

Have you ever been falsely accused? How about falsely accused by law enforcement or in a court of law?

In 1977, Cathleen Crowell (**picture**) was 16-year-old and living with her foster parents in a Chicago suburb. On July 9<sup>th</sup>, on her way home from her part-time job at a fast food restaurant, she claimed to have been abducted by three men in a car, one of whom raped her. Later, after contacting police, she identified a suspect from a sketch and mug shot. The man she accused was Gary Dotson (**picture**). He was arrested as a suspect after matching her description. In a 1979 trial, her testimony, along with evidence by a purported forensics expert, was used to convict Dotson, who was then sentenced to a 25-to 50-year prison term for kidnapping and rape. It was a false accusation.

No one is certain exactly how many innocent people are in jail, some studies estimate that it's between 2.5 and 5% of all U.S. prisoners. That comes to about 20,000 people who are in prison that may be innocent.

As we continue our series, *Luke: Finding Jesus*, we're beginning what Kent Hughes (**picture**) calls "*the most infamous trial in history, a weird, twisted thing that began before Pilate, the careerist Roman politician, then detoured to the tetrarch Herod, the half-Jew puppet ruler, and finally returned to Pilate where the awful judgment was rendered.*" Turn to Luke 23:1-25 (p. 883).

Jesus is **The Accused**, the falsely accused. On that fateful night two millennia ago, those in charge of what were eventually six trials weren't interested in the truth. The truth stared them in the face, yet those who were sworn to uphold the truth sought injustice to further their own vile agendas. Though Jesus is falsely accused, it's all part of God's plan to pay for our sin and the sin of the whole world.

Luke unpacks several accounts of Jesus' innocence in a governmental court. All the proceedings that follow demonstrate this horrible injustice. He's not just innocent but sinless, having done nothing worthy of punishment.

Yet, the decisions of the Jewish leaders, Pilate and Herod, are the same decision we must make. Every single person who comes in contact with Jesus, no matter how inadvertent that contact may be, whether he or she realizes it or not at the time, is faced with the most important decision of their life. Neutrality is impossible. Like the characters in this passage, our verdict regarding Jesus is the most important decision we will ever make because that decision, for good or for ill, turns around and makes us.

In Matthew's account of this trial, Pilate asks the Jews, "*What shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?*" (27:22). That crucial question is the most important question in life for each of us. It's the one you and I face today: *What will I do with Jesus?* This passage portrays four main characters or sets of characters who made the fatal decision to reject Christ.

**1. The Religious Leaders are Jesus haters.** Prince Charles (**picture**) has said he that wants to be known as the "defender of faiths," rather than the defender of the faith. Does he mean that he's going to defend all faiths? Will he defend the faith of the suicide bomber? Those who won't eat pork because it's a sin for them to kill and eat a pig, but not sin for them to kill themselves and complete strangers. Though self-sacrificingly sincere, it's like the Jewish leaders were in their determination to kill Jesus. Sincerity may determine how zealous you are in practicing your beliefs, but sincerity and even zeal has nothing to do with whether what you believe is true.

Like driving a car, the more confident you are that you're going in the right direction, the further you'll go before you turn around. Our culture today faces a truth crisis. It's a theological problem. These Jews had a truth problem. They had a distorted belief about Jesus, that He was a blasphemer and blasphemers had to die. Ideas have legs. So, they dragged Him off to Pilate crying, "Kill him for us." Under Rome's rule, they weren't allowed to execute anyone.

This doesn't come out of the blue. They'd abandoned the authority of Scripture and developed their own religious belief system, a monstrous hybrid of God's Law in the Old Testament. Without the norming authority of Scripture anything is possible, if not inevitable. When the Bible is no longer the authoritative standard, anything can be normalized, even what Scripture condemns, even the murder of the Messiah.

Only Luke notes that the Jewish leaders brought official charges against Jesus. They resorted to the most calculated and malicious lies in their devilish drive to eliminate Jesus. They bring three charges before Pilate. The first is that Jesus is leading the Jews astray. The second that He opposes paying taxes. But Pilate doesn't entertain the first two charges. The third gets Pilate's attention, that Jesus claims to be a king. If He's claiming to be a king, He's claiming to have authority over the Jews, competing with and taking authority from Caesar. Pilate asks, "*Is this true? Are you claiming to be a king?*" He doesn't care about the first two, but wants to know about that last one.

