

Series: Mark's Gospel

Title: Characters from the Crucifixion Court

Text: Mark 15:1-15

Date: March 28, 2021

Verse 1

In verse 1, Jesus was transferred to stand on trial before the Roman governor. Mark said, "As soon as it was morning, having held a meeting with the elders, scribes, and the whole Sanhedrin, the chief priests tied Jesus up, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate" (Mark 15:1). The time frame in view was likely 5:00 am to 6:00 am. It was daybreak.¹ In the first-century world, it was common for people to be up at such an hour. The work day began at sunrise and Roman trials were known to take place at daybreak.² It should not be seen as unreasonable for Jesus to be transferred to Pilate at such an hour.

Mark indicated that our Lord was tied up. It is likely chains were used for the task. Normally a criminal would have been bound with an iron collar around the neck. Cuffs would have secured the wrists. All together, the chains and shackles would have weighed around ten pounds.³

After Jesus was bound, He was led away. The Sanhedrin took Him from the courtyard near the high priest's residence (Mark 14:66) to an unspecified location. It is likely He was taken to an open location near Herod's residence. Since Pilate did not live in Jerusalem, he normally stayed near Herod's place. As a result, it is reasonable to think he would have conducted business and handed down judgments near that location. Tradition has typically seen Pilate judging Jesus in the open air on a patio near Herod's residence.

Pilate was governor of Judea from AD 26 to AD 36. He was appointed to office by the Roman emperor Tiberius.⁴ He was known for harboring a cruel hatred for the Jews. Both Josephus and Philo attest to that fact. Luke 13:1 portrays him as a ruthless man, as it describes a heinous act he committed against Galilean Jews.⁵

The transfer to Pilate was necessary, since the Jews had no legal authority before Rome to sentence a man to death. In handing Jesus over to Gentiles, however, the Sanhedrin was unaware of the symbolic meaning of their gesture. Their act signified the Lord's rejection of the Jews. Because of their refusal to accept their Messiah, the Lord had chosen to temporarily bypass His people in order to work amongst the Gentiles. Their rejection of covenant promises (Leviticus 26:27-34) had brought about a hardening in their hearts.

In a way, one can see a fulfillment of a prophecy from the book of Genesis in our passage. In the days of Joseph, the Lord had told Judah, "The scepter will not depart from Judah or the staff from between his feet until he whose right it is comes and the obedience of the peoples belongs to him" (Genesis 49:10). A figurative scepter of authority was removed from Israel when "he whose right" it was to rule appeared on earth. Because they rejected their Messiah, the Lord rejected Israel for a temporary season known as the time of the Gentiles. Paul spoke of this reality in Romans, saying, "A partial hardening has come upon Israel until the fulness of the Gentiles has come in" (Romans 11:25).

¹ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 101.

² Schnabel, 395-396.

³ Schnabel, 394.

⁴ Schnabel, 395.

⁵ Brooks, 248-249.

As with the cursed fig tree in Mark 11:12-14 and 20-26, and as with the prediction of the destruction of the temple in Mark 13:1-2, the Sanhedrin's surrender of Jesus to a Gentile ruler can be seen as a picture of the Lord's rejection of Israel. Though there will be an end-time revival amongst the Jews (Romans 11:26 and Revelation 7:1-8), the Lord has chosen to primarily work amongst non-Jewish people during the church age. Pilate's authority over Jesus demonstrated such spiritual truth. Through their actions, the Sanhedrin signified their own perdition.

Mark's language that spoke of Jesus being "handed" over was significant. It emphasized both the depravity of man and the sovereignty of God.⁶ Mark intended to show the wickedness of the Sanhedrin in delivering over a just man for death, but he also meant to portray the providence of God. The language hints at God's hand in the matters at hand. Though men delivered up Jesus for death, His destiny was in the hands of the one who had ordained Him to be a sacrifice for sin. Jesus' words from Mark 10:45 were being fulfilled – "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Verse 2

As Jesus stood before Pilate, the governor asked, "Are you the king of the Jews?" (Mark 15:2). Mark's use of the title is significant. Although he had not used it of Jesus so far in his gospel account, he would use the title six times in chapter 15 (Mark 15:2, 9, 12, 18, 26, and 32). The wording of our text is the same wording that was often used of insurrectionists who attempted to lead insurrectionists against Roman rule. The title is one that was applied to Herod.⁷ Mark was intentional to depict the real charges against Jesus – Jesus was accused of claiming to be an earthly king. Such a charge was serious. It was regarded as a treasonous crime.

