



**SCRIPTURE:**

John 18:38B-40

**SERMON NOTES:**

We're still making our way through the book of John. If it seems like we've been in this book forever, that's because we have been. This will be our last sermon in John for this season. Next week we'll be moving back to our Genesis series and Pastor Larry has some great stuff for you. Today, we're going to be looking at John 18:38b-40. While you're turning there, let me set the scene for you a little. We're drawing near to the crucifixion of Christ. Jesus has been betrayed by Judas, captured, tried by the religious leaders, and handed over to the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate. Last week we looked at the false accusations and the subsequent trial of Jesus by the Jews and the beginning of a series of interactions with Pilate. We're picking back up during one of those interactions.

38B After he [Pilate] had said this, he went back outside to the Jews and told them, "I find no guilt in him [Jesus]. 39 But you have a custom that I should release one man for you at the Passover. So do you want me to release to you the King of the Jews?" 40 They cried out again, "Not this man, but Barabbas!" Now Barabbas was a robber.

I shared this with some of our people at a conference recently, albeit for a different reason, but it bears repeating. My son and I watched an Imax documentary not too long ago about the Serengeti. It was amazing. It focused on how important wildebeests were to the ecosystem in that part of the world. There is a massive population of these animals and a finite amount of resources to sustain them. The way that they keep this balanced is really interesting.

The wildebeests graze in the north during one season, and once they've consumed all the grass there, they begin a migration to the south. While they make this journey, it begins to be the rainy season in the south. As they migrate, they become exposed to predators like lions and cheetahs, and inevitably some of the herd is lost. But this is actually a good thing. It not only provides much needed food for the predators, but it

manages the number of wildebeests and keeps the population the right size for the grass that has grown during the rainy season in the south.

Once they get to the new grass, they graze and have sufficient food there to stay long enough to mate. So they mate and once the calves are ready, they begin making the journey back. While they've been away, the rains have moved to the north and grass has begun to replenish itself there.

The rains have also altered the landscape and as the wildebeests make their way back, they have to cross swollen rivers. Apparently, this is the most treacherous part of the return trip. The calves could get swept away in the currents and end up becoming food for scavengers, and the rivers are now teeming with crocodiles. So, again, their numbers decrease but it's a good thing. The predators are sustained and the herd doesn't exhaust the new grass too quickly once they arrive back in the north.

This migration takes place over and over again like clockwork and through it, the animals in this ecosystem thrive.

Now, some of my fellow nerds here thought that was incredibly interesting, while others are wondering what in the world wildebeests have to do with the Gospel of John. However, I'll bet all of you followed every bit of that. It wasn't theoretical or abstract.

It was real. I was describing real events with real creatures that happen in the real world. We get the earthiness of it.

But what if I told you that what was really happening wasn't the migration instincts, and weather patterns. That's not what was going on. What was really going on was,

He gives to the beast its food, And to the young ravens which cry. Psalm 147:9

The young lions roar after their prey And seek their food from God. Psalm 104:21

And that He sends the rains to [...] give drink to every beast of the field Psalm 104:11

And that He feeds the birds of the air, and not one of them falls, apart from His will (Matthew 6)

Or that The eyes of all [animals] look to You, And You give them their food in due time.  
Psalm 145:15

What if I told you that that's what was really happening and not all that natural stuff?

Well, you'd probably tell me that both things were really happening. It's not one or the other. It's both/and. God is sustaining these animals through all these real events and circumstances and natural means. When the wildebeest enjoys the new grass, that experience is real. And at the same time, that real experience is taking place in the unfolding of God's eternal decree.

This is how He has made this world to work. He brings His plan to pass through the everyday means and real life experiences of His creatures. And the fact that He is behind it all doesn't make those experiences any less real.

This short two and a half verses in the Gospel of John shows this very same truth. We're going to see this scene from three different perspectives. Through the eyes of Pilate, the religious leaders, and Jesus. And what we'll see is that:

Pilate's self-preservation, the religious leaders' self-righteousness, and Jesus' rejection were all real life experiences, taking place in real time, while simultaneously fulfilling the decree of God.

This passage documents real life experiences of real life people living in a broken and sinful world. But these decisions and backstories and circumstances are the means by which God brings about His plan from eternity past, to save sinners.

Let's start with Jesus, and we'll come full circle and finish with Him too.

### **1. Jesus suffered alone.**

In less than the span of a week, Jesus goes from the prophesied King of all the Jewish scriptures being celebrated as He rides into the city of David – to an object of scorn and contempt. Less than a week.