Why did these men hate Jesus? It wasn't that they'd suddenly become patriotic toward Rome and felt Jesus was a threat to Rome's rule. Pilate saw right through them. Mark 15:10 tells us that he knew that the chief priests had delivered up Jesus because of *envy*. The Greek word refers to being jealous of another's success with the evil intent of bringing him

down. Jesus was a threat to their power and prestige. He confronted their sin. He upset their tables in the temple and threatened the profitable religious racket they had going. He convicted them of their selfishness and rebellion against God.

The main reason they reject Jesus is that they don't want to give up their sin. They resent His confronting their comfortable way of life. They like running their own lives and don't want to yield to Jesus as Lord. Like them, many are vehement in their hatred toward Jesus as Lord. They'll do anything to get Him out of their lives, even invent and believe lies.

**2. Pilate is the political opportunist.** Have you ever written a politician about a concern and received a reply, but you have no idea what they're saying or what position they are taking on your concern? The driving force for many politicians is to stay in office. That's Pilate. He's much more concerned about this career than doing the right thing.

Pilate governed Judea for Rome from A.D. 26-36 and was a politician in the worst sense of the word. His aim in life was to promote himself. He was always concerned with acting in ways that would be advantageous to his own position. He also despised the Jews and they despised him.

Early in his rule, Pilate had angered them by sending his soldiers into Jerusalem with military standards bearing emblems that the Jews regarded as idolatrous. When they resisted, he threatened to kill them. But they lay down and bared their necks for the sword. Pilate finally had to yield or risk open rebellion, which he couldn't afford. He lost face in the encounter.

He also outraged them by taking money from the temple treasury to finance an aqueduct. They rioted. Many were killed, resulting in Pilate's receiving a scathing rebuke from Rome. Jesus referred to another incident in Luke 13 where Pilate mingled the Galileans' blood with their sacrifices.

Pilate and the Jews had clashed frequently. He couldn't afford for word of another incident getting back to Rome. Though he hated the Jews and knew that they were accusing Jesus out of envy, he had to placate them to save his own skin, even if it meant the death of an innocent man.

Luke abbreviates the exchange between Pilate and Jesus, simply reporting Pilate asking, "*Are You the King of the Jews?*" "*You*" is emphatic and probably was a sarcastic question. Jesus had already been beaten and spit upon. He hardly looked like a King! Pilate seems to have been saying, "So this is what the King of the Jews looks like, is it?" After examining Jesus, Pilate went out to the Jewish leaders and gave his verdict: "*I find no guilt in this man.*" Pilate didn't see Jesus as a threat to Rome's rule.

At this point, he should have dismissed the Jews, given Jesus military protection to get out of town...case closed. But the Jews kept insisting that Jesus stirred "*up the people, teaching all over Judea, starting from Galilee, even as far as this place.*" (23:5). When Pilate heard the word "*Galilee,*" he got a bright idea. If Jesus was a Galilean, then He fell into Herod's jurisdiction.

**Pilate passes the buck.** With great power comes great responsibility. Many love power but don't want responsibility. Since Herod was in town for the Passover, Pilate could send Jesus to Herod and get rid of the case, an old political maneuver called "passing the buck." As American humorist, Will Rogers (**picture**) said, "*There have been two great eras in American history, the passing of the buffalo and the passing of the buck.*"

Passing the buck happens all of the time. We live in a culture that screams for privilege but doesn't want responsibility. It happens in politics where the other party or previous administration is blamed. It happens in the workplace. Labor blames management and management blames labor. It happens in the home with something as simple as, "Go ask your mother...go ask your father."

Satan is delighted when we blame others and make excuses. Adam and Eve were the first buck passers. Living without personal responsibility becomes a safe and familiar place to hide. It takes discipline and courage to break out of this prison and take responsibility. Passing the buck wasn't going to get Pilate off with God and it won't hold up with God for us either.

We need to step up and state, "It's on me!" That needs to be our answer. Let me suggest four areas where you need to take personal responsibility: *You must take responsibility for your attitude.* IT'S ON ME! *You must take responsibility for your actions.* IT'S ON ME! *You must take responsibility for your affections.* IT'S ON ME! *You must take responsibility for your associations.* IT'S ON ME! But Pilate passes the buck. Are you passing the buck? We're going to come back to Pilate but let's move first to Herod.

