

Good Friday, April 18, 2025

ISAIAH 53:10–11. (EHV, alt.)

Yet it was the LORD'S will to crush him
and to allow him to suffer.
Because you made his life a guilt offering, he will see offspring.
He will prolong his days,
and the LORD'S gracious plan will succeed in his hand.
After his soul experiences anguish, he will see the light of life.
He will provide satisfaction.
By his knowledge, my just servant will justify the many,
for he himself carried their guilt.

One after another the members of the jury emerge from the jury room and take their seats. The bailiff tells everyone to rise, and the judge enters and takes his seat. The judge asks, “Has the jury reached a verdict?”

The jury foreman responds, “Yes, Your Honor.”

“How does the jury find the defendant?” the judge asks.

“We the jury hereby find the defendant...”

That is a tense moment. Guilty, or not guilty? It's especially tense if the defendant is either you or someone you know and love.

Even though we know the story well, we experience a number of tense moments in Jesus's trial and execution as different characters reach a verdict.

1.

We come upon the first verdict when the Gospels tell us that the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council, reaches a verdict about Jesus very early in the morning. What is the verdict? The Gospels continues by telling us that they bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pontius Pilate the governor.

Ah, so they have found Jesus guilty. And not just guilty of any crime, but guilty of a crime deserving the death penalty. For the apostle John tells us that the Jews had no right to execute anyone. That's why they took him to Pilate; as the Roman governor of Judea he had that right.

So what exactly did Jesus do to deserve death? The Gospels tell us that his trial consisted of many false witnesses bringing false testimony against him—false testimony that didn't agree and contradicted itself. So finally the high priest had asked Jesus point-blank if he was the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One.

“I am,” said Jesus.

And instead of examining or testing this claim, they all simply condemned him as worthy of death.

How worthy of death? So worthy, they thought, that even though they reached this decision very early in the morning, they immediately led him to Pilate. The apostle John tells us in his Gospel that they were still hoping to be able to eat the Passover. The Passover had to be finished being eaten sometime between sunset on the previous day and sunrise on this morning. So it was probably between 4 and 5 a.m. that they led Jesus to Pilate. They wanted Jesus sentenced to death for claiming to be the Son of God, and it couldn't wait until next month, or next week, or even tomorrow. It had to happen *now*.

And why was it so bad that Jesus had claimed to be the Son of God? Why wasn't he an acceptable Messiah for the Jewish leaders? It was because, instead of courting their favor as the leaders of God's chosen people, he condemned their self-righteousness. It was because he took the way to heaven that they thought was broader and wider than it was and made it narrow by teaching that only those who believed in him went to heaven.

2.

But the Jewish leaders weren't the only ones to declare Jesus guilty. Pilate did too. But not at first. Pilate realized that Jesus was innocent, and so he tried to free him.

But Pilate was in a difficult position. On one side, virtually all the Jewish leaders were adamant that Jesus was worthy of death. On another side, Pilate knew Jesus was innocent and from secular sources we know that he hated his Jewish subjects. On another side, it wouldn't look good to Caesar if he released someone that the Jews said was claiming to be a king (and Jesus himself acknowledged to Pilate privately that he was the king of the Jews). And on yet another side, apart from a few answers given in private, Jesus wasn't talking.

It seemed like a hard spot to be in, but it really shouldn't have been. If he knew Jesus was innocent, isn't that all that should have mattered? Shouldn't any person be willing to die for what is right? But Pilate was ambitious and selfish. He wasn't asking, "What is right in the eyes of God?" He was asking, "What is best for me?"

Still, something about Jesus unsettled him and he didn't want innocent blood on his hands, so he came up with what he thought was a sure solution. There was a custom in place where the governor would release a Jewish prisoner that the Jews requested. Since the Jews were governed by the Romans, it could happen from time to time that a Jew might be arrested and imprisoned for reasons that were more Roman than criminal. So this was one way the Romans threw a bone to their subjects. Once a year, if they thought someone was wrongfully imprisoned, they could request his release. So Pilate decided to give them that choice now—but to limit their choice to two men, Jesus or a man called Barabbas was in prison with some insurrectionists who had committed murder in an uprising. Even though he was a Jew, even the Jews knew that he was not a good man. This was not a man they would want free on their streets.

So, Jesus or Barabbas? Certainly they would rather free Jesus than Barabbas, and the matter would be settled.

But in giving the Jews that decision, you actually already heard Pilate render his verdict about Jesus. By giving them the choice between a murderous insurrectionist and Jesus, Pilate was already declaring Jesus guilty. He was putting Jesus on the same plane as an insurrectionist, murdering criminal. So on the off chance that they chose to free Barabbas, Pilate would now have no choice but to do with Jesus as they wished.

And that's exactly what the Jewish leaders did. The chief priests stirred up the crowd to have Pilate release Barabbas.

"What shall I do, then, with the one you call the king of the Jews?" Pilate asked them.

"Crucify him!" they shouted.

"Why? What crime has he committed?" asked Pilate.

But they just shouted all the louder, “Crucify him!” So, wanting to satisfy the crowd and probably also just to be done with this whole ordeal this early in the morning, Pilate released Barabbas to them, but had Jesus flogged and handed him over to be crucified.

And this may have been Jesus’s second flogging, since John tells us that Pilate had him flogged even before he sentenced him, in yet another attempt to try and win him sympathy from the Jews. And since whips were customarily studded with pieces of bone and lead, Jesus must have looked the part to match his guilty verdict by the time he actually began carrying the cross.

Yes, Pilate also found Jesus guilty. And why? Not for the reasons the Jewish leaders did. Pilate found Jesus guilty simply because it was convenient, simply because he was selfish.

