

THE MEANING OF CHRIST'S SUFFERING UNDER PONTIUS PILATE

Rev. H. Hofman sr. - Lord's Day 15, Question 38

Psalter 223

Scripture: Matthew 26:1-31

Psalter 151

Psalter 206

Psalter 208

Dear congregation, we ask your attention for Lord's Day 15 of the Heidelberg Catechism, Question and Answer 38:

Question 38: Why did He suffer under Pontius Pilate, as judge?

Answer: That He, being innocent, and yet condemned by a temporal judge, might thereby free us from the severe judgment of God to which we were exposed.

We wish to consider:

The Meaning of Christ's Suffering Under Pontius Pilate

1. This is the Fulfillment of the Prophecies
2. To Bring Out Christ's Innocence
3. To Substitute for His People

I repeat: The Meaning of Christ's Suffering Under Pontius Pilate: First, This is the Fulfillment of the Prophecies; secondly, To Bring Out Christ's Innocence; and thirdly, To Substitute for His People.

"Why did He suffer under Pontius Pilate, as judge? That He, being innocent ... might thereby free us from the severe judgment of God to which we were exposed." We have heard that the Catechism interprets it as meaning that Christ is the great Substitute. That Christ was innocent was made clear when Jesus

appeared before Pilate. Several times Pilate said that he could find no guilt, no sin, in Him. It is a matter of course that there is a special meaning in this suffering of Jesus under Pontius Pilate. In general, it may be said that all the events of Christ's suffering and death have special meaning, because we are talking about the Mediator between God and man, the Savior. We have heard in the past about His precious names--that He is Jesus, which means that He saves His people from their sins; that His name is Christ, that He is the anointed Servant of the Lord to be Prophet, Priest, and King; that He is Lord, because He has redeemed us and delivered us from the power of sin and Satan and has made us His own property.

Every event, every step, everything in His deep humiliation, has a special meaning, is of great significance, also His betrayal by Judas, His agony in Gethsemane, His capture and trial before the Sanhedrin, and His being set at naught by Herod and the soldiers. They all belonged to the program of Jesus' suffering as it was determined and arranged, not by man, but by God Himself. We must always look at the suffering and death of the Lord Jesus Christ, not only as what the soldiers did, what Judas, what the Jews, what the Sanhedrin did, and so on, but, congregation, beyond all these human actions is God, the Judge of heaven and earth. Everything, every step in the humiliation of the precious Mediator, the Lord Jesus Christ, was determined and arranged by God Himself. Christ must not only suffer and die, but He must suffer and die exactly at that time and exactly in that way which the Father had ordained. Nothing happened by chance. Nothing happened too early or too late. It was all determined by the God of heaven and earth.

It was evidently through God's special direction of events that the Savior, Jesus Christ, was brought before the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. Pontius Pilate was the highest imperial officer and judge in Judea and only He could authorize the death penalty. This power was taken away from the highest court of the Jewish people, namely the Sanhedrin, when the land came under the Roman yoke. That Christ was taken to this judge, Pontius Pilate, is the fulfillment of God's own prediction. We read in Luke 18:32,33, "For He shall be delivered unto the Gentiles, and shall be mocked, and spitefully entreated, and spitted on: and they shall scourge Him, and put Him to death: and the third day He shall rise again." Also in the Old Testament we read something about this, as we read in Psalm 129:3, "The plowers plowed upon My back: they made long their furrows." Also in Psalm 22:16, we read, "For dogs have compassed Me: the assembly of the

wicked have inclosed Me: they pierced My hands and My feet." No, the name of Pontius Pilate is not mentioned in the Old Testament. But when it says that plowers plowed upon His back, that dogs have compassed Him: the assembly of the wicked had inclosed Him: and they pierced His hands and His feet," we must know that the Jews, the Sanhedrin, were not allowed to sentence a person to the death of the cross. The Jews were not allowed to crucify a person. Thus indirectly the Old Testament and also Jesus with His own words mentioned that He must fall into the hands of the wicked, of the Gentiles. God had determined this way, and it must be done officially, with authority.

