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THE "GOOD CONFESSION" BEFORE PILATE.

– MAY 28. – JOHN 18:28-40; 1 TIM. 6:13. –

"I find no fault in him." – John 19:4.

PILATE, the Roman governor of Judea, had in his hands the power of life and death. The Jewish Sanhedrin was permitted to govern the country in a religious way, according to Jewish law and custom, but had no power to order public execution. Apparently they did have the power to stone to death for blasphemy (the charge on which they condemned Jesus) as in the case of Stephen (Acts 7:58); and hence we may suppose that they had such a power in respect to Jesus, but failed to exercise it lest the people should resent the injustice. Moreover, quite possibly they realized the wide influence already attained by his teachings, and desired to make his execution as public and as disgraceful as possible – to the intent that his followers might be chagrined and humiliated, as well as himself, because few would care to confess themselves disciples of one who had been publicly executed as a criminal, – condemned by both civil and ecclesiastical judges. Thus they hoped to nip in the bud the new system of religious teaching, which, if it continued, would evidently entirely subvert their own influence with the people. Thus unwittingly these evil-doers were carrying out the very arrangements foreordained of God – and doing so in the full exercise of their own evil volition.

As already noted, the formal condemnation of our Lord before the Jewish Sanhedrin occurred at dawn, five to six o'clock, and immediately they hurried him to Pilate's judgment hall, intent on getting him into the hands of the Roman soldiers for execution at the earliest possible moment, so that the multitudes might realize his case as beyond the power of their intervention. Nor had the Jewish rulers any particular reason to suspect that Pilate would hesitate at all to order an execution. Pilate seems to have had a reputation for cruelty.

Philo speaks of "his corruption, his acts of insolence, his habit of insulting the people, his cruelty, his continual murders of people untried and uncondemned, and his never-ending and most grievous inhumanity at all times – a man of most ferocious passions, [R2470 : page 122] very merciless as well as very obstinate." Apparently the rulers of the Jews had frequent cause to appeal to Pilate to be merciful, and generally without effect; they seem to have taken for granted that if any prisoner were brought to him with a request for execution [R2471 : page 122] he would take pleasure in complying.

We are reminded of our Lord's words to the Pharisees, "Ye outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity," when we read that these very persons who murderously were scheming for the destruction of the Just One would not enter into Pilate's judgment hall, "lest they should be defiled," and thus be hindered from celebrating the Passover. How wretchedly inconsistent and hypocritical they were! They feared that Pilate's judgment hall, being under jurisdiction of the Gentiles, might have in it some *leaven* (a symbol of sin), and realized not that the real leaven of sin had permeated and thoroughly saturated their own hearts – anger, malice, hatred, envy, strife.

What a lesson the Lord's people have here: for we are to remember that these heart-corrupted conspirators were the professed holiness people of their day and church. While it is not in the power of any to-day to crucify the Lord and put him to an open shame, it is within our power to put to shame, to crucify, his "brethren" – the members of his body. And we fear that some to-day are doing this with as much self-deception as was exercised by these chief priests and Pharisees who secured our Lord's crucifixion. True, the Pharisees knew not what they did, as Peter says, "I wot that through ignorance ye did it, as did also your rulers." (Acts 3:17.) And so likewise to-day any who put to shame the members of "the body of Christ" probably are ignorant of what they do. Nevertheless they put themselves under the Lord's sentence, "It were better that a mill-stone were hanged

about his neck, and he cast into the sea." (Luke 17:2.) Let us each therefore beware, and keep the heart, out of which are the issues of life.

Had the hearts of those Pharisees been in proper condition, full of love of righteousness and truth, and appreciative of whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report, they could not have made the mistake of rejecting and crucifying the Lamb of God. Similarly, those who have the spirit of love for the brethren will be hindered from becoming in any manner their persecutors. Only such can properly eat of the antitypical Passover.

