

What is Truth?

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- [0 : 00] It's night. Elie Wiesel, the Nobel Prize-winning author, wrote a book about the Holocaust under the title Night, because evil things happen at night.
- Night, the time of peril and danger. You may know this prayer from the prayer book. Lighten our darkness, Lord, we pray, and in your great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this night.
- Night. Scott Fitzgerald, the author, wrote that the real dark night of the soul is always at 3 a.m. Night.
- When evil people plot and plan dastardly and sinister things. Because men love darkness more than light.
- Oh yes, the light shines in the darkness in John's Gospel. The light of life no less shines. But still under the cover of darkness, men flee.
- [1 : 24] And on the night before he died, evil, bad, sinister, sad things happened.
- This is a dark night indeed. A dark night for Peter. A dark night for the Jews. A dark night for Pilate.
- A dark night for Jesus. Under the cover of darkness, they took Jesus to Annas.
- This is after his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, as we saw last week. So verse 12 begins, The soldiers, their officer and the Jewish police arrested Jesus and bound him.
- First they took him to Annas, who was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest that year. Annas is clearly the power behind the Jewish throne. He had been the high priest many years before, but was deposed by the Romans in about 15 AD.
- [2 : 27] Something that the Jews wouldn't countenance, because a high priest was high priest for life. And in the intervening years, four of his sons had been high priest, and now his son-in-law Caiaphas was the high priest.
- But Annas clearly is the power behind the throne, and it's there that they go first. He's the old wise one, so called. To Jews, no doubt still regarded as the legitimate high priest.
- And we switch scene. It's still night. And we've got to hurry, because these things must happen at night. And under cover of darkness, Simon Peter and another disciple follow the bound Jesus as he's taken to Annas' house.
- And there they go, we're told in verses 15 and 16, into the courtyard of that house. And such an innocent person, and such an innocent-looking question thoroughly throws Peter.
- She asks him, you are not also one of this man's disciples, are you? It's not an interrogation. She's a slave girl.
- [3 : 40] A mere girl and a slave girl at that. It's an innocent question. She's just wondering who he is. And Peter, under cover of darkness, caught by surprise, caught unawares by such an innocent, non-threatening-looking girl, says, I am not.
- The one who's just put his sword away, trying to defend Jesus with the sword, swiping the ear of a slave. The one who'd just hours before pledged his life for Jesus.

Kamikaze Kephas cracks before a mere slave girl, and denies even knowing Jesus at all. It's not even an accusation.

Just an innocent question. We ought not be surprised at Peter's capitulation. Because it's when we think we're strong and standing firm, then we are most vulnerable to fall.

Caught by surprise, we keep our mouths shut, don't we? At school, in the workplace, in our daily lives. When somebody might innocently, suddenly, surprisingly ask us something about the Christian faith, our mouths snap shut.

[5 : 07] History is sprinkled with such as Peter. From schoolyards to courtrooms. Some incidents are perhaps of minor consequence. Others caught in silence under threat of death.

Thomas Cranmer was the Archbishop of Canterbury in the latter years of Henry VIII's reign. He was a keen Protestant reformer. Keen to see the Church of England established independently of Rome, not just institutionally, but theologically.

Getting it right theologically from the Bible. He was committed to the Gospel. He was the Archbishop of Canterbury during the reign of Henry's son, Edward VI.

A very significant figure. One who basically wrote the theology and prayer book of the Anglican Church, even that we use today to some extent. But when Edward VI died as a teenager and was succeeded by very Catholic, staunchly so Mary, daughter of Henry VIII, Archbishop Cranmer was soon locked up in prison.

He was put on trial. The threat was death by burning. He was called to renounce his Protestant faith. And he did.

[6 : 25] The one who had been so strong and clearly and well thought out Protestant, committed to the Bible's Gospel, capitulated.

And in the subsequent dark hours of his soul, no doubt at 3am, he realised the error of his ways. He renounced his capitulation.

And on March 21st, 1556, was burned at the stake. Just in recent weeks, a 16-year-old boy was executed for owning up to being a Christian.

He was the son of an Anglican minister in northern Nigeria. In those riots that we read about just a few weeks ago, they came to him, asked if he was a Christian.

He acknowledged that he was, and was killed, aged 16. Any day, every day, any night, every night, we stand on trial, like Peter.

[7 : 39] We must stand firm. Unlike Peter. It's night and we switch scene again, back to the courtroom.

And under cover of darkness, there's a kangaroo court in operation. Kangaroos, of course, are non-kosher. This is a non-kosher court. It's illegal. It's before Annas, not the legitimate high priest.

It's not an official court with witnesses there. And illegally, they question Jesus about what he's been teaching and who his disciples are. That's what Annas asks him in verse 19.