Oh congregation, we can never fathom the wisdom of God in this mediatorial work of the Lord Jesus Christ. We can read it in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, but behind all these events, in the steps which the Lord Jesus Christ took in His being here upon earth, behind all these things, there is the hand and the counsel of God. God has pointed out that it must be done officially, with authority.

It is very clear from the gospel that it was not the intention of the Jews to bring Jesus to death in the way of a public and official trial. We always read that the Jews tried to avoid that. Their original intention was quite different from its final execution, for when shortly before the final passover the chief priests and the scribes and the elders of the people assembled in the palace of the high priest to conspire against Jesus, they "consulted that they might take Jesus by subtilty, and kill Him. But they said, Not on the feast day, lest there be an uproar among the people," as we have read for you from Matthew 26:4,5.

That this program was frustrated both as to time and manner was due to several factors over which the leaders of the Jews had no control. I think about the unexpected action of Judas. For the Jews it was totally unexpected. We read only that the devil entered into the heart of Judas. No, Judas did not ask advice from the Sanhedrin or other people. His action was personal. It was unexpected for the Jews, but it was according to the counsel of God. It was the fullness of time, so to speak, determined by God from all eternity. The Jews knew nothing about it, but it took place. It is evident that all the secret plans of Judas and of the Jews were known by the Lord.

Thus it came about that they hired a band of soldiers that night, and that the capture of Jesus that same night could not remain a secret. That all was in the counsel of the Lord. It had become impossible to kill Him secretly, and they were

forced to bring the Lord to the Roman judge and to seek confirmation of the death sentence they had already pronounced. All this was, of course, also necessary, because the death of the Savior must be a public spectacle and must assume the form of crucifixion. But He must also be condemned by the temporal judge. It was therefore not according to the counsel of man, but according to God's own program of Jesus' suffering. It was only by His special direction that Christ appeared before Pontius Pilate to be tried and condemned by him.

"Why did He suffer under Pontius Pilate, as judge?" We may descend into the depths of Christ's sufferings. We know out of the gospels what took place when Jesus appeared before the Sanhedrin and when He came before the worldly judge, Pontius Pilate. Why must Jesus be tried by a worldly judge? It was the hand of God who condemned Jesus as Mediator and Substitute. We read in the form for the administration of the Lord's Supper these words: "that He was innocently condemned to death, that we might be acquitted at the judgment-seat of God." To the question, "Why must Christ suffer under a judge and be condemned in the ordinary way?" Ursinus gives this explanation: "In order that we might know that He was condemned by God Himself on account of our sins, and that He, therefore, made satisfaction before the tribunal of God, in order that we might not be condemned by the severe judgment of God, even as He also sustained death for us, that we might be delivered from it, that His unjust condemnation might take the place of our most righteous condemnation." Pilate, as he investigated the case of Jesus of Nazareth and heard all the accusations of the Jews, declared Jesus innocent. It was official. It was mentioned three times by this judge that He was innocent. That is what the Catechism says, "That He, being innocent." We know out of the Scriptures that the Lord Jesus Christ was without sin--without original sin, without actual sin--that He was the blameless Lamb, that there was no wrong in Him, that He was righteous in all His words and deeds and thoughts, that He fulfilled the law perfectly, obeyed His Father's will in all details, that He came voluntarily, and that He gave Himself as a ransom for sinners. It seems a contradiction "That He, being innocent, and yet condemned by a temporal judge, might thereby free us from the severe judgment of God to which we were exposed."

Oh congregation, we must emphasize today His being officially declared innocent by the judge. He was without fault, without sins. There was nothing in His life, in His words, and in His deeds, for which He must be killed by the Jews.

He was officially declared innocent, but still was condemned. The mystery is that Jesus Christ is the Substitute. He stands here, not for His own sins, but instead of His people, who are under the severe judgment of God, as the Catechism says. All the sins of His entire church were laid upon Him. He must die, "That He, being innocent ... might free us from the severe judgment." That is His mediatorial work, and that is the value of His work. Oh, that we may see Him, because He has finished this work. This all has been fulfilled according to the counsel of God in the Counsel of Peace. God's will from all eternity was to save His people from their sins in this way. We read in Romans 8 of the fruits thereof, what it means to be made free from the severe judgment of God to which we are exposed.