By the time we get to our passage, Jesus has already wrestled with the Father in prayer, knowing the wrath He's about to endure; while His closest friends couldn't even stay awake to pray with Him, He has been betrayed by a man He walked side by side with for three years, deserted by His disciples, denied by one of those in His innermost circle, He

has been lied about, slandered, mocked, humiliated by the leaders of the very religion that was meant to point to Him, unjustly accused and condemned by those same religious leaders, and now He stands alone, bound before a proud, spineless, Roman Governor.

Can you imagine the demoralization of this? We speak often of our need for community and the need that we have for brothers and sisters to stand with us as the hatred of this world zeros in on those who speak the truth. In this moment, Jesus doesn't have that. All of this is taking place; He is being dismantled piece by piece. And, He's all alone. There's an old hymn that says:

1 It was alone the Savior prayed  
In dark Gethsemane;  
Alone He drained the bitter cup  
And suffered there for me.

2 It was alone the Savior stood  
In Pilate's judgment hall;  
Alone the crown of thorns He wore,  
Forsaken thus by all.

3 Alone upon the cross He hung  
That others He might save;  
Forsaken then by God and man,  
Alone, His life He gave.

Alone, alone, He bore it all alone;  
He gave Himself to save His own,  
He suffered, bled and died alone, alone.

## **2. This suffering is the product of Pilate's self-interest and the religious leaders' self-righteousness.**

So here He is in our passage all alone, standing trial for crimes He didn't commit. And in verse 38 His judge, Pontius Pilate, says, I find no guilt in him.

This isn't good news for Jesus, though. He's not standing there, breathing a sigh of relief, thinking, "Just maybe I'll get out of this."

No, He already knows the ending of this story. He has not passively allowed these events to unfold, but He has orchestrated the course of human history to lead Himself to this moment. He is not hoping for the best. He's sticking to the plan. His face is set like flint. His purpose foremost on His mind – that two-sided purpose of pleasing the Father and setting you free. Determined, He commits to enduring this suffering alone.

And what is Pilate doing here? What's his angle?

Pilate was the Roman Governor in charge of this region for about 10 years. Israel was an occupied nation, and it was Pilate's job to oversee the political, financial, and administrative interests of Rome in his respective area. Pilate was particularly cruel towards the Jewish people. Some accounts say that in 50 AD, Philo of Alexandria, a Jewish philosopher, rebuked Pilate for his "bribes, insults, robberies, outrages, and wanton injuries, execution without trial, constantly repeated, ceaseless and supremely grievous cruelty."

As a result of his heavy-handedness, he was apparently hated by the Jews and not in great standing with his superiors in Rome either. We'll see how reluctant he is to condemn Jesus, and all of this history is part of the reason he is so reluctant. From Pilate's perspective, he knows if the Jews riot, he'll be in trouble, and if his superiors find out that he executed an innocent man, he'll also be in trouble. He's in a really precarious position here. He is a characterless man who prioritizes self-preservation at all costs.

After examining Jesus, his remark to the crowd is, "I find no guilt in Him." Catch the irony here. This is exactly what Romans 1 and 2 says. The Jews have a supernatural revelation from God – the Word of God, teaching them about morality and justice. But Pilate is a Gentile without that revelation, and yet he knows what justice is. He is not a just man, but he knows what justice is. And these religious leaders, trusting in their own righteousness, can't see as clearly as this wicked Gentile can.

To take a little detour here, it's worth noting that this is a textbook side effect of self-righteousness. When we begin to trust in our own righteousness, we actually become blind to our own sinfulness. It's counterintuitive, but that's the way it works. Typically the higher you think of yourself, the less self-awareness you actually have. We're all masters of self-deception. Everyone likes to think of themselves as a good

person. In fact, the Bible says as much “Every way of a man is right in his own eyes, but the LORD weighs the heart.” Proverbs 21:2

No one in this scene thinks that they are doing evil. They all have a justification for their actions. Pilate thinks he’s maneuvering to do what’s best for himself, maybe for his family, or maybe even for Rome. The religious leaders think that they are doing a service to God. They can’t see the forest for the trees.

And the irony is that in this exchange, the perverse justice of a Gentile exposes the self-righteousness of those calling themselves God’s chosen people. So how does Pilate play this? What’s the move?