It's illegal because in a Jewish court of Jesus' day, the defendant would not be questioned, and the first questions would be offered to the witnesses for the defendant.

And that's behind, I think, Jesus' response. He says in verse 20 onwards, I've spoken openly to the world. I've always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews come together.

[8 : 39] I have said nothing in secret. Why do you ask me? Ask those who heard what I said to them. They know what I said. Unlike Peter, Jesus did not flinch.

He didn't back down. He didn't renounce his faith or his claims. He stood by his teaching. And he directed Annas and no doubt the other Jewish authorities there to the many, many, many witnesses who would have heard him teach over the last three years.

He directs Annas to proper court procedure. Ask the witnesses. Not me. The Jewish authorities, unlike Jesus, are scheming secret things at night.

But Jesus, by contrast, was public and open in what he said. The contrast here is stark. Under cover of darkness, the lies abound, the illegalities multiply.

Jesus taught openly, in public. No secrets to what he said. A Jewish policeman resorts to physical violence.

[10 : 01] He slaps Jesus, something that would be firm, probably the open hand, across the face. The sort of thing that Sybil Fawltly does to Basil Fawltly in Fawltly Towers several times.

It would hurt. But it's under cover of darkness, so it's okay, because it's another illegal feature. You would never do that in official court. This Jewish policeman has broken protocol.

He slaps Jesus and says, is that how you answer the high priest? As though somehow the high priest is the one worthiest of the greatest respect. What irony, sadly.

He slaps the Son of God, whom deserves the greater respect. Jesus' challenge to this man who slapped him is in verse 23, if I have spoken wrongly, testify to the wrong.

But if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me? And the question goes unanswered. Jesus, I think, is speaking at two levels.

[11 : 09] If my teaching in public for the last three years has been right, then why strike me? If it's wrong, show me. But also his words just then to Annas. If I'm wrong about court procedure, then tell me.

But if I'm right, that you should talk to the witnesses, not to me, then why do you strike me? But Jesus' question is ignored.

Annas sends him bound to Caiaphas, the high priest. It's night. We switch scene again. Still in the shadow of darkness, Peter and others are around this coal fire.

Peter, in this switching from scene to scene, clearly stands in a contrast to Jesus. the one who unflinchingly stands by the truth, though his life is threatened.

And Peter, who so readily and easily capitulates, though his life is not really in danger. In quick succession, he denies Jesus twice more.

[12 : 22] He was standing, warming himself. It would be cold at this time of year, at night in Jerusalem, 2,500 feet above sea level. You're not also one of his disciples, are you? Again, it's not an accusatory sort of question.

It's a general curiosity type question, wondering, who is he? I am not, he said.

Compare that to the one who consistently says, I am. And one of the slaves of the high priest, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, asked, did I not see you in the garden with him?

Of course it's dark, it's a bit hard to see, they're not sure. Maybe that question has got just a tinge more of accusation and wonder about this man who's just cut off the ear of his relative.

And again, Peter denies it. There's irony in that third question because he's the one who cut off the ear and now he denies it all.

[13 : 31] He's gone from being brave, or at least full of bravado, to being a coward. It's under cover of darkness, but that does not cover over our denial before God.

For God knows the dark places of our souls. God knows the dark desires of our hearts. God knows the dark thoughts of our minds.

Darkness is no darkness to God. His light shines into its deepest recesses. And for Peter, his time is coming three days hence, when the light of God will shine into that dark mind and soul and heart, and mercifully for him, forgive and restore.

But meanwhile, perhaps in the silence of the darkness, the cock crows. Its somber notes.

In the midst of all this darkness, lies, illegality and denial. A stupid animal crows, beckoning the dawn of light, the day of glory.

[14 : 52] But it's still night, and we switch scene yet again. This time we go to Herod's palace near Jaffa Gate in Jerusalem today. Jesus is taken there to the Roman governor, the intervening courtroom scene in the Sanhedrin of Caiaphas is glossed over in John.

We read some details about it in the other Gospels. John's not concerned with that. He goes straight to the Roman governor. But it's still night. We're told that it's in early morning in verse 28, and that means that it's before 6am, probably in the watch between 3am and 6am.

It's dark. But they're in a hurry. These events must be concluded in dark. There is no rest for the wicked, literally here. And under cover of darkness, these sinister things keep happening.

Without the New Testament in the Bible, the world would know nothing of Pontius Pilate. He would be a completely unknown figure of history, apart from one recent inscription found in 1962 in Caesarea on the sea in Israel.

But no doubt, if we didn't have the Gospels, the archaeologists who would have found it would not have known anything about him, and it would have been quite inconsequential. But Pilate is known the world around because he just happened to be the governor in office at the time of the trial and death of Jesus Christ.

