

Greatest Questions



Ever Asked

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What Shall I Do With Christ?

It's in the early hours of Friday morning. Jesus was led by rather a strange mixture of soldiers and priests from a garden called Gethsemane to the House of Caiaphas, the Roman-appointed high priest. After a period of time there he was shuttled off to Annas, the real Jewish high priest, and then back to Caiaphas again. Those two high priests have decided that this man must die, but they had no authority to do that, only the Roman procurator could condemn a man to death. So they brought him to Pontius Pilate. The world would have never remembered a petty Roman governor named Pilate except for his encounter with Jesus. Awakened at an early hour he realized this was just some kind of petty argument among the Jews. In the process of his conversation and deliberations with Jesus, Pilate quickly saw that this man had done nothing wrong, certainly nothing that deserved death, so he devised a plan.

It had been a Roman custom for some time to appease the Jews by releasing to them a particular prisoner during Passover time. "Now it was the governor's custom at the Feast to release a prisoner chosen by the crowd. At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Barabbas. So when the crowd had gathered, Pilate asked them, 'which one do you want me to release to you: Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?' For he knew it was out of envy that they had handed Jesus over to him." (Matthew 27:15-18)

We know precious little about Barabbas. Mark and Luke tell us that he had helped lead a failed insurrection against the Roman government and that he had been guilty of murder. Pilate thought that he was appealing to the Jews' sense of morality. He knew how badly they hated the Roman government, but surely, surely they wouldn't condone murder. Since Jesus had been guilty of no real crime and just a week earlier he had been quite popular when he came into the city with cries of 'Hosanna! Hosanna! Pilate thought that surely the crowd would request his release. But much to his surprise and dismay, they cried, "Give us Barabbas, Give us Barabbas." It's Pilate's next question that's the focus of our study. In fear and anger and confusion, he asked "What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called Christ?"

Pilate didn't realize it, but he was asking a question marked much larger than himself, much larger than its time. As long as men live, Pilate will be remembered as the man through whom life's central question is asked. "What shall I do with Jesus who is called the Christ?"

Notice the first person pronoun: What shall I do with Jesus? There are very few things in life that are inescapable. The old adage says, "Death and taxes are the only thing." No that's not right, there are precious few more and Jesus is one of those. For 2,000 years, he has been the central character of human history and because Jesus is at the heart of the universe, he is at the core of every human's agenda. The one truth about Jesus Christ that everyone agrees upon is this: He cannot be ignored. As the centuries have rolled by, men have answered him with love, some with contempt, some with scorn, others with disdain, some with astonishment, some with denial and some with affection, but all have answered. The biography of Jesus closes with these words, he says, "Lo, I am with you always even unto the end of the world."

Jesus Christ is still alive. He is not the figment of some imagination or the product of a fairy tale. He is not just a historical man. He is not the surprise founder of one of the world's great religions. He is alive. He is just at home here as he was in Capernaum. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. If you let that sink in, then the question that Pilate asked years ago is just as pertinent and just as important today as it was then.

The question of whether Jesus was to live or die was more than a matter of concern for a Jewish Sanhedrin or a Roman procurator. No, the question of whether Jesus must live or die is answered in the heart, mind, of every man and in every woman. What will you do with this Jesus who is called Christ? You can look at that

Crucifixion scene and you can see the specific choices in the lives and on the faces of hosts of characters there. Let me share with you four of those choices.

1. Choose truth or tradition.

Truth or tradition was the issue facing the chief priest and the Pharisees. In fact, this issue was the primary reason there was a cross. The Jews had been looking for a Messiah for centuries. It had been prophesied all the way through the Old Testament. Every day Jewish families by the thousands prayed for the coming of the Messiah but they supposed he would be some great military and governmental genius. They were looking for a new Moses or a Joshua or a David. They were looking for someone who was strong, a military genius on a white horse behind a chariot. He would lead the great forces to a conquest over the Romans. In other words, they were looking for what they wanted, not what God had proclaimed.

So in the fullness of time the Messiah came and he was hardly what they expected. Born in an animal stall there was no aroma of royalty, no political connections, no pedigree, or no formal training. Why he wasn't even Judean, he was from Galilee. His closest friends smelled like fish and he kept the company of tax collectors and prostitutes. The masses loved him. They loved him because he loved them and because he spoke simple truths. He was truth but the "powers that be" expected tradition. To tamper with tradition is to always court the cross.

In Matthew 15 at the beginning of that chapter, Jesus condemned their little tradition that they had set up so Jewish people had neglected the care of their own parents by pledging their estates to the temple. Concluding in verse 6 some scathing remarks, "you have made void the word of God by your petty little traditions." In Matthew 23, he called the chief priests and Pharisees whited sepulchers "you're all painted on the outside, but inside you're full of dead men's bones."

