

Lesson 20
John 18:28 – 19:16
Jesus' Civil Trial

Memory verse: “He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.” (Isaiah 53:3 NIV)

Long before the Jewish leaders had Jesus arrested in the garden, they had determined to kill Him (John 11:47–54). However, the Jewish council did not have the right to execute prisoners, so it was necessary to get the cooperation and approval of Rome. This meant a visit to the Roman procurator, Pontius Pilate.

There were three stages in both the Jewish “trial” and the Roman “trial.” After His arrest, Jesus was taken to the home of Annas and there interrogated informally (John 18:12–14, 19–23). Annas hoped to get information that would implicate Jesus as an enemy of the state. He wanted to prove that both His doctrine and His disciples were anti-Roman, for then He would be worthy of death.

Stage two of the Jewish trial took place before Caiaphas and whatever members of the Sanhedrin the high priest could assemble at that hour of the night (Matt. 26:57–68; Mark 14:53–65). When Jesus confessed clearly that He was the Christ, the council found Him guilty of blasphemy and therefore, according to their law, worthy of death. However, it was necessary for the council to meet early the next morning and give their verdict, since it was not considered legal to try capital cases at night. So, stage three of the Jewish trial took place as early as possible, and the leaders condemned Jesus to death (Matt. 27:1; Luke 22:66–71).

The three stages of the Roman trial were the first appearance before Pilate (John 18:28–38), the appearance before Herod (Luke 23:6–12), and the second appearance before Pilate (John 18:39—19:16; and see Matt. 27:15–26; Mark 15:6–15; Luke 23:13–25). As you can see, the apostle John records only the interrogations by Annas and Pilate, and mentions Caiaphas only in passing. He focuses primarily on the Roman trial. By the time he wrote this gospel, the Jewish nation had been scattered by Rome, Jerusalem had been destroyed, and Roman power was all that really mattered.

Pontius Pilate was in office from AD 26–36 and was not greatly liked by the Jews. He could be ruthless when he wanted to be (see Luke 13:1–2), but he also understood the Jewish power structures and knew how to use them. His handling of the trial of Jesus reveals an indecisive man, a weak man, a compromising man. Rome’s motto was, “Let justice be done though the heavens fall!” Pilate was not concerned about justice; his only concern was to protect himself, his job, and Rome. Alas, he failed in all three!

As you read John’s account, you see Pilate seeking to find some “loophole” that would please both sides. He was afraid of the crowd, but then he grew more and more afraid of the prisoner! At least three times he announced that Jesus was not guilty of any crime (Luke 23:14; John 19:4; Luke 23:22; John 19:6). Yet he refused to release Him!

At the Roman “trial,” of Jesus conducted by Pilate, let’s consider the outcome – who had failed miserably?

Scripture Reading: John 18:28 -19:16

To learn in this lesson: 1) the divine kingship of Jesus 2) the Jews' rejection of Him. 3) the Gentiles also rejected Him through the person of their representative: Pilate.

Discussion Questions:

1) Why did the religious leaders bring Jesus to Pilate and what can we deduce from the initial proceeding of the trial? (28 to 38).

2) “Shall I Release the King of the Jews?” (18:39—19:7). In this part of the trial, what can we learn about the Jewish nation at this point of their history?

3) “Where Are You From?” (19:8–16). The trial concluded with the death penalty by crucifixion for Jesus but Pilate had no answer for his pertinent question. Who had actually failed in the trial and why?