[16 : 11] He was an inconsequential man, in effect. A little governor sent to this remote province that was always brewing some problems, but he wasn't a great man by any stretch of the imagination.

He was arrogant. He was cruel. He was vindictive, a petty prince. That's all. They took Jesus from Caiaphas to Pilate's headquarters.

It was early in the morning, but still dark, that is. They themselves did not enter the headquarters so as to avoid ritual defilement and to be able to eat the Passover.

Those words are pregnant with irony. How blind sin is. How dark their world was. This is Hyacinth bouquet religion.

They are keeping up appearances. They cannot get ritually defiled here at the beginning of the feast of Passover and the days of the festival that lie ahead. It would be totally improper should they somehow be ritually defiled that would then prevent them from partaking in further festivities later that day.

[17 : 25] But the sad, sad irony is that they've missed who the real Passover lamb is. They're on about the externals and the appearances.

But they're about to put the real Passover lamb to death on a cross. Oh, for them, keeping up appearances is much more important than anything like executing or murdering an innocent man.

Do away with him. That's all right. That won't ritually defile us. But we're just not going to step over the threshold of Pilate's palace. Sin blinds them to values.

It distorts their perspective. And in cover of darkness, of course, when it's so hard to see, we cannot get things into perspective. Sin's like that generally.

Sin means that we become concerned with a veneer of respectability, the keeping up of appearances, but we forget the essentials, the heart of what is going on. Oh, it's all right to murder the Son of God so long as we keep ritually pure.

[18 : 38] Yes, we'll tithe our herbs, our little things, our inconsequential things of our life, but we're not going to tithe our hearts and our minds and our souls and all our money. Oh, and we're not going to work on the Sabbath day.

We'll walk such and such a distance, but we won't put our foot beyond the one or two kilometre mark. And we're not going to heal a man on the Sabbath because we don't want to break the Sabbath law. It is so easy to be duped into such perversion of values when our minds are contorted with sin.

And Christians are vulnerable to the same mistakes as these Jews. We become gripped by trivia but ignorant of the essentials, blind to them.

So we parade our piety, our religiosity. We keep up a veneer of Christian appearance and respectability, but we keep the light switched off in our own hearts.

We clean up our clothes, our outside, but we leave the mess of our minds intact. We polish up our personas so people will think highly of us, but our souls remain sullied in sin.

[20 : 05] Be slow to condemn these Jewish authorities. For apart from the grace of God, which brings us from being blind to being able to see, we are they.

Through grace alone, our sin is dealt with. The one comic element in this whole sad saga is that because of the Jews' refusal to cross the threshold of the palace, Pilate, the governor, the supreme person of Judea and Samaria at this time, has to walk backwards and forwards, into Jesus to talk with him, out to the threshold to talk to the Jews, back he goes, back he goes, one way and the other, at least three times in the rest of this chapter and into chapter 19.

That's not very dignified for a Roman governor. He shows how weak and impotent he is, that he's really at the beck and call of these Jews and this man who's been brought bound to him.

So Pilate goes out to the crowd, we're told in verse 29. What accusation do you bring against this man? And their answer shows their impertinence and impatience.

If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you. That is, come on, look, it's dark, it's coming to be dawn, we want to get this over and done with, sign the thing that says his death warrant.

[21 : 37] Come on, let's get it over with. Believe us, trust us, he's guilty, he deserves to die. That's in effect what they're saying to him. Come on, Pilate, play the game. We haven't got time for a Roman court.

Well, Pilate says to them, take him yourselves and judge him. Pilate, we know from history, had an absolute contempt for Jewish people and here is that being reflected here.

He really doesn't have much time for them. In many ways, the story of the trial that follows shows him with a little bit of sympathy for Jesus but he's absolutely gutless to do anything about it.

The Jews are expecting him to acquiesce quickly but he refuses and he's also mocking them when he says, well, take him away yourselves and judge him because he knows they want him dead and he knows they can't put him to death because once the Romans governed Judea from 63 BC, they reserved the right to themselves of putting anybody to death for capital punishment.

Now, the tricky thing is that the Jews want him executed because he's guilty of blasphemy and that was a capital of punishment offence in the Old Testament. The trouble is the Romans would never want to put anyone to death for that for blasphemy for a Jew is not illegal for a Roman.

[22 : 56] So the Jews have to concoct another story that will convince Pilate and the Roman authorities that Jesus should be put to death. Treason is their answer. Treason was a capital offence in Roman Empire.

Why is Jesus treasonable? He claims to be a king. But Pilate's reply mocks them. He knows they can't put him to death. And so the Jews reply and hereby declare their heart.

We are not permitted to put anyone to death. They're not interested in justice. They want blood. And that's what they're buying for outside the doors of the palace.