Truth or tradition, it's a timeless issue, a timeless choice. The Pharisees were looking for what they wanted, not what God proclaimed and so do many of us. Over the centuries, denominations, sect, cults and groups and their leaders have painted pictures of Jesus that bear little resemblance to the real Son of God. During that same period individuals by the millions who never read a Bible, were telling you "Well my idea of God is..." or "I've always thought of Jesus as..." Just another way of choosing tradition over truth. Hear me. God does not honor perception. If he did, the Pharisees would have been fine. What God honors is truth.

What will you do with the real Jesus? Will you make him what you want him to be? Or, will you mold your life to who he is?

2. The choice of Christ or the crowd?

This was the choice that was specifically faced Peter. It's ironic that the crucifixion of Jesus was propelled by an angry crowd, a senseless mob. It's ironic because all throughout his ministry, Jesus was very popular with the crowds. The great Sermon on the Mount, the reason he was on a mountain is because he needed that amphitheater to be able to proclaim his message to such a huge host of people. (Matthew 5-7) Jesus took a handful of food and fed 5,000 men plus women and children. (Matthew 14) Zacchaeus climbed up into a tree because he couldn't see, the crowd was too great. (Luke) Just seven days earlier when he came to Jerusalem they were putting palm leaves down in his path crying out "Hosanna to the Son of God." In fact it was because of the crowd that Jesus lived as long as he did.

About two-thirds of the way through his ministry "the Pharisees said to one another, 'See, this is getting us nowhere. Look the whole world has gone after him!'" (John 12:19) Many times in the gospels, the crowds were ready to crown him king. But Jesus will never be crowned by a crowd. He is either enthroned or dethroned in the heart of each individual.

Do you remember how Peter followed at a distance after Jesus' arrest? He stood by a campfire warming himself and three different times he denied knowing the Lord. Why was that? It's a silly question, isn't it? It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure it out. It was not the politically correct position at that moment. There might have very well been a fourth cross on that hill called Calvary. At the very least it would have brought about surely a severe beating, Christ or the crowd? Peter took the crowd.

After the Resurrection, after Jesus saw him face to face and told him how much he loved him, after Jesus forgave him, after the Pentecost seven weeks later, after the coming of the Holy Spirit, and after the coming of his church, that same Peter is such a force for Christianity, he's called in before those same leaders. He's threatened with his very life and they say, "Peter, what are you going to do?" The bottom line is he's got the same question again. Christ or the crowd? To his credit, this time Peter looks them squarely in the eyes, and if you'll allow the paraphrase, he said, "I'll take the Christ, thank you." (Acts 4-5)

Every day you face the same question and so do I. The crowd is very fickle. We say America is a Christian nation. That's not supposing that the majority of Americans ever were Christians, but the Judeo-Christian ethic was everything that this country stood for, admired and valued. Today, quite frankly, being a Christian is generally viewed as being uncool, ignorant and politically incorrect. About the only thing that our society is intolerant of is for somebody who believes there is such a thing as absolute truth. It is totally unacceptable for somebody to stand up and say "I agree with Jesus that he is the way, the truth and the life. No you don't get to heaven any other way, only by him." How about you? Are you salt and light to a dying world? Or, do you choose like Peter to stand by your own little campfire, afraid and unnoticed?

3. Conscience or Caesar?

Pilate knew that this man was innocent, certainly innocent of any offense which would mandate execution. So when bombarded by accusations regarding this man as a traitor, Pilate called him inside and asked Jesus, "Are you a King?" Jesus looked calmly and said, "You've said it correctly, but my kingdom is not of this world." After their conversation, Pilate knew Jesus was no rebel. He was no insurrectionist or zealot. He wondered why this man was even appearing before him in the first place.

Matthew gives us a parenthetical note by recording "while Pilate was sitting on his judge's seat, his wife sent him this message, 'don't have anything to do with that innocent man for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him.'" (Matthew 26:19) So Pilate made the decision, the initial decision to release him. As the Jews saw that decision unfolding and their plot being foiled, John the apostle recorded their response. "From then on, Pilate tried to set Jesus free, but the Jews kept shouting, 'If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar's. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar.'" (John 19:12) BAM! Do you know what that was? That was the sound of the door slamming on Jesus. That was the sound of the deciding blow.

For over a quarter of a century, Judea had become a testing ground for future leadership in Rome. Like the old song says, "If you could make it there, you could make it anywhere." If a Roman procurator could stay there for three or four years appease the Jews and keep all things quiet, he would head back to Rome for a political promotion. If he couldn't make it there, he just kind of wandered off into obscurity. When Pilate heard those words, "If you are this man's friend, you are no friend of Caesar's." He could immediately picture word getting back to Caesar that there was a man, Pilate, who was opposing a group that was an offshoot of the Jews, somebody that was causing an insurrection; maybe it was going to be a lot of trouble. Pilate said, "What will it be, conscience or Caesar?" He chose Caesar.