**3. Herod is the curious sadist.** Luke is the only Gospel writer to include the account of Jesus being shuttled off by Pilate to Herod Antipas. He's the son of Herod the Great who slaughtered the infants in Bethlehem. He ruled over Galilee and Perea from 4 B.C. to A.D. 39. This is the Herod John the Baptist rebuked because he'd dumped his first wife and married his brother's wife, Herodias. She hated John and because of her, Herod put John in prison. But Herod feared John, knowing him to be a righteous man. He often listened to John talk about spiritual matters. But then came the fateful day when Herod got drunk at his birthday party and rashly promised the daughter of Herodias up to half of his kingdom because he enjoyed

her sensual dancing. She asked for John's head on a platter and Herod reluctantly complied so as not to lose face before his dinner guests.

Even with the growing animosity toward Christianity, most of us aren't going to pay with our lives for the cause of Christ. We do need though to develop a, what John Stonestreet (**picture**) calls, "*a theology of getting fired.*" There may come a time, maybe soon, when Christians will have to choose between our jobs and our biblical convictions. The day is coming when business owners, educators, and those in the medical field, will be asked to participate in ceremonies or curricula or procedures that violate our biblical convictions.

Just one example, the New Mexico Medical Society recently decided to officially endorse physician-assisted suicide and to repeal conscience exemptions for participating in abortion. After appealing to them to change their stance, Gregg Schmedes (**picture**), a state representative and a physician, publicly resigned his membership. Not a small step for a medical doctor.

What will we do when we face that choice? What lines will we never cross? How will we offer support for our brothers and sisters who lose their career or livelihood because of their faith? These are important questions and we need to be prepared to answer them. We know how John the Baptist answered. John was the man who kept his conscience, but lost his head. Herod was the man who took John's head and lost his conscience.

After this, when Herod heard of Jesus' preaching and miracles, he was haunted by guilt, thinking that perhaps John the Baptist had risen from the dead. Jesus called Herod a *fox*, referring to his crafty cowardice. "Fox" in that culture didn't mean *sly* but worthless. Herod was a king of no value.

**He was sickeningly curious.** The pleasure-driven, sensual Herod is glad to see Jesus. He's heard about his miracles and hopes Jesus will perform some tricks for him. He thinks of Jesus as some carnival act.

Herod is the guy who likes to dabble in spiritual matters, but has no intention of applying it personally or to repent. He'd sinned in committing adultery and wrongful divorce. When John the Baptist confronted him, he should have repented and sought God's forgiveness. After executing John, his conscience was seared, but he still found spiritual matters fascinating.

He's like people who find Bible prophecy interesting, but never make the connection that Bible prophecy is predicting their own doom if they won't repent. So Herod wanted to see Jesus. Think of the interesting dinner stories that Herod could tell if he saw Jesus do a miracle or two!

It's easy to say, "I want to see Jesus," but we must realize that any time a sinner sees Jesus, he/she is going to be confronted with the need for repentance. It's interesting to sit around and discuss theology, but biblical truth is to lead to repentance and growth in holiness. Herod wanted Jesus to entertain him. Many go to church and think that they're going to see Jesus, but they really want to be entertained. Jesus isn't some stand-up comic; He's sovereign.

**He was arrogant.** "*So he questioned [Jesus] at some length, but [Jesus] made no answer.*" Jesus' silence spoke volumes, but it incensed Herod. We're not required to answer every question. Proverbs 26:4 says, "*Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself.*"

It's noteworthy that our Lord was willing to reason with the scoundrel high priest Caiphias and even to prophesy to him. Jesus conversed with Pilate and gave him great substance to chew on. He grieved over Judas as He tenderly reached out for his soul in the Upper Room. But Jesus maintained a stark silence before Herod...Herod's day of grace was already over! He'd seared his conscience long before and now it couldn't respond.

**He was cruel.** "*And Herod with his soldiers treated Him with contempt and mocked Him. Then, arraying Him in splendid clothing, he sent Him back to Pilate.*" Herod stood face to face with God in His absolute righteousness and goodness, and never saw it. He's so spiritually dead that he mocks Jesus, dressed Him up so his bodyguards could mock God. He held God in contempt.

Notice that Herod never investigates the charges against Jesus. The judge was guilty of a mockery of justice. For Him, Jesus didn't really matter. But it wasn't Herod who was judging Jesus; Jesus was judging Herod.