But in the midst of the darkness of this night a glimmer of a morning star shines. It's in brackets in our version in verse 32.

This was to fulfill what Jesus had said when he indicated the kind of death he was to die. That is saying that here in the darkness of Pilate and the Jews their illegalities, their gutlessness, their involvement with lies rather than truth, God's hand is fulfilling God's purposes.

[24 : 14] Hard to see but it's true. the sovereignty of God working about what he wants and wills. Jesus had said several times in John's gospel that he would be lifted up in death.

That is that he would be crucified not stoned or any other form of execution but like the snake in the wilderness he said in John 3 he would be lifted up to draw all men to himself.

The same in chapter 8 and in chapter 12 as well. Here you see a glimmer of light that over and above these evil machinations the sovereign hand of God is in control.

It's still night and now the scene switches yet again from the threshold where Pilate addresses the Jews back inside his palace with the bound Jesus Christ.

Pilate is incredulous here. He says to Jesus in verse 33 are you the king of the Jews?

[25 : 23] That's the thrust of his question. He can't believe that this bound man in front of him is the king of the Jews. Now you see we know royalty when we see it.

You only have to look at the paparazzi where they are there is royalty. You could see it just a few weeks ago in Australia couldn't you? And if you can't see the paparazzi then you might see the crown.

There's the royalty there's a crown there. And if you can't see a crown or paparazzi we can identify royalty by the accent can't we? My husband and I are royalty over there.

And if you can't hear the accent then we always know it because there's a hand with a long white glove waving. We can tell royalty can't we? But Jesus is bound before Pilate without a crown or a long white glove or a posh English accent for that matter.

He doesn't look anything like a king even a bound king. Jesus' reply to Pilate doesn't answer his question but does seek to clarify what he's on about.

[26 : 30] Jesus says to him in verse 34 do you ask this on your own or did others tell you about me? Now in a sense Jesus is trying to clarify what sort of king do you think I might be?

What sort of king are you asking that I am? And Pilate's response is rather strong. I am not a Jew am I?

Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me that is to be associated with Jews is beyond the pale for him. He has nothing to do with them.

And then he says what have you done? He knows that Jesus must have done something very serious to be bound before him before light with the Jewish authorities on the day of Passover no less.

He must have done something very bad for this to happen. What have you done? He can hardly bear to imagine what it might be.

[27 : 40] And Jesus' answer ignoring that question in effect says in verse 36 my kingdom is not from this world.

If my kingdom were from this world though it's not that's the way the word if reads in the ancient Greek my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews.

But as it is the real case my kingdom is not from here. Jesus has laid his cards on the table. His kingdom is not the politico military sort of kingdom of the Roman Empire.

It is not a political threat to Rome. What kind of king? I'm not the sort of king you would expect me to be he's saying. Pilate of course remains confused because darkness does that to people.

So you are a king. Let's get this straight. You are claiming to be a king. And Jesus now positively defines his kingdom. You say that I am a king.

[28 : 47] That's a muted way of saying yes I am a king. He's not just saying well you've said it not me. it is actually beginning to say yes you are right in saying that I'm a king.

And then he goes on to say for this I was born and for this I came into the world to testify to the truth. Night is just giving way to day at this point and now truth takes its stand the light in the midst of the lies.

truth the truth about God the truth about Jesus Christ the truth about God's purposes the truth about salvation it is that truth that Jesus has come to testify about he's not talking about mathematical or scientific truth or historical truth he's talking about God he's saying I have come to bear witness to the truth about God and I am that truth as he said elsewhere in this gospel he's not talking about theories he's not talking about religions he's not talking about philosophies or ideologies he's talking about personal relationships and revelation of God I've come to testify to the truth I am the truth I reveal God is what he's saying in effect here but his words conclude with perhaps a gentle invitation everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice

Pilate are you listening to my voice do you hear my truth or Pilate are you too blind to see me in the darkness to see the truth and the tables are turned Jesus statement that everyone who belongs to the truth hears my voice has all of a sudden put Pilate on trial is he one who hears the truth that is Jesus voice or not but even more than that it puts the Jews on trial and it puts the readers of this gospel us on trial everyone who belongs to the truth hears my voice Pilate asked him what is truth and as the poet said what is truth said jesting

Pilate yet would not wait for an answer this is a black night indeed a dark night indeed truth is suppressed truth is perverted truth is ignored and truth is denied but a new day is dawning as Jesus speaks these words a good day a good Friday a day of glory and light Jesus words call us to the kingdom of truth everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice Jesus words call us to his kingdom and to submit to him as king you see being a Christian is about obeying the truth it is about submitting to the truth it is about submitting to the king hear his voice hear his voice

[32 : 50] Thank you.