The Roman governor, knowing of the peculiar custom of the Jews in respect to their Passover time, accommodated himself to their theory and had his chair of state brought outside the judgment hall to what was known as the Place of the Pavement, an elevated platform. Jesus was called up on this platform for examination, while the Jews standing outside of the unhallowed ground made known to Pilate their accusations. They evidently expected that the mere presentation of Jesus as a prisoner for crucifixion would be sufficient. Apparently they had not even expected to be required to make an accusation; hence their answer, "If he were not a malefactor [evil-doer] we would not have delivered him up unto thee." Some have suggested, in harmony with the character of Pilate and his probable disrespect for the Pharisees, that his question rather was, "What accusation do *you* bring against *him*?" as tho he would give the implication that Jesus rather had ground for making accusation against the Pharisees – which of course was the case. The hardened Roman no doubt had become an expert reader of human character, and could readily see that there were no criminal features in our Lord's countenance, and many in those of his accusers.

To the surprise of the priests and Pharisees, Pilate turned Jesus over again to them, saying in substance, This is some petty religious quarrel with which I care to have nothing to do; take the prisoner and do with him according to your own laws and customs – imprisoning him, or causing him to be beaten, or whatever you may think proper, according to your law. But, thirsting for our Lord's death, his persecutors revealed their real condition of heart, saying, "It is not lawful for us to put any man to death."

Hard, cruel, unmerciful tho he was, Pilate realized the true situation – that the guilty were pursuing the innocent to death. That he might have the better opportunity for thinking quietly, and also for hearing what Jesus would say in self-defence, Pilate left the Jews and called Jesus unto him into the judgment hall, where they conversed. There must have been something very striking in our Lord's personal appearance to have caused Pilate to consider for a moment the rejection of the demands of the Jewish Court or Sanhedrin, for altho he had full power of life and death it was incumbent upon him, as his first duty, to preserve the peace and tranquility of his dominion; and this implied that in a general way at least he must keep on the popular side, especially when the popular side embraced the chief men of the province, and particularly when those chief men desired the execution of one whom they denounced as a disturber of the peace. Pilate's position was in many respects a delicate one: he must please the government at Rome, and he must avoid unnecessary disputes with the local authorities, who in the present instance were evidently so determined that they would have created a general disturbance [R2471 : page 123] rather than that their evil scheme should come to naught. The fact is that six years later these people did send to the Roman Emperor such complaints against Pilate as secured his removal.

Alone with Jesus, Pilate's question was, "Art thou King of the Jews?" The Jews had not made such a charge against Jesus; indeed, they were far from wishing to acknowledge the Galilean as King of

the Jews, or as being thus recognized by any number; they had thus far merely charged that Jesus was an evil-doer, an insurrectionist, whose death was necessary to the peace of the nation. It would seem therefore that Pilate had previously heard from some quarter about the riding of Jesus on the ass, and as being hailed by the people as the Son of David a few days previously. That this was not part of the accusation of the Jews seems evident from our Lord's reply to Pilate, "Sayest thou this thing of thyself, or did others tell it thee of me?" Are you an interested inquirer after the truth on this subject, or are you merely calling up a matter of which you have heard? Pilate's reply, "Am I a Jew?" was tantamount to saying, What do I know about your Jewish hopes and expectations? I am the Roman governor, and if you are a king it is your own nation and its chief representatives that have delivered you to me. What have you done, if you are their king, that makes your subjects thus disloyal to you? Apparently there is no great danger of your exercising any power against the Roman empire; you are meek, gentle, lowly, unresisting yourself, and your people are crying out against you. King of the Jews, explain this peculiar situation!

Then Jesus explained that his Kingdom is not of this order of things, otherwise he would have servants to fight and to defend him, and would not be as at present, at the mercy of his enemies; and that his kingdom had not yet commenced. Astonished, and perhaps with some degree of sympathy for a great ruler under such humiliating conditions, Pilate asks, Do you then claim that you are a king? Our Lord answers, "Thou sayest," that is, Your statement is correct; I am a King. "To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I might bear witness unto the truth. Everyone that is of the truth heareth my voice."