As we will see later in our passage (Mark 15:10), Pilate knew that Jesus was no insurrectionist. However, he questioned our Lord in our current verse in order to follow governmental protocol.⁸ Charges of treason had to be handled with caution and care. If Pilate was accused of ignoring due process in such a situation, it could have cost him his life. He questioned Jesus in our text in order to give Jesus an opportunity to clear His name. Jesus certainly could have been acquitted, if He would have defended Himself. Little did Pilate know what all was going on behind the scenes of what was seen.

In response to Pilate's interrogation, Jesus simply said, "You say so." Our Lord's reply was strange to say the least. He was intentionally unclear. A similar reply is recorded in Matthew 27:11; Luke 23:3; and John 18:37. One has said Jesus was "deliberately ambiguous."⁹ In being unclear, Jesus asserted His authority over the situation. He demonstrated that He was in control, that His death was not the result of mere human scheming. Though men tried Him, the Lord had ordained His death. Solomon's axiom was true of the situation at hand – "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord" (Proverbs 16:33).

Jesus' answer was also significant in that it provided an affirmation regarding His kingly nature. He may not have been an earthly monarch, but He was indeed a king. He had a spiritual kingdom, one that was not of the Earth (John 18:36). Those who followed Him experienced His rule and reign in their hearts (Matthew 6:33).

On top of being a spiritual king, Jesus could answer in the affirmative because of the prospect of His future earthly reign. Though He was rejected by men at His first advent, He will

⁶ Brooks, 248.

⁷ Schnabel, 397.

⁸ Robertson, 391.

⁹ Brooks, 250.

reign over men at His second advent (Revelation 19:11-15). He did not lie when He said, “You say so.” His words to Pilate were true. If anyone was ever a king, Jesus was a king.

Verse 3

After the initial questioning from Pilate, the accusations from the Sanhedrin escalated. Mark said, “And the chief priests accused him of many things” (Mark 15:3). The original language of the text used imperfect tense verbs in verse 3. The verbiage expressed iterative action. The idea was to depict continual accusations being hurled at Jesus.¹⁰ The scene was similar to the one found in Mark 14:56. Jesus faced an onslaught of ridicule. Perhaps Mark wanted to comfort his original readers who were the objects of scorn in a Roman world that was persecuting Christians. Believers of all generations can find comfort when they are accosted because of their faith. Jesus has experienced ridicule and hostility from sinners. He is a friend to those who are persecuted because of their faith in Him (Matthew 5:11-12).

Verse 4

Seeing the serious accusations against Jesus, Pilate once again questioned our Lord. He inquired, “Aren’t you going to answer? Look how many things they are accusing you of!” (Mark 15:4). In the original language of the text, Pilate’s question was structured in a way that expected a positive answer.¹¹ Mark was intentional to portray Pilate’s shock at Jesus’ non-response. The intent was to emphasize the way in which our Lord was purposely silent in the face of His adversaries. The scene is similar to Mark 14:61.

Verse 5

Jesus kept His silence in verse 5. Mark said, “But Jesus still did not answer, and so Pilate was amazed” (Mark 15:5). Our Lord’s posture was a fulfillment of Isaiah 53:7. In saying nothing, Jesus maintained His innocence. He was the Son of God, the long-promised Messiah. The deceit of the religious leaders did not warrant a reply. Our Lord’s silence also signified His faithful obedience to the Lord’s will for His life. He fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah 50:7 — “I have set my face like flint, and I know I will not be put to shame.” As in Luke 9:51, our Lord exhibited His determination to offer Himself as a sacrifice for sin as He kept His mouth shut before Pilate and His accusers.

There is great theological meaning in our Lord’s lack of response, but there is also great practical application as well. The author of Hebrews upheld Jesus’ behavior as an example for believers, saying, “For consider him who endured such hostility from sinners against himself, so that you won’t grow weary and give up” (Hebrews 12:3). In this world, we will face innumerable critics. Many will harshly condemn us for our faith. May we learn to be like Jesus, enduring and loving despite the rough treatment of others. May we heed the advice Moses gave the Israelites when they were pursued by the Egyptian’s — “The Lord will fight for you, and you must be quiet” (Exodus 14:14). May we cultivate the commitment of the Psalmist who said, “I will guard my way so that I may not send with my tongue; I will guard my mouth with a muzzle as long as the wicked are in my presence” (Psalm 39:1).

Pilate stood “amazed” at Jesus’ response. The word “amazed” is one that meant “to be astounded” or “to wonder.”¹² Pilate was overwhelmed and impressed by the self-control of

¹⁰ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 101.

¹¹ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 101.