**VS39 -- *But you have a custom that I should release one man for you at the Passover. So do you want me to release to you the King of the Jews?***

The book of Ecclesiastes says that there is nothing new under the sun. What Pilate is doing is nothing new. This is politics 101. He’s backed into a corner. It’s not in the best interest of his career or his conscience to execute this man whom he knows is innocent. He’s already tried to pitch the responsibility back to them, but it didn't work, so now he takes another approach.

Listen to how theologian J.C. Ryle describes it:

*“In this verse we see the cowardly, weak, double-minded character of Pilate coming out. He knows in his own conscience that our Lord is innocent, and that if he acts justly he ought to let Him go free. But he fears offending the Jews and wants to contrive matters so as to please them. He therefore prepares a plan by which he hoped that Jesus might be found guilty and the Jews satisfied, and yet Jesus might depart unhurt and his own secret desire to acquit Him be gratified.[...] Such are the ways of worldly and unprincipled rulers. Between the base fear of men, the desire to please the mob, and the secret dictates of their own conscience, they are continually doing wicked things and pleasing nobody at all, and least of all themselves.”*

Pilate doesn’t want to execute Jesus because he doesn’t want Jesus’ blood on his hands. His own self-interest and conscience are trying to win out, but his plan won’t succeed.

**3. And yet, everything is playing out just as God decreed.**

Pilate tries to release Jesus at least four times, and this is not the last time he'll try. The tension here is real, and it's a type of tension that we understand. We all know what it's like to let our sin get us into a situation that we're trying our hardest to manipulate our way out of. Pilate was a verifiable historical figure. This was a real man wrestling with a real-life political decision. He had a past, a reputation, ambitions, and a wife who we'll later see is interjected into the story too – all of this to say, these are not remarkable circumstances on the surface. This is everyday life for everyone involved.

A Roman province ruled by a tyrant governor who has gotten himself into trouble for being a loose cannon is caught between a religious figure, a mob, and his own interests. This could be the headline for a thousand other stories throughout history. Why does that matter?

Because I want you to see that this is just the daily struggle for all the people involved in this text. They are all making free decisions that are shaping the circumstances that they're living in. Everyone is doing exactly what they want to do. And yet, flip to Acts 2:22-24 *“Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know— 23 this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. 24 God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it.*

This is the way that all of history unfolds. This is what the sovereignty of God looks like in action. Who is responsible for Jesus being crucified, is it the Jewish leaders? Pilate? Or God?

The answer is “yes.” Yes to all. These men freely chose that which God decreed from the foundation of the world. They chose to deliver Jesus up to Pilate and God decreed it before the foundation of the world. You can go down that rabbit hole, and it's a fun one to go down but hear me on this. Understanding how that works is not nearly as important as understanding that that's the way it works.

Understanding how the decree of God, His sovereign plan for His creation, interacts and coalesces with our actions is not nearly as important as understanding that both work together at the same time.

How can I say that? Because we see it right here. And we see it in Moses delivering the Israelites from Pharaoh, we see it in the account of Joseph and his brothers, and in all of these passages where we see God's sovereignty and man's responsibility overlap, do you know what God never stops to do? He never once stops to explain it. He gives us accounts of His working out human history down to every individual bird, every individual hair, and every individual day of your life, and yet He expects you to believe that and be responsible for your decisions.

So we see Pilate living a real life, making real choices, and yet he is simultaneously fulfilling the decree of God all the way down to "the type of death that Jesus would die" as we saw in John 12, earlier in 18, and as we'll see again in John 21.

God's plan is playing out through the everyday circumstances and choices of people.

4. Jesus, standing alone because of Pilate's self-interest and the religious leaders' self-righteousness, is now utterly and publicly rejected. Rejected, all according to the decree of God, that we might be accepted.

***VS40 -- They cried out again, "Not this man, but Barabbas!" Now Barabbas was a robber.***

Pilate's plan backfires. I brought you down that little theological side road to show you that it backfires because God wanted it to backfire. It's not only not a coincidence that Jesus is about to be crucified, but it's also not a coincidence that He's getting ready to be crucified substitutionally. And not just substitutionally, but substitutionally for a man of truly wretched character.

We know from the other Gospels that Barabbas was also an insurrectionist and a murderer as well as a robber. The idea here is that there are no redeeming qualities in this man. The picture that God has given us here is one of stark contrasts. Jesus on one side and Barabbas on the other.

Light and darkness. Love and hate. Good and evil. Holiness and sin. Innocence and guilt.

The person being set forth for the crowd's choice, in God's providence, is undoubtedly the worst that Pilate had to offer. It has to be. This is the whole ruse. Pilate is trying to get out of condemning Jesus. He has to be thinking, "Surely they won't pick Barabbas!"



