

May 21, 2023

THE RIGHTEOUS SUFFERER AND EVIL AUTHORITIES

Luke 22:66-23:25

(12 of 16 in a series through Luke 16-24)

In his book, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, N. T. Wright notes, “One of the great gains of the last fifty years of scholarship has been the recognition that Matthew, Mark, and Luke . . . were *theologians*” and not just “artless chroniclers or transcribers.”¹ That is, the gospel writers weren’t concerned simply to give us the details of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. They recorded the details in such a way to educate us theologically—to teach us theological truths. Michael Spain made a similar point in preaching from Mark 4-6 last week as he noted that Mark didn’t simply give us these stories from Jesus’ ministry chronologically but arranged them together in such a way so as to show us Jesus’ authority over nature, sickness, death, and evil. And I think we see the same thing as we come to Luke 22:66-23:25 and see Luke’s record of Jesus’ trials before his crucifixion and death.

When compared to the other gospel writers, Luke leaves out some details that we may remember from reading their parallel counts. But it’s not simply because Luke wants to be brief or is keeping an eye on his word count. Rather, he’s focusing us on certain elements that he wants to make sure come across. In other words, he’s got a theological aim, which he accomplishes by how he communicates details in Jesus’ life and ministry. What is it then that Luke wants us to see as he communicates the details of Jesus’ Jewish trial and his appearances before Pilate and Herod? I think he wants us to see the innocence of Jesus, the vile nature of his accusers, and the redemptive plan of God. Let’s take these in order, focusing first on the innocence and righteousness of Jesus.

The innocence and righteousness of Jesus, the Messiah

In our country, we’re supposed to operate with a presumption of innocence. That is, we presume someone is innocent until they’re proven guilty beyond reasonable doubt. And yet it’s hard to do, isn’t it? If a number of police cars swarmed your neighbors house and law enforcement officials began approaching with guns, your first reaction is probably not to presume your neighbor is innocent and righteous. You probably begin to say to yourself or those in the house with you, “I wonder what he did?” That is, you actually presume guilt. It’s human nature.

And the same would have been true in the first century. If you hear about someone arrested in Jerusalem, appearing in a trial before the local council, the tetrarch, and the governor, and ultimately crucified, your assumption would be that this individual is guilty and worthy of the

¹ *Jesus and the Victory of God*, vol. 2 of *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 478-79.

sentence he received. But Luke wants to make extremely clear that this is simply not the case. Jesus was innocent. In fact, more than that, he is the righteous Son of God. I think this is the main point Luke wants us to see in this section of his gospel. And the way he shows us this is by taking us into the details of Jesus' trials (if you can call them that) and showing us at every step of the way, before everyone who questions him, that he is innocent.

So, let me give our setting in order to explain what's going on in these verses. Although Rome was over the affairs taking place in Jerusalem, there simply weren't enough Roman officials to handle the day-in and day-out affairs in all provinces. Consequently, a local council would often take care of everyday matters of government, even having power to arrest, gather evidence, and examine potential criminals for the purpose of getting everything together to present the matter before the governor.² The idea, then, is that when all of this evidence is presented to the governor, his ruling would be easy and straightforward. What you see, then, in 22:66-71 is Jesus before this local council as they're trying to gather clear evidence against Jesus in order to take him to the governor, named, Pilate. But what you'll see at every point is that there's nothing Jesus has said or done that is wrong.

First, as that local council gathers together to question him—including the elders, chief priests, and scribes—they ask Jesus plainly, "If you are the Christ, tell us" (22:67). Now, I think there's a reason this is their leading question. I mean, they could have started with all kinds of things they had against Jesus. They've been opposing him every step of his ministry it seems. But I think the reason they want to start here is because the Christ is another way of saying, "The Messiah." And the Messiah was God's promised one who would come from David's line and be God's forever king over the whole world.

Well, if you're being ruled over by another empire (Rome) who already has a king (Caesar), then it sounds a lot like treason for one to come along and say, "I'm God's promised and forever king over the whole world," right? So, if Jesus indeed confesses to be the Christ—which he is—then that would be some pretty condemning evidence to present before Pilate.

But Jesus doesn't answer that way. First, he says, "If I tell you, you will not believe, and if I ask you, you will not answer" (22:67-68). In other words, here these men are, questioning Jesus as if they are his judges. But Jesus turns it back on them, exposing their hearts. If he answered them straightforwardly, they wouldn't believe. If he asked them to look at the evidence and answer whether they thought he was, they wouldn't answer—or wouldn't answer truthfully. They're not after truth. At this point, they're after fulfilling their own evil desires that all revolve around killing Jesus. But by shifting the focus back on their guilt and unbelief, Jesus is reminding them that he's the real judge here, which he makes explicit when he adds, "But from now on the Son of Man shall be seated at the right hand of the power of God" (22:69).

² David Garland, *Luke*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 900.

