You, and I have authority to crucify You?” ¹¹Jesus answered, “You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given you from above; for this reason he who delivered Me to you has the greater sin.” [NASB]

HOPE
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I. Pilate Scourging; Soldiers Mocking

Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Only once in a long while does a hymn or spiritual song bear out the harsh angst inherent in the perplexities of Christian life. Only once in a long while, does one convey the gut-wrenching reality which most current songs try to suppress with trite platitudes drawn from Scripture words taken out of context. Singer Jami Smith hit one of those once-in-a-long-whiles with her song, “It’s Not Fair.”

It is not a sweet song. It grinds your teeth with a certain Janis Joplin rasp that misses notes and tries to claw its way into the right pitch... but can’t quite make it. “It’s not fair. Life is not fair. No, it’s not easy... to believe with what we see... in this world.” Everybody—whether they go to church or not—knows at some level that things just ain’t right with this world. Thoughts and discussions regarding justice and fairness too commonly are dripping with cynicism.

You would be sadly mistaken if you have heard me to say over the past few weeks that Jesus had everything under control here. You would be absolutely correct, if you heard me to say over the past few weeks that Jesus had everything under control here. But you would miss the whole point if you heard me to say over the past few weeks that Jesus had everything under control here.

Most certainly, Jesus had everything under control here. Everything that takes place in this Praetorium has been planned by God from all eternity, and when it comes right down to it, we call God the First Cause. Yes, everything including the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus Christ was foreordained by God. Jesus had everything under control here.

But don’t hear me saying that Jesus had everything under control here. If you hear me saying that, then you will have no hope at all when you start singing—which you *do* need to sing!—“Life is not fair.”

Let me just ask you: do you think Jesus was pleased that Pilate had Him scourged, whipped at a post in such a way that His flesh was peeled back from bone, joint, sinew? Do you think that Jesus moved His hands like a symphony conductor, pointing to the section when it was time to beat three- or five- or seven-inch thorns into His skull?

Do you think Jesus told the soldiers to bring Him a grungy purple robe which would pull on His flapping, dangling skin? Do you think that Jesus was holding the playstation joystick, directing the fists of the soldiers striking His face? Do you think Jesus handed the monstrous soldiers manuscripts, with their character lines highlighted in pink, so they knew when to say “Hail, King of the Jews,” in a despicable, mocking voice?

Do you really think Jesus was in control of all this? *Do you really think Jesus was not tempted beyond anything you or I will ever imagine, to cry out, “It’s not fair! Life is not fair!”?* If that is what you think—that Jesus was not severely tempted to despair the unfair— then you may as well hang up your hope on the coat rack as you depart. For if that is what you think, then no one has borne your despair for you, in His own flesh and bone and soul. Your despair of the unfair is still yours... all yours.

II. Pilate Judging; Priests Condemning

It’s not fair. Life is not fair. Judgments come, and judgments go. Favorable one moment, deadly the next. Pilate is a weasel, and he’s trying to slip out of the knot he’s feeling tighten around him. Surely the whipping, scourging, and battering would appease these passionate Jewish leaders! Okay, so maybe they weren’t quite as upright as Pilate had hoped. So they *had* chosen for Pilate to release the convicted murderer Barabbas instead of releasing the innocent Jesus. Surely, they would nevertheless have pity on this pulp of a Man who already has been stricken, smitten, and afflicted enough for one day! For one life!

Pilate makes no bones about his own innocence as a judge. “I FIND NO GUILT IN HIM.” He keeps saying that. Why isn’t anybody listening? Oh, but they are. The God of heaven and earth is listening to Pilate. The God of heaven and earth always listens when anyone—heavenly or heathen—declares the glory of the Lord. The heathen Pilate declares the glory of the Lord’s righteousness, sinlessness, goodness, innocence.

For all the ages of the earth, and unto the furthest reaches of eternity—we will hear it again and again in heaven!—Pilate’s proclamation will redound to God’s glorious praise: “*I find no guilt in Him.*” The one whom God alone raised into the place of a ruler has judged correctly: *there is no sin in Jesus.*

Pilate is not the only one to declare this. John the Baptist declared this when, in ch1, he cried out, ^{Jn1.29}“Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!... ³⁴I myself have seen, and have testified that this is the Son of God.” Behold the spotless, sinless Lamb of God. He can take away the sins of another only if He has no sins of His own.