Jesus is not to be ignored or mocked. He's to be honored and obeyed. If Jesus is truly our King, it will show in our attitude, our marriages, our homes, our workplace and our church. Jesus' claim on kingship is a claim that He makes on us. Is Jesus the King of your life?

Most of us would jump at the chance Pilate and Herod had that day, a personal interview with Jesus. Such an encounter only benefits us if we respond with repentance. They had the chance of a lifetime to become friends with Jesus. Instead, they rejected the Lord and became friends with each other.

But let's return to Pilate...

**Pilate was a pragmatist.** "*Pilate then called together the chief priests and the rulers and the people, and said to them, 'You brought me this man as one who was misleading the people. And after examining Him before you, behold, I did not find this man guilty of any of your charges against Him. Neither did Herod, for he sent Him back to us. Look, nothing deserving death has been done by Him. I will therefore punish and release Him.' But they all cried out together, 'Away*

with this man, and release to us Barabbas'— a man who had been thrown into prison for an insurrection started in the city and for murder." Pilate was astute enough to know that he was on trial, not Jesus. Under Roman law a light beating was sometimes given as a warning. It was illegal to scourge an innocent man, yet Pilate in attempt to appease Jesus' accusers and at the same time, in an attempt to save Jesus, has Him beaten.

John's Gospel records seven different moves that Pilate made to avoid condemning Jesus to death. He frantically looked for a loophole. Three times he declared Jesus not guilty, yet crucified Him just the same. Evidently influences beyond the political were inwardly tugging at this Roman leader.

Pilate tries one last tactic. There was a custom of releasing one prisoner to the people at the feast. Pilate suggests what he thought was a clear choice of extremes: Jesus or Barabbas, a notorious rebel guilty of robbery and murder. But to Pilate's shock, they called for Jesus' death and Barabbas' release.

**Pilate was a coward.** It's rare to find character in leadership. Pilate put his career and political life ahead of Jesus' life. The Jews threatened his position. It was blackmail. Jewish writer, Philo (picture), says, "[Pilate] was afraid that if a Jewish embassy were sent to Rome, they might discuss the many maladministrations of his government, his extortions, his unjust decrees, his inhuman punishments."

Pilate's goal in life was to hang onto his power and promote his own political fortune. On one level, this was the best day of Pilate's life. He patched up a quarrel with his political rival, Herod. He placated the difficult Jewish leaders and avoided a riot and a certain reprimand from Rome. He was able to hang onto power for a few more years. Spiritually, though it was the absolute worst day of his life. Although he didn't want to, he ended up condemning the innocent Son of God and brought down God's condemnation on his head.

Pilate didn't want to kill Jesus and didn't want a controversy with the Jews. He just wanted peace. He wanted to be neutral about Jesus and get on with his life. His downfall was that he was concerned about appeasing the Jews and pleasing Caesar, but he didn't consider pleasing God. Scripture is clear that if we take a stand for Christ, we'll alienate some. While we should never deliberately alienate anyone, sometimes we have no choice. Paul says, "If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men" (Rom. 12:18). Or as Winston Churchill (picture) wisely said, "People who are not prepared to do unpopular things and defy clamour are not fit to be ministers in times of stress." If Herod silenced the voice of God in his life, Pilate smothered it.

There are many who don't believe Jesus is the Son of God. They claim to be seeking the truth about God, but can't find God for the same reason a bank robber can't find a policeman—they aren't really looking. Most people in America have heard the truth about Jesus, they just don't believe it. In most cases, people reject the truth not because they have an intellectual problem with Jesus, but a moral problem. They don't want to give up their sin. Their own sinful desires are more important to them than God. You can know the Bible and still go to hell. Knowing the truth isn't the same as embracing it.

**4. Barabbas, the condemned murderer, is given a substitute.** "It was the best of times; it was the worst of times." You may recognize those words from Charles Dickens (picture) classic, *A Tale of Two Cities*. It begins in 1775 and spans 17 years of revolutionary turmoil in Paris with the French Revolution. It's one of the greatest stories of substitution in literature.

Charles Darnay is arrested and sentenced to die by the guillotine. Sydney Carton, a hard-drinking, cynical London lawyer is nearly his twin. When Carton learns of Darnay's plight, he travels to Paris, visits Darnay in the Bastille. Relying on their uncanny resemblance, Carton persuades Darnay to change clothes with him. Sydney Carton then sends Charles Darnay to freedom, while he waits in Darnay's cell to be executed. Maybe you remember the line that Sydney Carton speaks as he's being conveyed to his death on behalf of another, "It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done."