By saying that, Jesus brings together two well-known texts from the Old Testament. The first is Daniel 7:13-14 where we're told that "one like a son of man" came and was given by the Ancient of Days "dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him" an "everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away" and a kingdom which will never be destroyed. This figure from Daniel 7—the "son of Man"—is one who is given all authority in heaven and on earth. So, Jesus is identifying himself as that one.

But he's also combining that picture with Psalm 110:1, where David writes, "The LORD says to my Lord: 'Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.'" This was David writing about the Messiah, whom Jesus has already pointed out that David saw as his son and his Lord, being given a place of honor and authority at God's right hand to reign.

So, by identifying himself as the Son of Man of Daniel 7 and sitting at the right hand of God in line with Psalm 110, there's really no clearer way that one could say to people steeped in the Old Testament that he is God's promised king, the God-man, who would reign over all as King of kings and Lord of Lords. And this is exactly what happened with Jesus as he walked out of the tomb alive on that Easter Sunday morning and ultimately declared to his disciples in Matthew 28:18, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me."

Therefore, the elders, chief priests, and scribes see exactly what he's doing. He's claiming to be the promised Son of God, so they ask him once more, "Are you the Son of God, then?" (22:70). And he answers, "You say that I am" (22:70).

Now, here, my guess is that some of us have read this text in our Bibles and found ourselves puzzled or even frustrated, wondering why Jesus wouldn't just say, "Yes, I am." Why not just answer in a straightforward fashion? Why say, "You say that I am"? We might feel like he is being evasive and giving ammunition to some who come to the Bible and argue that Jesus isn't the Son of God. So, let me make a few responses.

First, Jesus has already identified himself very clearly as the Son of God. As I noted earlier, by identifying himself as the "Son of Man" of Daniel 7 and the one who sits at God's right hand in accord with Psalm 110, there is no stronger way to identify oneself as the Son of God than that. And that's why the council immediately follows up Jesus' declaration by saying, "Are you the Son of God, then?" They clearly see what he's saying. Second, Luke's entire gospel has made clear that Jesus is the Son of God. I know it's been a long time since we were in the early chapters of Luke, but remember how Gabriel said to Mary about this child whom the Holy Spirit had conceived in her womb, "He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end" (1:32-33)? And remember how at Jesus' baptism the Father declared, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased" (3:22)? And we could go on and on. It's unmistakably clear throughout Luke's gospel that Jesus is the Son of God.

So why then not simply affirm what has been clearly stated to this point? There are several possibilities. Two, I think, are most likely. It may be that Jesus wants to keep the focus on their unbelieving, wicked hearts, and by continually turning the focus back on what they're saying, he keeps them focused on their denial of his clear identity. Or, it may be that Jesus doesn't want to give any impression that they have authority over him. If he were to confess so that they could say that they had pulled a confession from him, then it would give the impression that Jesus was submitting to their perceived authority over him. It would make them feel like they got him, broke him, and squeezed out of him what they needed. But Jesus would have none of that. No one has ultimate authority over him. He was laying his life down; no one was taking it from him.

But they, nonetheless, finally feel like they have enough to take him to Pilate, saying, "What further testimony do we need? We have heard it ourselves from his own lips" (22:71). But all that's been made clear is that Jesus is indeed the Christ, nothing deserving of a death sentence. There is no guilt in Jesus before the local council.

We also see his innocence before Pilate. First, when the council brings Jesus to Pilate, their charges are a mess. They say, "We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ, a king" (23:2). There is nothing Jesus has done to mislead the nation or cause civil unrest. Nor has he forbidden giving tribute to Caesar. He actually explicitly said the opposite, declaring that they should "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's." Moreover, even though he is the Christ, we know from John's gospel that Jesus would say to Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36). So, this is misleading by the council at best and an outright lie at worst.

Then, after Pilate questions him about being the king of the Jews and Jesus answers similarly to before, Pilate declares, "I find no guilt in this man" (23:4). This would be the first declaration like that from Pilate but not the last. Luke wants us to see this theme clearly.

But the council and crowds kept insisting that he was a rebel rouser, stirring up people from Galilee on. And this gave Pilate an opportunity to see if Herod—whose jurisdiction was over Galilee—might agree with him that Jesus appears innocent, so he sends him to Herod. And sure enough Herod finds no guilt in him either, though he mocked him, accused him, and treated him with contempt by putting splendid clothing on him to make him look like a king and sending him back to Pilate. But even this dressing him like a king was probably intended by Herod to say to Pilate that these charges brought by the Jews are baseless—as if mocking the whole affair.

Therefore, when Jesus comes back to Pilate, he's examined once more as Pilate concludes again, "I did not find this man guilty of any of your charges against him," adding, "Neither did Herod, for he sent him back to us. Look, nothing deserving of death has been done by him" (23:14-15). And before delivering Jesus over, Pilate would declare once more, "I have found in him no guilt deserving of death" (23:22).