We have the same choice. Our Caesar is that power, authority, or influence, whose approval we think we need so desperately. Maybe it's your boss at work who holds the raise and promotion in one hand and a pink slip in the other asking you to compromise your integrity. It's the V.I.P. whose favor we think we must have and

millions of times each day integrity is compromised, conviction is diluted and sometimes the pocketbook is valued. Caesar is served, and Christ is crucified.

4. Submission or self.

Let's look at one more character in the crucifixion drama, a man by the name of Judas Iscariot. I believe in his heart we find the basic struggle and decision of life. I'm convinced that many people have a totally wrong impression of who Judas is. Most of us picture him totally and constantly as being some diabolical villain who wore a black hat, kept a cape over his face, hid in the shadows and was just the epitome of evil all of his life. I don't believe that's true. I believe that when Jesus went out to find 12 men, 12 apostles, he chose the best men that he could find and Judas was one of them. Educated and a Judean, he was probably the most qualified and best prepared of the 12. No, Judas' fate and his reputation came about as the result of a wrong decision in the ageless struggle, the choice of sovereignty, the choice over who rules. God or self.

As time passed, Judas became a shock witness of the outcome of his deeds. As he listens to the angry howls of this lynch mob, his heart begins to break. I don't think he bargained on the cross. So as Jesus is led up that hill; panic-stricken he sought to undo the deal by returning the blood money. He runs and throws it at the chief priests' feet. In their hypocrisy, those who paid it wouldn't take it back. Stricken by a wounded conscience, he mistakenly sought to undo the deed by turning to a hangman's noose.

Tell me, have you ever stopped to think if Judas could not live without the Christ, why didn't he choose to live for him? The answer is simple. He had no intention of living without Jesus. He wanted to take him, but not too seriously. He wanted to keep Jesus and lose nothing, in fact even gain 30 pieces of silver. He was willing to follow Jesus, but on his own terms, it was conditionally. He wanted that middle ground. Judas sought to cling to Christ in one hand and 30 pieces of silver in the other. That choice is still there. God or self? One of them has to be crucified.

Paul said what is at the very heart of the whole gospel message, "I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live, yet not I, but Christ lives in me." (Galatians 2:20) You can confess and be baptized, but until you make the decision in your heart to crucify self and let Christ reign, you will not know the joy and the fruit of Christianity.

Do you know who the most miserable people in the world are? Growing up, I was always told it was the sinners, those who were out there living the lascivious life, partying and having a high time. But they are not the most miserable people in the world. Don't misunderstand. Eventually what they involve themselves in will catch up to them. It's a hollow life which leads to emptiness. It leads to total rejection and dejection. But they aren't the most miserable people in the world. The most miserable people in the world are the ones like Judas who stand on that middle ground and try to hold on to the cross in one hand and the world with the other. By straddling that divide, that nobody can straddle, they're constantly torn apart inside. Submission or self, that's what you've got to answer when you face the question, what shall I do with Jesus who is called the Christ?

Isn't it amazing? Pilate asked that question almost 2,000 years ago and yet it still echoes through the years. The basic choices, truth or tradition, Christ or the crowd, conscience or Caesar, and submission or self are all still there. What's your decision? What will you do with this Jesus who is called the Christ?

Sadly, when the crowd heard that question, they under the leadership of the chief priests and the Pharisees, started to chant "Crucify Him, crucify Him, crucify Him!" I hope your response is different. Jesus said in Matthew 10:32, "Whoever confesses me before men, the same will I confess before the Father." He said in Mark 16:16, "He that believes and is baptized will be saved, he that believes not will be condemned."

Today, that most important question is before you. "What will you do with Jesus who is called Christ?" If you have never answered that in the larger sense, if you've never said, "I know he is the Son of God, I'll confess

that, I'll confess it right now, then now is the time. I want to be baptized, symbolically burying my old sinful self into a watery grave to be raised to walk in a newness of life." I hope your answer will not be like the crowd by saying "crucify him again. Crucify him again."

Those of you who have committed your life to Christ, would you examine those four basic choices that are wrapped up within that question? Would you look deep within your heart and ask yourself am I painting a picture of a Jesus I want or am I following the truth? Am I really listening to the siren call of the crowd or am I standing firm in a dying world that needs someone who will stand? Ask yourself the question, is my conscience leading me or am I bowing before some Caesar somewhere? Finally, have I surrendered to him? Or, are you really calling your own shots. Were you once faithful in Christ but now need to recommit, to ask God to forgive you once again as he's willing to do and to receive the strength from that cross to get up and walk again with the true self. Then today is the day for that commitment. Don't delay. Today is the day for salvation. Amazing Grace #1277 Steve Flatt August 25, 1996