So you've got the perfect Son of God on one side. He's never sinned a day in His life. Never wronged anyone, including God, in thought, word, or deed. He's been teaching people in the most compassionate way, healing diseases that previously ruined people's lives, casting out demons, feeding the hungry, blessing children, and then you have Barabbas.

An enemy to the state. An enemy to his neighbor. And an enemy of God. And Pilate says, "Which one do you desire more?"

Consider that. He says, "It's your choice. Which one would you rather have?" And here's what I want you to see. They didn't pick Barabbas.

"What? Wait a minute. I know this passage. They definitely did pick Barrabas, you're thinking."

No, they didn't.

They didn't pick Barabbas, they rejected Jesus. The distinction matters.

Yes, of course, Barabbas is picked as a consequence. But anyone could have been in Barabbas' spot, and the outcome would have been the same because this whole thing wasn't about Barabbas being picked.

It was about Jesus being rejected.

Remember what we were looking at earlier? The total dismantling of the humanity of Jesus, bit by bit. Betrayed and left to suffer and die all alone. This scene is one more act of that dismantling.

**VS40 -- "*Not this man, but Barabbas!*"**

Not. This. Man.

Christ is standing before these people, watching and hearing this entire exchange. The man who has done nothing but good to them, the eternal Son of God who authored and sustains the life of each and every one of them. The One who formed the vocal cords of those insulting Him, the One who designed the plant that would produce the thorns to be

beaten into His brow. The One who gave life to the animal from whose hide the leather would come for the whip He's about to be tortured with.

There He stands, and they say, "NOT THIS MAN."

Isaiah 53, written hundreds of years before the birth of Christ, depicts all of this so clearly. And as to His rejection, it, along with other OT prophecies, says it plainly:

**Isaiah 53:3 -- *He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.***

But we see how this was part of the plan all along in 1 Peter 2:4,7, *As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious [...] "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,"*

Providentially enough, part of what Peter says is a citation from Psalm 118, which was traditionally sung at Passover. Passover, as in the very time that Jesus is being rejected in our text this morning. Behold the wisdom of God and the unsearchable riches of His word.

## **5. Providence and the rejection of Christ.**

This is where I want to land us. I told you that:

Pilate's self-preservation, the religious leaders' self-righteousness, and Jesus' rejection were all real life experiences, taking place in real time, while simultaneously fulfilling the decree of God.

Just as God's plan of salvation was determined before the foundation of the world, and yet was brought to pass by the messy, everyday decisions and circumstances of fallen sinners, so in your life, He is working out a plan.

And if you are in Christ, that plan is not just any plan. It is a plan for your good. There is no waste in the economy of God. Barabbas didn't simply happen to be the one there that day. God ordained those events to give you this picture:

Jesus takes the place of even the most vile, seemingly irredeemable sinners. Barabbas is a picture of you. And the picture is intentional. We can look at the way that God has put

all of this together, from the political troubles and self-interest of Pilate to the self-righteous power-mongering of the religious leaders, to the way that the laws had been structured in such a way that the Jews couldn't execute Jesus by crucifixion and He, therefore, had to be executed by a Gentile. All of these little details fulfill all of these specific prophecies, all of them giving us a picture of a righteous man being substituted for a wretched sinner. A picture of:

***2 Corinthians 5:21 -- For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.***

***1 Peter 3:18 -- For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God***

The just for the unjust. He took Barabbas' place as an illustration in the great story of God. An illustration of Jesus Christ the Righteous, taking your place and giving you His place. The innocent counted guilty, that the guilty might be counted innocent. God was working in this account. Meticulously.

And God is working in your life today, this moment, meticulously. Through your messy everyday circumstances, through your blessings, through your trials, through your successes, through your failures, through your joy, through your pain...He is in all of it. Using all of it. For your good and His glory.

As John Piper, Pastor Brandon's best friend, famously said, *"God is always doing 10,000 things in your life, and you may be aware of three of them."*

God's working for your good instead of your judgment is only possible because Jesus suffered and died – rejected and alone for you.

You get to go free because the plan was that He be condemned.

You get to be accepted because the plan was for Him to be rejected.

And that rejection was real. This wasn't some sanitized transactional event. It wasn't neat and efficient like the animal sacrifices were.

No, our Passover Lamb was dismantled bit by bit. Emotionally, mentally, psychologically, relationally, and then physically. And He did it willingly. For the joy set before Him, Hebrews 12 says, He did it for you.