By Christ's being condemned, we may know that for the entire church it becomes totally different. "There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus." Paul says, "If God be for us, who can be against us? He that spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things? Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth. Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died ... who also maketh intercession for us." Here we see why Christ must suffer under Pontius Pilate. He, being innocent, is declared guilty. God's people, all those who are given unto Christ, are guilty. They are under the severe judgment of God, and they are declared free. What an unspeakable wonder of God's grace! He was condemned for their sakes, and that publicly.

Everyone knew it and had heard it: "I have found no fault in this Man." Then why must He die? Because He is the Substitute. God demands that His justice be satisfied. Oh congregation, God is Judge. Do you hear Pilate's words from the judgment hall: "Behold the Man!" They proclaimed that the heavenly Judge has acquitted sinners. It is the proclamation of atonement. It tells us that with the death of Christ, the sentence that Christ must die, God's justice is satisfied. It means that there now is hope for a condemned soul.

It is possible that you are going over the world in that frame of heart that you feel the severe judgment of God which rests upon you, that you see God's righteous judgment, that you have sinned against God, that you have transgressed God's holy law, that you are under the curse of the law, and that therefore God must punish you. You must die as a cursed one, and must be cast away by the righteous Judge of heaven and earth. Oh, you hear the verdict out of God's Word, "Depart from Me, ye that work iniquity." You cannot find relief

through your works, through your prayers, your wrestling, or your promises for improvement. You read your condemnation on every page of the Bible. You meet this Judge everywhere. Then there is no rest or peace, but the only thing you see is that hell is opened and that you have nothing to offer the Lord. You see that God's hand is against you. Is this your life, congregation? Is there no hope left? Is all that you see your death sentence--you must die? You would flee away from God, but you cannot find a hiding place. Everywhere you walk or are, you see and feel God's hand, you hear, "Pay what you owe," and your hands are empty. There is nothing left in your hands.

Oh congregation, is there a possibility to be saved? Is it possible for such a cursed sinner as you are? Well, we read, "Why did He suffer under Pontius Pilate, as judge? That He, being innocent, and yet condemned." He was sentenced to death for such condemned people, for people by whom the severe judgment of God was felt. For such people He was condemned, being innocent. But therefore He was the Substitute, that such guilty sinners might feel that He has done it for them. It can be a long way and it can take a long time to reach that point, but it is the Holy Spirit who brings us at His feet, who brings us to the hill of Golgotha, where we may see Him nailed to the cross, bleeding out of many wounds. It can take a long time, in which we try to help ourselves, and to satisfy God with our works, with our prayers, with our promises, with our reformation. We say, "Lord, be patient. I will pay all that I owe." Sometimes we think that it goes better. We strive against sin and start to live a decent life, but if the Holy Spirit goes further and works through in our life, then there comes a time that all our righteousnesses and all our works become nothing but filthy rags. Then there is only one thing left: We must pay, and we have nothing with which to pay. Then we see death. And what a blessing it is if there comes a time that we may agree, if we see the sword of God which rests upon us and may feel it, so that we confess, "Lord, Thou art righteous if Thou would cast me away forever and ever into outer darkness. Lord, it is my own sin, my guilt, my work."

But oh, what a wonder that this Mediator, this Substitute, intervenes. There is hope for such people, congregation, who cannot find life in themselves anymore, that His work is imputed in our heart, that our sins are laid upon Him. Then we may see Him, as Isaiah says in chapter 53, that "He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities," that He is the Substitute. Then we receive the liberty to lay all our sins, the curse of the law, and the severe

judgment of God, upon His strong shoulders, and to see that He is willing to pay the guilt and to satisfy God's justice instead of us, He being innocent, and yet condemned.

He was condemned and brought to death so that we might be made free and receive life out of His suffering and death. It was not done secretly, but publicly, according to God's holy will, not through the back door, but officially. Because behind Pontius Pilate, congregation, there is the Judge of heaven and earth. In fact, it is not Pilate, but it is God. Then we may see this great gift of the Judge of heaven and earth for condemned sinners, the gift of the eternal God to lost sinners. We may see this Lamb, as we read in the history of Abraham and Isaac, where Abraham said that the Lord would provide Himself a lamb.