This was the good confession which our Lord witnessed before Pontius Pilate, to which the Apostle refers. (1 Tim. 6:13.) He confessed his kingship and its divine authority. We are not to wonder that Pilate was incredulous of our Lord's claims to kingship, and that

he probably thought him a fanatic. We are rather to remember that remarkably few of those who have heard of Jesus have recognized the truth of this statement that he is *a King*. How few, even amongst professed Christians, recognize the kingly office of our Lord! Many who realize that Jesus was indeed the Man of Sorrows, acquainted with grief, and some who realize that he died for our sins, have never yet seen that he purchased not only man but the empire originally given to the first Adam. Many can realize our Lord in the attitude of Priest who fail to realize that he is also to be a King, and that throughout the Millennial age he will be a Priest upon his *throne*, "after the order of Melchizedec," his Church and Bride being associated with him and sharing in both his priestly and his kingly offices.

The priestly office speaks mercy, forgiveness and grace to help; but the kingly office is no less essential to the world's salvation – men must be *delivered* from the bondage of sin and death – and must be *ruled* with the iron rod in order to develop them and fit them for life everlasting; and all of this work belongs to him who redeemed us with his own precious blood. It is well that we remember, too, that a very large proportion of our Lord's parables related to the Kingdom in its various stages – now embryotic, by and by to be set up with full power and authority to overthrow evil and to bring in everlasting righteousness.

This Kingdom is to be a Kingdom of truth, of righteousness and of love, working well for its subjects, and our Lord's mission at the first advent was to lay the foundation for that Kingdom by witnessing to the truth – the truth that God is both just and loving, and is willing to receive back into harmony with himself all who love truth and righteousness. It was our Lord's faithfulness to the truth that brought upon him the opposition of those who were blinded by the Adversary, hence his statement that he came to bear witness to the truth is a brief statement of his mission. It was his witness to the truth that cost him his life, and it was the giving **[R2472 : page 123]** of his life in defence

of the truth that constituted the redemption price. Similarly all of the Lord's followers are to bear witness to the truth – the truth in respect to God's character and plan – the features of that plan accomplished at the first advent in the redemption of the world, and the features of that plan yet to be accomplished in the second advent, in the deliverance of the world from the bondage of sin and corruption. It is such witness to the truth that is to cost all the true followers of Jesus their lives in presenting themselves living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God through Christ Jesus. Let each one who hopes to be a joint-heir with the Prince of Life in the Kingdom witness to the truth – a good confession respecting the Kingdom, its foundation and ultimate superstructure in glory.

A very short discourse on such a text was quite sufficient for Pilate. He had no desire to enter into a theological discussion, which could only reflect unfavorably upon his own past record. He broke off the conversation suddenly, saying, "What is truth?" – as [R2472 : page 124] tho he would say, Who is truthful? Where is absolute justice to be found, absolute truth, absolute probity? And without waiting for an answer he left Jesus in the judgment hall, went forth to the Place of the Pavement, and addressed the waiting Sanhedrin and their multitude of servants and hangers-on, brought with them to give evidence of popular clamor.

Pilate announced his decision, "I find in him no fault at all." Then the Jews, fearing that their prey was about to escape, began to bethink themselves of charges to be formulated. They did not mention the charge on which they themselves had convicted Jesus, falsely, namely, blasphemy; for this would have been no crime whatever in the eyes of the Roman governor. Instead, they made three charges, *viz.*, (1) sedition – agitation of the people against the existing order of things; (2) that he interfered with the collection of taxes, teaching the people that it was improper to pay tribute-money to a foreign power; and (3) that he made claims of being a king. – Luke 23:2.

But now learning that Jesus' home and principal ministry was in Galilee, Pilate thought to relieve himself by referring the entire matter to Herod, who had charge of the province of Galilee, and who was then at Jerusalem, at a palace not far distant. This was the Herod who had caused the death of John the Baptist. Luke tells us (23:8) that Herod was very glad to see Jesus, for having heard much respecting him he hoped also to see some miracle performed by him. Herod questioned our Lord with many words, but received no response whatever, while the chief priests and scribes grew the more vehement in their accusations, seeing that Jesus denied nothing that they said, and that thus they were not called upon for proofs.

Herod no doubt was piqued as well as disappointed by our Lord's conduct, and unable to gain entertainment from him as expected, he and his guard took sport in mocking the Redeemer's claims of dignity and kingship.