Now Pilate presents the Lamb and says “Behold, the Man!” Pilate is a mocker. He mocks Jesus and he mocks the Jews. “Behold this sorry spectacle of a man... and you think He is a troublemaker worthy of death? He is nothing. Check out this crown—and you are *envious*?!!? What is *wrong* with you Jews! Get a hold of yourselves. This is just stupid. He’s done nothing wrong, and what’s more, He’s a sad specimen of someone for you to be afraid of. Good grief, you fools, what is it you see when you behold *this* sorry substitute for a real man?!?”

Well, that goes over real well with the Jewish leaders. They don’t take kindly to being mocked by this Roman imposter in Jerusalem who is just fueling their frenzy. Bad move, Pilate. Your plan to appease has backfired. Blood only ever intensified bloodthirstiness. “Crucify, crucify” is all their cry.

And Pilate gets one step more exasperated. “You wanted me to judge Him, and judge Him I have. He’s innocent. Why did you ask me to judge Him, if you are just going to condemn Him despite my judgment? Crucify Him yourself, if you aren’t going to receive my judgment.”

Did you forget that Jesus is standing right there? Is Jesus orchestrating this exchange between the Roman and the Jews? Is this one of those balance-counterbalance numbers? “Innocent!” – “Crucify!” – “Innocent!” – “Crucify!” How fair is that?

And how fair is this? Those whose purpose in history was to be a lifeline through history from the man who first sinned to the Man who would *become* sin, now used the most glorious truth *against* Him? “He made Himself out to be the Son of God.” I don’t know if the Jews were smart enough to have figured out the effect this would have upon a typically superstitious Roman governor.

Maybe they were just getting desperate to get this problem taken care of before the Passover festival began. Having begun with a civil complaint (“This man is an evildoer”^{18.30}),

they now blow their cover and say not only is He a blasphemer (which by Lev24.16 must be put to death), but He actually makes Himself to be God. Apparently, on account of his superstition, this is enough to tip Pilate into panic. ⁸“Therefore when Pilate heard this statement, he was even *much more* afraid.”

What about this? Was Jesus in control of this, too? Roman governor running back and forth between Jesus and Jesus’ own people? What is happening with Jesus? Pilate in his panic comes to Jesus and asks “Where are You from?” And Jesus is silent. He usually is, when godless superstitious fear is driving the question. He would have answered readily if Pilate had been concerned for his eternal soul.

III. Father Silent; Jesus Judging

Jesus is silent. What intimate, joyful discourse He had with His disciples a few very short hours ago! Touching them, washing their feet, embracing them... even letting one of them recline with his head upon His breast. (Can you *imagine* being that one?!?)

Jesus is silent. What passionate prayer He lifted to His Father for the disciples, and for all who would believe through their Word.

Jesus is silent. Thus the Father must be silent, for Jesus does speak when His Father speaks. In the garden... what deep, dark, excruciating ache had twisted His entire body in contortions that caused blood to drip out of his sweat glands! Oh, the ache, when He heard nothing from His Father! Nothing!

And now Jesus is silent. Has He checked out? Is He numb? Have His body’s pain processors gone into shock? Where is there one soul—even just *one*—in whose eyes He might find a hint of compassion? What is fair about this? Now here is this mocker Pilate, this unprincipled judge bobbing like a beach ball on the waves—up, down, up, down. And now here is this puppet Pilate, boasting in authority he does not have.

He Rules! When he says Be Silent, you be silent! When he says Speak, you Speak! But when he claims authority he does not have... Jesus puts him in his place. Oh sure, Pilate could at any moment tell his henchmen to come crucify Jesus and his henchmen would come crucify Jesus. But Pilate did not have the authority to crucify an innocent man. He had authority to mete out punishment consistent with his judgment of guilt.

This Man was guiltless, according to the Governor’s own judgment. Too bad for Pilate that he did not give to Jesus his own guilt. Too bad for any of us if we don’t give to Jesus our own guilt. Too bad for any of us if the Guiltless One does not become guilt *for* us in our place!