3.

Do you then hear another voice finding Jesus guilty? Do you hear yourselves?

Do you ever hear yourself, like the Jews, declaring Jesus guilty because he condemns your self-righteousness and makes the way of heaven a narrow way? How many of you have loved ones dead and gone who you would love to believe are in heaven, but you know that they did not place their confidence in Jesus alone for their salvation, and so you know that Jesus says otherwise? How many times do we comfort ourselves when little children are murdered through abortion or shooting, or lose their lives in a tragedy, with the thought that surely God wouldn’t send innocent little children to hell, and Jesus says, “If they don’t believe in me, that’s exactly where they are”? How often do we think we should be treated in a special way at church because of what we or our ancestors have done for the church, and Jesus says, “God can raise up stones to be good church members if he wants them to”? How often do we think Jesus should show special favor to us, and he says, “Even all your righteous acts are like filthy rags”?

None of us deserve so much as a grain of dust from God, Jesus says. The only way to heaven therefore is through faith in him, he says. Doesn’t our sinful nature want Jesus dead for that? And it doesn’t want his death to wait until next month, next week, or tomorrow, does it?

Do you ever hear yourself, like Pilate, declaring Jesus guilty simply for the sake of convenience? Simply because following him is too difficult?

I was at an event once at a Lutheran high school in Wisconsin. The high school asked one of their alumni, who was now a professional psychologist, to come back to speak at the event. He talked about the difficulties of being a Christian studying for a psychology degree. Sometimes he would be the only one in his class singled out and made fun of because he actually believed what the Bible said.

Have you ever experienced that, at work, at school, or anywhere else? Maybe you have felt like Pilate, with people yelling at us on one side, calling us foolish or childish or backwards or old-fashioned or worse, and Jesus apparently quiet on the other side. Isn’t it sometimes easier simply to declare him guilty along with everyone else? Maybe we do so simply by keeping our mouths shut, and then comfort ourselves with the thought that we didn’t actually speak out against Jesus. But even the Romans had a saying: He who is silent is judged to be in agreement.

This is what our sinful nature always unjustly does—declares Jesus guilty—in an attempt to cover up the fact that the guilt is really ours.

4.

But there is yet one more character who reaches the same verdict about Jesus.

He is hinted at by Jesus' silence.

He is hinted at by the apparent helplessness of Pilate, who is simply trying to lend some order to a process that seems to be out of his control.

He is hinted at by the release of Barabbas. Did you know that Barabbas was actually a very common name? The Jewish Talmud tells the legend of a man named Samuel who went to a cemetery to talk to his father's spirit. His father's name was Abbas, so he asked the other spirits, "Where is Abbas?" And they replied, "Which one?" So he said, "Abbas bar Abbas." And they still replied, "Which one?" So he finally said, "Abbas bar Abbas the father of Samuel."

You see, Abbas itself was a common name, which simply means, "my father." And Bar simply means, "son of," so many people by the name of Abbas would name, or nickname, their sons Barabbas, which simply means, "son of Abbas" or "son of my father." And as you can tell from the meaning, really any father could give his son that name or nickname. In fact, who of you men sitting in front of me couldn't have received that name—"son of my father"? Who of you is not a son or daughter of your father? It's almost the Jewish equivalent of the English phrase "Joe Everyman."

That's worth some thought. Joe Everyman was bound in a prison on death row for committing murder and rebellion. Suddenly a soldier comes to his cell, unlocks it, and tells him, "You are free to go. They are crucifying a man named Jesus in your place." Another verdict—not guilty—given to the guilty.

Make no mistake, Barabbas was a real criminal who was really set free, but he was also a picture, a window into the courtroom of another, greater judge declaring a verdict that day—declaring a verdict about Jesus and a verdict about us.

The Jewish leaders, Pontius Pilate, and our own sinful nature all declared Jesus guilty for sinful reasons. But *God the Father* also declared Jesus guilty, and he did so for a completely righteous reason. It was the reason that his Son was silent when he was accused. It was the reason that things seemed to be out of Pilate's control. It was the reason that a guilty criminal with an "Everyman" kind of name went free. It was the reason Isaiah states plainly in chapter 53: "We all have gone astray like sheep. Each of us has turned to his own way, but the LORD has charged all our guilt to him. ... It was the LORD'S will to crush him and to allow him to suffer. ... [Y]ou made his life a guilt offering... By his knowledge, my just servant will justify the many, for he himself carried their guilt." Or as St. Paul says, "The One who had no experience with sin"—Jesus—"God made to be sin for us, so that we in turn might become the righteousness of God in him" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

There is a day coming; it's called Judgment Day. It is a day on which God the Righteous Judge will announce his verdict about us. The verdict that he will announce on that day is the same verdict he announced on this day: Jesus was guilty, not you. For his sake, you are not guilty.

So the verdict, "worthy of death," is not only the Jewish leaders' verdict, it is not only Pilate's verdict, it is not only our sinful nature's verdict, but it is also *God's* verdict, and so it is also the verdict of our *new man*, the verdict of *faith*, for completely different reasons. It is the verdict of faith, because faith believes that Jesus *wanted* to bear our guilt for us, that he *wanted* to suffer God's wrath and punishment in our place, that he wanted us, like Barabbas, to go innocent and free.

Yes, Jesus was guilty—guilty of *my* sin, guilty of *your* sin, not his own. Because of him, Son of God and Son of Man, you and I stand not guilty forever. And because he bore our guilty sentence perfectly, as his Father asked and wished of him, now he too stands guilty no more, and he eagerly waits for the day when he will take us to be with him in the home of all those believe in him, the home of all those who are: Not guilty. Amen.