That great story pales in comparison to what Jesus did when He was crucified in place of Barabbas. He's the worst of the worst, the worst prisoner possible. Pilate wants to highlight the contrast as he offers this choice to the Jews.

Barabbas stands on the biblical page as a type of sinner for whom Christ died. That's because...

**Barabbas deserved to die.** Apparently he'd led an insurrection that had resulted in people being murdered. He's called a murderer. He's a robber. He'd violated the law and deserved to die. Ironically, Barabbas was guilty of the very crime of insurrection the Jews accused Jesus of. If Barabbas had been executed, no one would have questioned it. He represents every person who's violated God's holy law. We all stand guilty as charged before God's bar of justice. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). "The wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23).

Like Barabbas, we deserve God's sentence of death. Perhaps you protest: "I'm no robber or murderer! I live a decent, clean life. I'm law-abiding. It's not fair to compare me with this criminal!" God's Word is clear – we've all violated God's holy standards countless times. None of us can claim that we've always kept even one of God's Ten Commandments, let alone all ten. Like Barabbas, we deserve to die.

**Barabbas did nothing to earn his pardon.** He didn't get out for good behavior. He didn't make any promises to reform. The factors that resulted in his pardon were totally apart from himself. All that he could do was to accept the pardon. He could never congratulate himself later because he got out of his death sentence. It was totally due to factors apart from him and even in spite of him. It was free grace. And that's exactly how God's salvation is offered to every sinner. If you think you deserve it or if you offer to somehow pay for it, you don't understand. All you can do is recognize that God offers it freely apart from any merit and humbly accept it.

**Jesus died in Barabbas' place.** That was literally true for Barabbas. He received a pardon and Jesus died instead of him. It's the good news that the Bible proclaims: we all deserve to die for our sins, but Jesus, the innocent Lamb of God, took our place on the cross as our substitute. He gave His life as the ransom for many. He bore the wrath of God that should have fallen on us, satisfying the penalty. "[God] made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Cor. 5:21). If your faith is in Christ, His death means you'll not face God's condemnation.

**Jesus' death resulted in Barabbas' life and freedom.** There's a great irony here: Barabbas' name means "son of the father." The real Son of the Father, Jesus, suffered and died so that this human son of the father could live and go free. The Apostle John states that he wrote his gospel "that you may believe the Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name" (John 20:31). If you do not believe in Christ, you're like Barabbas in prison: in bondage to sin, under the sentence of death, and unable to free yourself. Only Jesus Christ can free you from sin and impart eternal life to you so that you become a true "son of the Father," a child of God.

**Conclusion:** As we see first the Jews, then Pilate and Herod struggle with this dilemma, we're confronted with the same question that confronted them: *What will we do with Jesus?* Each of us must render a verdict on Him. As He stands before you today, what's your decision? You're the jury, what's your verdict?

The verdict about Jesus is always unanimous, because it's a jury of one. No one else can cast your vote. Parents or grandparents would love to cast the vote for their children or grandchildren, but you, and you alone must decide.

But as you decide your verdict about Jesus remember one day, the situation will be reversed. Jesus will be the judge; we will be the ones on trial. As an old poem says: *What will you do with Jesus? Neutral you cannot be. One day your heart will be asking, "What will He do with me?"*

What's your verdict on Jesus? There's only one right one. *"I trust You as my Savior. I turn from all my sin. I follow You as my Lord."* It's the only correct verdict on Jesus Christ, and when you turn to Jesus He turns your life around.

Remember Cathleen Crowell who falsely accused Gary Dotson? She grew up, got married and someone introduced her to Jesus Christ. Her life was turned around. The one who'd been the accuser was accused by her own conscience. She'd been forgiven and so she could no longer live with a lie. She went to her pastor and confessed what she'd done and came forward with the truth. She admitted to fabricating the charges to cover up a possible pregnancy after having sex with her boyfriend. She'd panicked at the thought of being thrown out of her foster home. And at first no one would believe her when she told the truth, but unable to ignore the publicity and political pressure, the Governor of Illinois set Gary Dotson free.

But the freedom Gary Dotson received and the freedom Barabbas received is nothing compared to the freedom Christ offers you as your substitute. Jesus died to set us free. Each of us though must accept His free gift of salvation. Have you done that? Do you know what it is to be truly free?