

VIGNETTE 2

JOSEPH OF ARIMATHEA AND PILATE



John 18:33-38; Matthew 27:57-61

“It is finished.” Still shaken from the last anguished cry of Jesus on the cross, still fearful because of the terrifying earthquake and darkness, Joseph of Arimathea hurried after the centurion, toward the Antonia Fortress, hoping his wealth and position on the Sanhedrin would gain him an audience with Pilate.

At the fortress gate, Joseph asked the guards if he could speak with Pilate. After hesitating briefly, they led him to Pilate’s chambers. Shrieks of terror from the street penetrated the walls and mixed with shouts of confusion inside the fortress courtyard.

Turning abruptly toward Joseph, Pilate barked, “What do you want?”

“Procurator, as you probably know, the man Jesus has died,” Joseph responded. “With your permission, I’d like to take his body and give it a proper burial.”

“He’s dead already? The criminals usually last for days.”

“Yes—but I saw him die. The soldiers confirmed it by piercing his side with a spear.”

Glancing over at the centurion, who had followed Joseph into the chamber, Pilate asked, “Is this true?”

“Yes, Procurator. We also saw him perish,” he confirmed.

Pilate paused a moment, then queried Joseph, “But why do *you* want the body?”

Joseph hoped Pilate didn’t know he was a secret disciple of Jesus. “Sir, he is a sincere teacher of the law, as well as a good man. As you yourself said earlier today, it doesn’t seem he committed a crime worthy of death. May I be of service to you by taking care of his body?”

Pilate assented with a curt nod, and Joseph departed hastily from the room, relieved.

Of all the irritating, confusing, and troublesome situations Pilate had faced with the Jews, this was the worst. Joseph was right—Pilate was still not convinced of the Nazarene’s guilt. How had he let himself be trapped by the power-hungry high priest, Caiaphas, and his accomplices? True, it was good to avoid a riot, which might have caused trouble for him in Rome and damaged his career. But he couldn’t evade the memory of the prisoner’s supernaturally calm face as he asserted, “My kingdom is from another place ... everyone who is on the side of truth listens to me ... You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above.”

Even at that late stage, Pilate had been sure that given the choice to free a prisoner, the Jews would ask him for Jesus, if he were really their king, rather than the murderer Barabbas. Instead, the same people who insisted on their one sovereign God astonished him with the brazen lie, “We have no king but Caesar!”

Pilate was trapped. If the crowd recognized the authority of Caesar, the representative of Caesar could not go against them. The decision had been neatly snatched from his hands. So, he turned and washed them of the sorry affair.



REFLECT

1. How did Jesus challenge Pilate's perception of power and control?
2. Pilate ignored Jesus' words and clear evidence of innocence in order to avoid political problems. What would cause you to ignore and disobey Jesus?

LEARN

See how the geographical background of the gospels can impact your understanding of the stories. Bargil Pixner wrote a fascinating, well-illustrated book about Jesus' ministry in Jerusalem: Pixner, Bargil. *With Jesus in Jerusalem: His First and Last Days in Judea*. Rosh Pina: Corazin Publishing, 2005.