*John 1:9-13 says, 9 The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. 10 He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. 11 He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. 12 But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, 13 who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.*

Though the world was made through Him, yet it did not know Him. It did not want Him. It rejected Him.

Yet, there are two categories of people in this verse. “But to all who did receive Him...” He was not a failure. His suffering was not in vain.

If you have ceased to reject Jesus, He has His prize. You are His prize. His people are His prize. His Kingdom is His reward for His obedience unto death.

The rejection of Christ was always part of the plan.

*In Luke 17:25, Jesus speaking of the end of the age, says, 25 But first he must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation.*

I get this. I can relate to this idea of the rejection of Christ on a real level. I remember when the Lord saved me. I was nineteen. God had been revealing the emptiness, the vanity of the sinful life that I was living, of the sinful human that I was. I began looking for anything that could bring me peace and contentment, to just make me feel ok, like life was worth living.

Some guys I worked with began witnessing to me and gave me a Bible. I began reading the Gospel of John, and I was enthralled with it. It was the first time I'd ever read the Bible. I couldn't get over how different it was from everything else I'd ever read, from everything else I'd ever thought. I knew it was no ordinary book. It wasn't some man-made religious conspiracy. I couldn't deny it, but I did.

I would read and go to this young adult's service with these guys, but I just wouldn't give in. I didn't want Christianity. I didn't want to be a Christian.

On the night He saved me, here's what I realized. I wasn't rejecting being a Christian. I wasn't rejecting Christianity. I wasn't even necessarily rejecting the Bible.

I was rejecting Jesus.

The person. God incarnate. The living Christ.

He had been set before my eyes, and I didn't want Him in fact, I wanted anything but Him. It was in that moment of realization that God changed my heart. I didn't just receive a set of beliefs in that moment. I received Christ. Just as John 1 says. I received Him and was given the right to become a child of God.

He was rejected on that platform 2000 years ago. And many still reject Him today. I wonder where you are in those two categories. Are you of those who reject Him, or have you received Him?

Like that crowd would have chosen anything but Jesus, we go through life chasing after anything, no matter how ridiculous, other than Jesus.

Just look at the shelves in the average bookstore. Self-help, yoga, meditation, spirituality, new age, magic rocks, astrology – we'll look to burning balls of gas for guidance before we'll call on the living Christ. Why? Because we want the stars' counsel so badly? No, but because we don't want Jesus. We say, "NOT THIS MAN."

You've heard the Gospel this morning. You've seen the Gospel illustrated in the story of Barabbas. The righteous died so that the guilty might go free. He has risen from the dead and will never ever stand under the judgment of wicked men again. He sits victorious. No longer silent as a lamb led to slaughter. But He calls to sinners to come to Him for pardon.

Don't reject Him today. Call upon Him and be saved. If you need to pray with someone this morning, we'll have people down front available for you. Whatever needs you may have, the risen Christ hears the prayers of His people.

If you need to be given the right to become one of those people, to receive Christ, we can pray with you. If you already belong to Him but need to call on Him for comfort, help, strength, or grace, we'd love to pray with you for that too.

**REVIEW:**

- ❖ What was Pilate trying to do by offering Barabbas as a substitute for Jesus?
- ❖ How do we see the Gospel in verses 39&40?

**REFLECT:**

- ❖ How do we see God's faithfulness play out in these verses?
- ❖ How does it make you feel to know how much Jesus must love you to go through what he did all alone?

**RESPOND:**

- ❖ What did Barabbas do to be set free?
- ❖ Are you trying to earn your salvation or are you trusting completely in the finished work of Christ?
- ❖ Have you accepted the free gift of salvation or are you still rejected Jesus like the crowd did?

**MEDITATE:**

- ❖ John 18:40 -- *They cried out again, "Not this man, but Barabbas!" Now Barabbas was a robber.*

**MEMORIZE:**

- ❖ 1 Peter 3:18 -- *For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God*

**PRAYER FOCUS:**

- ❖ Director of Communications - **Ally Johnson**
- ❖ Ministries - **Re:generation**
- ❖ Pray for the lost - Unreached People Group (UPG): **Chaungtha** in Myanmar (Burma)
- ❖ Population in country: 183,000
- ❖ Global population: 183,000
- ❖ Christian Adherent: 0.1%
- ❖ Evangelical: 0.07%
- ❖ Primary Religion: Buddhism
- ❖ Primary Language: Rakhine