This dying Jesus is God's provision. It is God's gift, not Pilate's gift. Being innocent and yet condemned is not in the first place Pilate's work, but it is in the first place God's work, so that condemned sinners might be made free "from the severe judgment of God to which we were exposed." It is laid upon Him, being innocent, and it is taken from us, being condemned and under the severe judgment of God. That is taken away and laid upon Him as the Substitute. That is the gift of God.

Do you hear it, bruised souls, smoking flax? Broken and humbled to the dust under the hand of God, do you feel it, do you see it, do you hear it? Here He stands before Pontius Pilate. Here is the only Substitute. Then we need faith, congregation. By faith we may receive this sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ. In Article 22 of the Confession of Faith, Guido de Bres confesses that this only Sacrifice is to be obtained by faith--no, not faith only, but faith as an instrument, which makes it possible to come into communion with the mediatorial work of Christ. That is necessary for all of us.

Why is it that there is so little certainty, that we often hear more about hungering and thirsting after the righteousness of Christ, and we hear nothing at all about Christ? The problem is our ignorance and unbelief. If there is no faith at all in our heart, then there is no room, no necessity, for Christ in our heart. Is faith weak and small? Then we cannot come to this point where we embrace this work of Christ. We need faith as an instrument, which is strengthened by the Word of God and the administration of the sacraments, that we may receive unity with Christ. Oh, that we by faith may embrace this precious work of Him, being innocent and yet condemned. When we may turn it around by faith, seeing God's

work and seeing God's great gift, then we may put the hand in our own bosom, being guilty, being a cursed one, a condemned one, and by His innocence made free from the severe judgment of God to which we were exposed. Then He becomes great and He becomes everything for us. Then we love Him because He has loved us first.

Let us first sing from Psalter 206, all stanzas.

But there is more, congregation. Pilate represented a short power. He executed judgment in God's Name, for the praise of them that do well and the punishment of them that do evil. This power was given him from above. That is the word of the Lord Jesus Christ to Pilate. Jesus humbly submitted to his verdict. He did not oppose it.

But there is another side to it. Having heard that Jesus Christ is the Substitute for His entire church and that He was condemned by the worldly judge, there is another side to it. Pilate's judgment did not concern the Mediator of God's people, but the man Jesus, Jesus of Nazareth, and concerning that man Jesus, his judgment was twofold. Jesus was perfectly innocent, as we have heard, and Pilate sentenced Him to death, the death of the cross. And what is meant by this? The condemnation of Christ, Jesus the Savior, the Son of God, by the world, was the judgment and condemnation of the world itself. In John 12:31, Jesus spoke with a view to His own condemnation and death, saying, "Now is the judgment of this world: now shall the prince of this world be cast out." That is also of deep meaning and an answer to why He suffered under Pontius Pilate, as judge. Then we must also pay attention to what the consequences are for Pilate officially, for the world. The trial and condemnation of Jesus by the world was in reality and according to God's purpose the trial and judgment of the world, the whole world of sinful humanity, as it reveals and develops itself in this present world.

This sentence of Pilate has its consequences for the world also today. The world in its ethically evil sense, the world with its lusts of the flesh, the world with the lust of the eyes and the pride of life, was tried and weighed in God's balances, exposed as corrupt, and found wanting, and condemned, when it passed judgment upon Jesus Christ. The anointed Servant of the Lord is tried and condemned by the world.

We must realize and notice that the center of the world was at Jerusalem. There the whole world in all its culture and civilization was represented. There

also was the world of religion, as it was enlightened by God's law and the prophets. There were the leaders of the Jews, teachers of Moses, sitting on Moses' seat, proud of their knowledge and their keeping of the law. There was also the Roman court of justice, famous for its knowledge of what is right and true among men. The world was tried and exposed as evil through the trial and condemnation of the Christ of God. This world was forced to cast off its mask of goodness, of justice, and of love for the truth, in order to become manifest in its inner wickedness and rottenness, in its love of darkness rather than light, in its enmity against the living God.