¹² Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 101.

Jesus.¹³ He didn't know what it was, but He sensed there was something special about the man. Once again, our Lord's behavior provided a model for believers. When Christians commit themselves to act like Jesus, keeping silent in the face of their adversaries, it will cause the world to stand in wonder at their faith. Christ-like character is the church's most powerful evangelistic tool. Fighting like the world fights will never win anyone to Christ. The New Testament calls us to develop the posture of Jesus. When Peter wrote to first-century Christians who were being persecuted because of their faith (1 Peter 2:12), he said, "Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that when they slander you as evildoers, they will observe your good works and will glorify God on the day he visits."

Verse 6

In verse 6, Mark explained a bit of cultural background related to the way in which Pilate customarily handled trials. He said, "At the festival Pilate used to release for the people a prisoner whom they requested" (Mark 15:6). There is no attestation to this practice in Jewish history, but the New Testament does speak of Pilate's custom in this regard on numerous occasions (Matthew 27:15 and John 18:39). There's no reason to doubt that the governor held to such a practice, as he had complete authority to release and incriminate prisoners as he wished.¹⁴ For our current text, Pilate's practice was an important part of the story, as it would set the stage for an act that would provide a beautiful picture of the substitutionary atonement of Christ.

Verse 7

Having explained Pilate's custom, Mark introduced his readers to a prisoner who was a prospect for release. He said, "There was one named Barabbas, who was in prison with rebels who had committed murder during the rebellion" (Mark 15:7). The man's name literally meant "son of a father." Some believe the title may have indicated that he was the son of a popular rabbi. A forename was not affixed to his title, so his exact identity remains unknown.¹⁵

What the man had done was more important than his name. Mark said he had "committed murder during the rebellion." The word translated "rebellion" referred to an "uprising," "riot," or "revolt."¹⁶ Barabbas' murderous participation in a riot had landed him "in prison with rebels." The term "rebels" was often used of insurrectionists and revolutionaries.¹⁷ Mark's audience was undoubtedly familiar with the events at hand. It seems Barabbas had been involved in a well-publicized uprising against the Roman government. Such outbreaks were common in first-century Judea, but the riot in which Barabbas participated seems to have been well known.

It is interesting to note that a murderous revolutionary was released instead of Jesus. It is also interesting to note that our Lord would eventually be crucified between two criminals. Mark used language in Mark 15:27 that depicted those two men as insurrectionists. The two men who were crucified with Jesus could have been partners with Barabbas. Maybe the three had participated together in the same uprising against Rome.¹⁸

¹³ Robertson, 392.

¹⁴ Brooks, 252.

¹⁵ Brooks, 250-251.

¹⁶ Schnabel, 400.

¹⁷ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 102.

¹⁸ Schnabel, 400.

Mark's aim was to depict the substitutionary death of Jesus. Though Barabbas had violated God's Law by murdering (Exodus 20:13), he did not have to pay for his crimes. Instead of hanging on a cross and dying alongside his counterparts, he walked away unpunished. Jesus stood condemned in His place.

Barabbas is a representative of us all. Like him, each one of us has violated God's commands (Romans 3:23). We are guilty, but Jesus has stood condemned in our place. He experienced the wrath our sin deserves. He was cut off and separated from God on our behalf. Though we are all like Barabbas in our own way, we have forgiveness and freedom in Jesus.

Verse 8

Knowing Pilate's custom, the crowd prodded for a release. Mark said, "The crowd came up and began to ask Pilate to do for them as was his custom" (Mark 15:8). It may seem strange that such a large crowd would be present at such an early hour. Remember that court proceedings often took place at daybreak. However, the presence of a large crowd of witnesses still seems remarkable. Why were they present? Did the Sanhedrin pay them to stir up a guilty conviction against Jesus? It seems something else was in play. Perhaps the mob was filled with friends of Barabbas, people who sympathized with the rebellion he led. They showed up in the wee hours of the morning to secure the release of their friend.¹⁹

Verses 9-10

Pilate responded to the crowd's request, saying, "Do you want me to release the king of the Jews for you?" (Mark 15:9). Mark added, "For he knew it was because of envy that the chief priests had handed him over" (Mark 15:10). The word translated "knew" appeared in the imperfect tense in the original language of the text. It depicted a continual and gradual perception. The idea was that Pilate slowly came to the impression that the Jews wanted to kill Jesus because of envy towards him.²⁰ He perceived Jesus was just.