And so Luke presents to us, amidst Jesus' trials, that he is the sinless Son of God. He's guilty of no sin and no crime and nothing deserving of death. He is innocent and righteous. But this is no mere historical detail for us to note that Jesus was an innocent man condemned to death. It's an important theological truth. You see, the Lord had made clear that the sacrifice for our sin needed to come from a spotless sacrifice. In Leviticus 22:19 the Lord had declared that if his people made a burnt offering, it had to be "a male without blemish." And Peter would later say of our redemption that we "were ransomed . . . not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot" (1 Pet 1:18-19). And that is what Luke is showing us here. Jesus is the spotless lamb. He the innocent and righteous sufferer who would die not for his own sins (for he had none) but for ours. And in exchange, as you and I repent and believe, we are credited with his perfect righteousness. This is the glorious and great exchange that happens as you and I are justified. He takes our sins and deals with them, and we bear his perfect righteousness. But this is only possible because he's the innocent, righteous Son of God. If he's not sinless, we cannot be saved.

And I want to encourage you to use this truth as a weapon against the enemy. He's so good at telling us we haven't done enough or can't measure up to God's demands. And our response should be to say, "We utterly agree with you, devil. In fact, God demands perfect obedience, and we could never measure up. But we're not relying on our own goodness for our standing before God but trusting in our crucified and risen savior so that his sinless life and righteous obedience are credited to us as we're united with him by faith. His righteousness is ours." There is no response the devil can give to that. So, rest in Christ. But it's not just the nature of Jesus we see here. We also see the vile and wicked nature of his accusers.

The vile and wicked nature of his accusers

Every step of the way through these sham trials we not only see Jesus' innocence and righteousness but also the vile and wicked nature of his accusers. We've already seen it where the council refuses to acknowledge Jesus to be who they know he is—God's Messiah. And we've seen it in that they outright lie in accusations against him. But perhaps their wicked and vile nature shines through most clearly in that they clamor for the release of a man named Barabbas.

Now, keep in mind, their main charge against Jesus was that he was stirring up the people against Roman rule, claiming that he's their rightful king instead of Caesar. Well, notice what happens as Jesus comes back to Pilate after Herod agreed that there was no basis to condemn this man. Pilate once more notes that Jesus is innocent and not deserving of death, and the people cry out, "Away with this man, and release to us Barabbas" (23:18). But note what Luke tells us about Barabbas. He identifies him as "a man who had been thrown into prison for an insurrection started in the city and for murder" (23:19). That is, Barabbas actually was guilty of the very thing the Jews were suggesting Jesus was guilty of, and he'd added murder on top of the insurrection he'd led. This would be like us claiming that some innocent man needed the electric chair because he was a threat to society while arguing that some serial killer should be released. This council wasn't seeking justice, and Luke shines a bright spotlight on their hypocrisy and wickedness.

And we see the same thing with Herod and Pilate. Herod sees he's innocent. He'd even heard of Jesus' miracles and wanted to see a sign from him. But that didn't stop him from treating Jesus with contempt and mocking him. And the same is true with Pilate. Though he declares over and over that Jesus is innocent, he still proposes punishing Jesus and then releasing him (23:16). But why punish an innocent man? It's because he wants to appease the crowds more than he wants to do what is right. And that is why ultimately, after going back and forth a bit with Jesus' accusers, we read, "So Pilate decided that their demand should be granted. He released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, for whom they asked, but he delivered Jesus over to their will" to be crucified (23:24-25). He's a judge who wants people's applause more than to walk in righteousness.

This is vile, wicked, and cowardly. But that too is what Luke wants us to see. Jesus' innocence is held up against the backdrop of the vile, wicked, cowardly ways of his accusers and those who stood to judge him. Sin is a vile, irrational practice, and we should allow this view of Pilate, Herod, and the Jews to remind us of why we want to make war against it in our lives. But there's one more thing I want to note in our text—the redeeming plan of God.

The redeeming plan of God

Now, this point doesn't come specifically from these verses, but these are the only verses in Luke's gospel where he brings Herod and Pilate together. However, it's not the only time he mentions them together in any of his writings. Luke also wrote the book of Acts. And in Acts 4:23-31 Luke mentions a time when the early believers were persecuted by the officials, and they came together with the other believers to pray. And as they prayed, they first quoted from Psalm 2, a psalm which reflects of the kings and rulers of the earth gathering together against the Lord and his Messiah. Then they add this line in their prayer: "For truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place" (Acts 4:27-28).

That is a reminder to us as we see this scene that Jesus was no victim of men more powerful than him. Nor was he dying because something had gone wrong in his earthly ministry. Rather, all of these events were being carried out according to the predetermined plan and hand of God, as he sent his Son to live, die, and be raised for our redemption. It doesn't mean Herod or Pilate weren't responsible for their sins. They were, and they'll face judgment as responsible creatures before God. But it's also true that nothing happened here apart from God's plan and hand. He was orchestrating these events in order to bring about our redemption.

Therefore, this morning, let us remember our righteous and innocent Savior and love him more. Let us remember the vile and wicked nature of sin and turn from it. And let us give thanks to God for carrying out his plan of redemption so that we who deserve only his wrath instead have forgiveness of sin, eternal life, and are objects of his grace and love. Let us give thanks for that now as we come to the table. Amen.