For this purpose this world must judge the Christ, God's Son, the Messiah, and in this judgment they must give an answer to the question, "What think ye of the Christ?" This question is a searching one, a question of life and death. It was intended to reveal whether they loved or hated the truth, and the answer they officially gave with one accord was that they would kill Him. The world killed Jesus Christ. Judas gave an answer to the question, "What do you think of the Christ?" The church of that day, represented by the Sanhedrin, by Annas, by Caiaphas, gave an answer. The soldiers, the representatives of Roman might, gave an answer. The multitude which was present at Pilate's court voted in favor of a murderer and demanded that the Christ of God be crucified. And Pilate, who was the representative of the highest worldly tribunal, without whose verdict Jesus could not have been crucified, gave an answer.

"He suffered under Pontius Pilate." He suffered under the official power of the world. Simple words, congregation, but tremendous in their significance when we consider that in the judgment of Pilate the whole world--you and me, the world of all ages--is finally tried and condemned. One of the most remarkable and striking things of this trial is that Pilate repeatedly declared that Jesus was innocent. He was perfectly convinced of Jesus' righteousness. He found no guilt in Him. His original judgment was never changed. "I find in Him no fault at all." Thus Pilate gave an answer as to what he thought of Christ. He was deeply conscious of the fact that he had power to release Jesus and power to send Him to His death.

But Pilate was afraid. He was anxious about his own position. On the one hand he was afraid of Jesus, and on the other hand he was afraid of the Jews, and above all, of Caesar. By all means he must remain Caesar's friend. And therefore Christ must die. Tossed to and fro, he repeatedly sought a way out to release

Jesus. He placed the people before the choice: Jesus or Barabbas. He tried to rid himself of the troublesome case by sending Jesus to Herod. But all these attempts failed. Pilate must officially give an answer, representing the world. And the answer finally came: "Let the blood of this righteous Man be shed." Thus the world condemned Jesus. The holy city closed its gates for Jesus, the Messiah, the Redeemer, the Substitute.

And now, congregation, we have given you some instruction about the meaning of Christ's suffering under Pontius Pilate, that He, being innocent, was yet condemned. Oh, that we may see Him as our Substitute, that we may need Him as our Savior, our Redeemer, who has finished all the work in our stead, who has given Himself as a ransom for sinners. Do you need Him as the Substitute? Is He precious to you? Are the outgoings of your heart to Him--"Give me Jesus, else I die"?

Or are you standing next to Pilate, the world, the religious world, as I have said--the Sanhedrin, the high priest--sitting easily in the seat of Moses, with a condemned Jesus? Are you like Pilate, who wanted to remain Caesar's friend, not wanting to give up your position? Then Jesus must be condemned, being innocent.

Dear congregation, the world has condemned Jesus. "Why did He suffer under Pontius Pilate?" They tried to get rid of Jesus. And what about you? Old and young, do we belong to this world? Oh, give an answer. Take this question along with you: What do you think about Christ? Who is Jesus for you? Are you aware of your sins, guilt, condemnation, lost condition? Do you think you can help yourself? Is it in your heart, "Give us Barabbas, and let Him be crucified"? Read again Article 22 about the satisfaction of Christ alone, if you think that Christ must help you. Is He *everything* for you? If not, then He is not a Savior for you at all. No, there is no way in between. Jesus is either all to us or nothing. That is something we must learn, that He is everything, that He is the only Savior, and we are nothing. We must not only learn this with words, congregation--you can say it a thousand times--but to practise in our life that He is everything and I am nothing, is something else. Do you really say it in truth, that He is everything and that you are nothing? Maybe you need Him to help you, to add something to your works, but, congregation, that is to say what Pilate did, to condemn the innocent. He must become all for us, and we nothing.

A long way, yes, impossible for our proud nature, but it is so profitable to become nothing in ourselves, so that all our money is spent and we become poor and empty, and that we become a cursed sinner, guilty, having transgressed God's holy law with words, deeds, and thoughts, and cannot help ourselves. Oh, what a wonder if He comes between a holy and righteous God and a guilty sinner, "that He, being innocent, and yet condemned by a temporal judge, might thereby free us from the severe judgment of God to which we were exposed."

Amen.

Psalter 208: All Stanzas