The word translated "envy" referred to "a state of ill will toward someone because of some real or presumed advantage experienced by such a person."²¹ It spoke of "ill will" or "malice."²² It has often been said that jealousy is the act of wanting what someone has, while envy is the act of not wanting someone to have what he or she has. Such was the attitude of the religious leaders toward Jesus. They knew He was popular with the common people of the land (Mark 11:8-10). As early as Mark 1:27-28, Mark portrayed the general populace as favoring Jesus' ministry over the leadership of the ruling elite. Our Lord's popularity with the people stirred the religious leaders to antagonism (Mark 2:6 and 3:22). Ultimately, envy was the Sanhedrin's motive for having Jesus put to death. They could not stand having anyone competing with their popularity, power, and prestige.

Mark's depiction of Jesus was designed to comfort his first-century audience. Many of them were being unjustly persecuted. They were being slandered because of their faith in a Jewish rabbi who had been crucified. Perhaps Mark wanted his predominantly Gentile readership to remember that Pilate had initially regarded Jesus as being innocent. When standing

¹⁹ Brooks, 251.

²⁰ Robertson, 393.

²¹ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 102.

²² Schnabel, 401.

on trial before Roman authorities, such information would have been helpful.²³ If Jesus was indeed innocent, they could stand with great boldness before their adversaries.

Verse 11

The crowd used Pilate's custom to secure the release of their friend. Mark recorded, "But the chief priests stirred up the crowd so that he would release Barabbas to them instead" (Mark 15:11). The word translated "stirred up" meant "to incite."²⁴ A.T. Robertson has said the language depicted people being shook up as if by an earthquake.²⁵ Though the general populace had previously been favorable in their reception of Jesus (Mark 11:8-10), they were now easily hostile towards Him. How can we explain the drastic difference in the public's demeanor?

Some have proposed that Jesus's closest followers were simply not present at Pilate's early morning trial.²⁶ Because Galilean folk were probably staying in Bethany, they had not yet made the trip into Jerusalem for the daily festivities of the holy week. The group in our text was mostly comprised of locals, people who were not as well acquainted with Jesus' ministry. They were personal friends with Barabbas, but they didn't know our Lord. As a result, they were easily provoked against Him.

Pilate was aware that the religious leaders were seeking a death sentence because of a personal vendetta (Mark 15:10). Because he was not a man of principle, however, he did not stand up to their schemes. He was driven by fear, not truth. In essence, he was little different than his Jewish counterparts (Mark 11:18). He was a people pleaser. He lived for what people thought. His trust was not in God.

We are reminded from Pilate's example that the fear of man is a snare, but he who trusts in the Lord is safe (Proverbs 29:25). May we see a holy warning in our story. May we forever be on guard against an unhealthy concern with what people think. What God thinks should be our guiding light in life.

Verse 12

Though he felt obliged to give the people what they wanted, Pilate did not miss an opportunity to take a dig at his Jewish nemeses. He asked them, "Then what do you want me to do with the one you call the King of the Jews?" (Mark 15:12). There was a tone of sarcasm in the governor's question. He sensed the raw envy (Mark 15:10), and he knew the crowd hated Jesus. He called the man "the King of the Jews" just to spite them.²⁷ Little did he know that a real king stood before him. The man was the Son of God who would one day rule the Earth.

Verse 13

The crowd thundered back at Pilate's sarcastic question, crying, "Crucify him!" (Mark 15:13). The call for crucifixion was extreme to say the least. Normally the punishment was reserved for the most treacherous of criminals. It was actually forbidden for a Roman citizen to be crucified, except on account of high treason. Though Jesus was not a Roman citizen, it would have still been shocking to hand down such a verdict for a man who clearly hadn't done anything to warrant such punishment. Since there was no hard evidence to incriminate Jesus, a lesser

²³ Brooks, 247-248.

²⁴ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 102.

²⁵ Robertson, 393.

²⁶ Robertson, 393.

²⁷ Robertson, 393.

sentence would have been more suitable. According to legal precedent, He could have been sentenced to work as a slave, or He could have been deported.²⁸ The unjust court resulted in an unjust decision.

There was a great degree of hypocrisy in the crowd's clamor for Jesus' crucifixion. They were willing to allow Barabbas to walk free, even though he was a murderer. He had violated one of the most important of God's laws (Exodus 20:13), but they fought for his freedom. Why? He represented everything they admired. He had been an insurrectionist who stood against the Roman government. Because they had more fervor for political realities than spiritual realities, they chose him over Jesus. In John's Gospel, the hypocrisy of their actions would be further displayed through the way in which they defiantly professed allegiance to Caesar (John 19:15). At the heart of their hypocrisy was an unholy alliance between politics and religion. Because they were more desirous for political liberty, they overlooked the spiritual liberty available in Jesus. God's people should always be on guard against melding politics and religion in an unhealthy fashion. When the government is more important than God, spiritual trouble is near.

