
Gabbatha

“Therefore when Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus out, and sat down on the judgment seat at a place called The Pavement, but in Hebrew, Gabbatha. . . . Pilate said to them, ‘Shall I crucify your King?’ The chief priests answered, ‘We have no king but Caesar.’ So he then handed Him over to them to be crucified” (John 19:13–16).

The events leading up to Pilate’s issuing of his final judgment regarding Jesus did not unfold in a straight line, as it should have, going from examination to weighing the evidence to announcing the judgment. Instead, the timeline zig-zagged, going from pronouncements to shouting matches, from desperate moves to counter-moves, until Pilate was coerced into reaching a decision of condemnation.

Nothing was working for Pilate. When he offered to free Jesus of His criminal charges, in harmony with the Jews’ Passover custom, they chose Barabbas instead. Then, in order to state clearly where he stood in relation to Jesus, he washed His hands in a basin before them, announcing that he was free from His blood. This ceremony had little impact on the people; they quickly agreed to accept the responsibility for Jesus’ death. At this point in the trial, Pilate sent Jesus away to be scourged, although he continued to argue with the chief priests for His release. After the flogging, he stood Jesus before them, blood-soaked and stripe-covered, hoping to gain their sympathy. Instead of pity, the crowd voiced hatred. They cried out against Him: “We have a law, and by that law He ought to die because He made Himself out to be the Son of God” (see John 19:7). Moved to fear by what they were saying, Pilate took Jesus back for another conversation with Him. This question of deity disturbed Pilate. He had observed the uniqueness in Jesus’ words and actions.

Energized by Jesus’ final statements to him, Pilate went out to the Jews and reminded them that he could find no fault with Him. The text

says, “As a result of this [that is, his conversation with Jesus] Pilate made efforts to release Him.” Nevertheless, as had been true earlier, his words fell upon deaf ears. “The Jews cried out saying, ‘If you release this Man, you are no friend of Caesar; everyone who makes himself out to be a king opposes Caesar . . .’” (John 19:12). The phrase “no friend of Caesar,” like a flaming arrow, pierced Pilate’s heart. At this point, Pilate was constrained to say to his own conscience, “I have done all I can do. My patience and my energy are gone.”

Pilate’s heart, quaking out of fear for what Rome and the crowd might do, could take no more. He had defended this Galilean, but he could not, he believed, sacrifice everything for Him. A potential riot was building. The disaster that an acquittal would bring into his life—and the problems he would have with Rome if he failed to take charge of this situation—did not seem worth the price he would have to pay for the courage, true leadership, and integrity required by this pivotal moment. Therefore, he abandoned everything of real value and ran to the cover of compromise.

With that decision, the close of Jesus’ trial finally arrived. John, who gave the most detailed coverage of the last moments, said,

Therefore when Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus out, and sat down on the judgment seat at a place called The Pavement, but in Hebrew, Gabbatha. Now it was the day of preparation for the Passover; it was about the sixth hour. And he said to the Jews, “Behold, your King!” So they cried out, “Away with Him, away with Him, crucify Him!” Pilate

said to them, "Shall I crucify your King?" The chief priests answered, "We have no king but Caesar." So he then handed Him over to them to be crucified (John 19:13-16).

Pilate had placed a bema, a raised platform, in public view somewhere outside the Praetorium at a location called The Pavement. This name in the Greek (λιθόστρωτος, *lithostrotos*) means "paved with stones." John marked the spot by telling us that it was also called "Gabbatha," a word that meant "ridge" in Hebrew (or Aramaic; see the NIV). F. F. Bruce associated this location with a place in the courtyard of Fortress Antonia. He wrote,

This has often been identified with a magnificent Roman pavement excavated beneath the Ecce Homo arch and the convent of Our Lady of Zion, originally measuring almost 3,000 square yards, which has further been identified as the courtyard of the Antonia fortress.¹

Having seated himself on that bema, at the proper time, Pilate would announce his judgment concerning Jesus. Sitting in his official governmental position, in his chair that was draped with purple, he would declare publicly his verdict for this trial.

His struggle with the trial had been so intense, and his mind had been so muddled by what was being said about it, that he was constrained to make one final gesture before stating his judgment. With a wave of his hand, he said to those in front of him, "Behold, your King!" His dramatic move seemed to say to them, "There He is. He is your King. Are you really going to crucify your King?" His final appeal was met with the saddest picture in the history of man. Pilate's ears were pummeled with a vicious outcry: "Away with Him, away with Him, crucify Him!"

Jesus the King—the One who had come to show us what God is like, to die for our sins, and to give us eternal life—was completely rejected by those who had orchestrated the trial. Pilate must have shouted back his reply to them: "Shall I crucify your King?" To his question, the chief priests quickly answered, "We have no king but Caesar." After this brief

interchange, the final descriptive words of the trial are given: "So he then handed Him over to them to be crucified" (John 19:16). From that moment on, Gabbatha would be remembered as a focal point of all time.

Gabbatha was a place of defeat. When Pilate, as a civil governor, sought to handle justice and issue a valid verdict, he failed. When the Jewish leaders sought to secure their own religion, they became enveloped in prejudice, envy, and the grossest of sins. Pilate's announcement that he was turning Jesus over to the cry for crucifixion indicated the tragedy that befalls man when he is controlled by the circumstances around him and does not submit himself in obedience to divine guidance.

Gabbatha was a place of victory. Annas, Caiaphas, the chief priests of the Sanhedrin, and the followers of the Jewish leadership of Jerusalem had set out to get rid of Jesus. They had plotted with all their mental and physical energies, bringing in false witnesses, twisting the words of Jesus, and manipulating Pilate into yielding to the pressure of their demands. When Pilate turned Him over to them, they could shout, "We have gotten our way!" It was both a day of victory and a day of defeat—a victory for wicked men and a defeat for men who represented justice.

Gabbatha was a place of destiny. Behind what Pilate had done and what the Jewish leadership thought it had accomplished was the plan of God. Man meant the crucifixion for evil, but God meant it for good. When Jesus set His face to go to Jerusalem, He was choosing the place and time for His sacrifice. In His most detailed prediction to His disciples regarding the passion, Jesus said,

Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem; and the Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn Him to death, and will hand Him over to the Gentiles to mock and scourge and crucify Him, and on the third day He will be raised up (Matthew 20:18, 19).

Peter would later say, "But the things which God announced beforehand by the mouth of all the prophets, that His Christ would suffer, He has thus fulfilled" (Acts 3:18).

Jesus had gone from Gethsemane to Gabbatha, from the sorrow in His place of prayer

¹F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1983), 364.

to the rejection in the Praetorium. He would next go to Golgotha and offer Himself as the sacrifice for sin. From there, He would go to the garden grave, where He would confirm by His own resurrection the eternal life that He has made possible through His death. Praise His Name! Hallelujah, what a Savior!

Eddie Cloer



“In some way or another, all the good things of life are sacrificially paid for. . . . The amenities of life are never bought at a bargain counter. They

come high—high in the coin of somebody’s toil and self-denial. . . .

“The man or woman of faith, who has accurately read the message of the Cross of Christ, realizes that Calvary casts a strange sacredness, an ineffable beauty, over the whole of life. Our homes are safer, our marriages are happier, our children are healthier, our food is tastier, our laughter is heartier, our literature is loftier, our songs are gladder, our world is richer—all because of the light that streams from that ‘green hill far away’ where the dear Lord gave His life for us.”²

²Paul Stromberg Rees, *The Radiant Cross* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1955), 18–19.