But with a desire to return Pilate's compliment, and perhaps with some little touch of remorse of conscience in respect to the beheading of John the Baptist, Herod disposed of his responsibilities in the case by returning our Lord to Pilate. It was after our Lord's return to Pilate's judgment hall that the latter, apparently as a final effort to appease the Jews, to preserve the peace of the country, and yet to let go one whom he clearly discerned to be innocent, announced that in view of the clamor against Jesus he would cause him to be scourged, altho he found no fault in him. He evidently hoped that by the infliction of the scourging (whipping) and incidental humiliation, that the spirit of malice on the part of the accusers would be satisfied, and that they would peaceably agree to his release. Apparently the scourging was done in some interior apartment by the Roman soldiers; and probably with the full consent of Pilate a cast-off royal robe and a crown of thorns were put upon our Lord. Evidently this proceeding would furnish amusement to the unsympathetic soldiery, and so much shame and contempt cast upon our Lord might at least satisfy his persecutors, if it did not awaken sympathy.

Acting in harmony with this thought, Pilate came again before the Jews, and caused our Lord to be led forth, weak, exhausted and miserable-looking, from the trying experiences of the night, supplemented by the painful and weakening influence of the scourging just received. With his crown of thorns and soiled purple robe he must have been a pitiable sight indeed, and yet the noble outlines of his perfect manhood must still have been striking, and no doubt suggested the words of Pilate which have echoed down the centuries since, "Behold the man!" (John 19:5.) Pilate evidently was impressed with our Lord's personality; never before had he seen so splendid a specimen of the human race. He was such an one as any people might have been glad to honor as their king. He evidently hoped that some impression would be made upon the clamoring throng which accused Jesus. But he was mistaken; they clamored so much the more, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" Meantime Pilate's wife had heard of the trial and had sent Pilate word respecting her dream, and advice that he have no part in doing injury to this just person. – Matt. 27:19.

Pilate immediately said to the Jews, Take him and crucify him, if that is your law. But altho thus assured that the Roman governor would not interfere in the matter, the Pharisees hesitated about accepting the proposition; they much preferred that the crucifixion should be in the hands of the Roman governor and his soldiers, lest the friends of Jesus and the multitudes who had been healed and taught by him should come to his assistance and overpower them; hence they answered Pilate that according to their law Jesus should die, because he made himself the Son of God. They perverted the truth in their endeavor to uphold their course, for the Law did not prescribe death as a penalty for the claim of being the *Son* of God. Had our Lord claimed to be the Father he would have come under the terms of the death penalty for blasphemy, but there was no such penalty, nor was it blasphemy, to call himself, as he did, the Son of God.

When Pilate heard of this he was the more alarmed. The features of Jesus were impressive of themselves, but if one possessing such features made the claim of relationship to God there certainly was some ground for fear. Pilate still withstood the Jewish clamor, and sought to release our Lord. Then the Jews, as a last [R2472 : page 125] resort, threatened Pilate by implication, crying out, "If thou let this man go thou art not Caesar's friend: whosoever maketh himself a king speaketh against Caesar." They thus intimated that if Pilate frustrated their designs, and refused to crucify Jesus as they demanded, they would report him to Caesar as an enemy of his empire, a succorer of seditious persons, a fosterer of rival kings in the empire. Pilate could not stand against this argument, and washed his hands in the presence of the multitude, saying by this act, as well as in words, "I am innocent of the blood of this just person; see ye to it." And when the Jews cried out, "His blood be upon us and upon our children," Pilate delivered him to be crucified. – Matt. 27:24,25.

We are not of those who condemn Pilate; he was a servant of the empire, charged with doing everything reasonable to preserve peace in his dominions, and only a clearly enlightened and fully consecrated saint could have been expected to do more than Pilate did for the release of Jesus. Our Lord in no sense intimated guilt on the part of Pilate. The responsibility was assumed by the Jews, and surely its penalty has rested heavily upon them and upon their children for the past eighteen centuries, and even yet their cup of anguish is not filled to the full. "Jacob's trouble" will be no unimportant one in the great time of trouble that is just approaching; but we thank God on their behalf that deliverance is nigh for them, as well as for all others of the groaning creation. How blessed the thought that when they shall look upon him whom they pierced, and wail because of him, it will not be with tears of hopeless sorrow; for the Lord "shall pour upon them the spirit of grace and of supplication, and they shall mourn for him as one mourneth for his first-born." – Zech. 12:10.