Verse 14

Pilate gave one last defense of Jesus, asking, "Why? What has he done wrong?" (Mark 15:14). In the original language of the text, Pilate's questions appeared in the imperfect tense. Mark's intent was to depict the governor as asking them repeatedly. Pilate was convinced that Jesus was not worthy of death, so he extended great effort in maintaining His innocence. The governor's actions revealed that Jesus was the spotless, sinless Lamb of God who was ordained to die for sin (John 1:29).

Pilate's defense of Jesus only intensified the crowd's call for crucifixion. Mark said, "But they shouted all the more, 'Crucify him!'" (Mark 15:14). The mob's cry for crucifixion would lead to Jesus' death on behalf of our sin. Through their shouts, the fulfillment of Daniel's prophecy in Daniel 9:26 came to pass – the Anointed One was cut off on behalf of humanity. Though it may have seemed as if Jesus was the victim of an angry mob's demands, the gears of providence were turning. The Heavenly Father's plan of redemption was unfolding. Ryle has commented on the scene in our text, saying, "We should remember that his death is the life of our souls, and that unless his blood had been shed, we must have perished miserably in our sins."²⁹

Jesus' death is what makes Christianity utterly unique from all other world religions and philosophies. Every other human paradigm makes claims regarding what men must do for God. Christianity reports concerning what God has done for man. The Lord enveloped and erased humanity's imperfection and brokenness through the death of His Son. In dying and being crucified, Jesus absorbed everything we deserve because of our sin – shame, scorn, and separation from God forever.

Verse 15

In verse 15, Pilate finally gave into the people's demands. Mark said, "Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them; and after having Jesus flogged, he handed him over to be crucified" (Mark 15:15). The Greek word translated "satisfy" is one that meant "to do what is sufficient to remove one ground of complaint."³⁰ The verbiage unearthed Pilate's real motive in sentencing Jesus. He wanted to placate the mob and the Jewish authorities.

²⁸ Schnabel, 403.

²⁹ Ryle, 265.

³⁰ Robertson, 394.

The rationale of his decision may seem cowardice to us, but it was perfectly reasonable for a first-century Roman governor. A governor's main responsibility before the state was to maintain law and order.³¹ If a riot broke out, and if Pilate lost control of his jurisdiction, he could have been liable to great punishment, possibly even death. His decision in Mark 15:15 was driven by his desire to keep his territory under control.

However, his actions still remind us of the folly of the fear of man. Many of Mark's readers needed to be reminded of the dangers of people pleasing. Because Pilate was overly concerned with what people thought, he made an unjust decision. In light of the persecution they were experiencing, Mark's readers could learn a lot from Pilate. If they gave into the fear of man, they would be susceptible to denying the faith.

Believers of all generations should be on guard. An unhealthy concern with what others think can be spiritually fatal. The fear of man can make men and women miss God's will for their lives. It can make one reject the council of the Lord. It is fully impossible to fully satisfy all people all the time. God's people should strive to make life decisions based on principle, not the opinions of people.

Moved by a fear of the mob, Pilate "released Barabbas to them." There was a strong touch of irony in the act. Ultimately, Jesus was declared guilty for the very crime Barabbas committed. He was sentenced for attempting to lead an insurrection against Rome.³² The scene painted a beautiful picture of the substitutionary atonement of Christ. The truth of Romans 5:6-8 is brought to mind: "For while we were still helpless, at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly. For rarely will someone die for a just person-though for a good person perhaps someone might even dare to die. But God proves his own love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

With Barabbas' release, Jesus was flogged. Such a beating usually preceded crucifixion. It was done with a whip made of several long leather straps attached to a wooden handle. Each leather strap was laden with several pieces of metal shards and animal bone. Normally the flogging alone would result in brutal injury. There are reports and history of individuals dying from Roman flogging. Others were left crippled for life.³³ When performed before a crucifixion, the purpose of the flogging was to weaken the criminal so that resistance to the act of crucifying was impossible.

Once Jesus was flogged, Pilate "handed him over to be crucified." The Greek word translated "handed over" was significant. It was used in the Septuagint to speak of the way in which the Messiah would be delivered up on behalf of sinful humanity (Isaiah 53:6 and 12). By using it, Mark showed that Jesus was the fulfillment of Messianic prophecies.

³¹ Schnabel, 395.

³² Brooks, 252.

³³ Schnabel, 404.