Still, there is one for whom it is worse than it is for Pilate. Pilate was a puppet. Pilate was a pawn. The problem came to Pilate. He did not start it, he did not initiate it. Pilate, in a sense, was the passive player. God determines and lifts every leader into his or her particular place of rule. God had arranged Pilate’s ascent to governor, in order that God might use Pilate to accomplish God’s purpose of sending His own Son to the cross to die for your sins and for mine.

Pilate was nonetheless responsible for his practice, for his rule, for his justice or his lack of justice. But whether Jesus referred to Judas Iscariot, or to Caiaphas the high priest as the one who handed Jesus over, we don’t know. All we know is that the act of initiating this crime against

Truth and Justice is even more heinous than playing a more passive role in carrying out the crime.

IV. Too short

Behold the Man! Behold the Lamb! It's not fair! Or is it? Perhaps the most perverted thing in the world is to take this passage and those coming up, and make yourself or someone else feel bad about it. In my experience that is the most common treatment of this passage in the church, as well as in the world. Interesting how the church and the world treat this passage similarly. Wanting to make you feel bad about the scourge, the thorn, the fist, the spit, the mocking. Preach about it, make a movie about it... What's the difference?

“It's not fair. Life is not fair. No, it's not easy... to believe with what we see... in this world.” I lament that even in this pathos-laden song, Jami may stop too short. “There's so much pain, so much fear, so much hate, so much grief and so much death... that I can't wrap my head around it; no I can't stop my heart from feeling it... from feeling that life is not fair.” Is her gut-wrenching struggle—and ours—with unfairness a struggle with something too far away? Is the pain, the fear, the hate, the grief, the death, of which she sings—and we sing—that which we see in this world?

Such is *not* the pain, the fear, the hate, the grief, the death, from which Jesus came to deliver us. Jesus came to deliver us from the pain, the fear, the hate, the grief, the death which we do *not* see... in our very own soul. This Jesus who receives these blows, these thorns, these nails, is the same Jesus over whom the Apostles agonize to have formed in you and in me. It is perverted to feel badly about this passage if you are a Christian!

Listen! Each blow, each thorn, each nail, is but one among the countless death warrants written out on you and on me... a death warrant that is being pressed sharply into Jesus Christ instead of you, instead of me! To make you feel badly or even guilty about Jesus' suffering, is to pervert the all-encompassing loveliness of God's sweet mercy!

It was unfair for Jesus! Jesus was *not* controlling the joystick in these proceedings. It was a horrible travesty of unfairness! But Jesus was not silently agonizing there before Pilate in order to fix the pain, the fear, the hate, the grief, the death out there in the world! Jesus was there to deliver *you* through and from the pain, the fear, the hate, the grief, the death which you do *not* see... that which is in *your very own soul*. Jesus was there agonizing before Pilate... to give you hope through the desperately unfair perplexities twisting *your very own soul* into agonizing, bleeding contortions.

Like the Oracle, I'm sorry to bring bad news to nice people like you. But you don't always get fair warning when Jesus begins to deliver you from the pain, the fear, the hate, the grief, the death which you don't even *know* is in your very own soul. And you cannot be any more in control of the process than Jesus was in the Praetorium. And that, my friends, is what it means for Christ to be formed in you.

I know. Believe me, I know. It is not fair. It would not hurt so much if the pain, the fear, the hate, the grief, the death were all out there in the world. But it is much closer. If it were out there, then you would not need the Spirit of Christ in here. If it were out there, then you would not need the thorns to penetrate *into* Jesus' skull. If it were out there, then you would not need Jesus to have His skin ripped off exposing His *innards*.

If it were out there, you would not need His face swelling from the *inside* by the blows. If it were out there, you would not need nails and spear drilling fountains of blood from His *inside*. No, beloved of the Lord, Christ will be formed *inside* you... not out there.

Be thankful—do not despair—for the unfair. If it were fair, then Pilate’s correct judgment would have held. And the guiltless Lamb of God would not have become guilty—would not have been sacrificed for your guilt and for mine.

Praise God, oh, praise God for the unfair.