

I Am the King

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Introduction.

- A. Even in the United States of America, the oldest of all of the democracies of today, the word "King" still carries a lot of oomph. Every year, high schools all across the country crown a Homecoming King. Stores from Burger King to Mattress King use the word to promote themselves. Even a Mafia boss is called a kingpin.
- B. Imagine, then, how important the word is in countries that still have a monarch. Although the royal family of Great Britain is as limited in scope as can be imagined, everything from the language to the ships of the navy is still described as a royal possession. Back in the bad old days, before the English system of elected government arose, that was the way that the country actually thought of itself, as belonging to a king. If you claimed to be the king and the real king of England found out, he would have you executed for it.
- C. It's against this backdrop that we need to understand the final "I am" of the book of John, an "I am" in which Jesus makes precisely this fatal claim. Unlike His other self-defining statements, the story of this one is laced with irony. His claim is true, yet He is treated in a completely non-royal fashion because of it. The people that has supposedly been waiting for Him for a thousand years are the ones who accuse Him of treason. Properly understood, His claim would prove His innocence, so His accusers twist and misinterpret it to show His guilt. The supposedly impartial judge who knows enough to save Him condemns Him instead, yet inscribes His true title at the top of the cross. It is at once one of the saddest and most complex stories ever told, yet John tells it from the perspective of four small words, words that Jesus uses to say, "I am the King."

I. His Word and His Crown.

- A. This story begins with the proclamation that Jesus makes, with **THE WORD OF THE KING**. Here's how it comes about: The chief priests and elders of the Jews have arrested Jesus. Just like they've always known they would, they find Him guilty of blasphemy, helped in this by the Lord's contemptuous refusal to speak a word in His own defense. They've always wanted to kill Jesus; now they have a pretext for killing Him legally.
- B. But there's a problem. The Jewish leaders are allowed to beat criminals, they're allowed to imprison criminals, but they aren't allowed to kill criminals without the permission of their Roman overlords. The Romans despise the Jews. They think the Jewish religion is ridiculous. That means that if the chief priests show up before Pilate saying, "Kill Jesus! He's a blasphemer!", Pilate is going to laugh them out of court. What the Jews have to do, then, is find ANOTHER pretext for killing Jesus. They find this second pretext in the claims that Jesus made to be the Christ, the Son of David, and so on. In Roman law, claiming to be king is treason, and is definitely a killing offense. So what the Jews do is tell Pilate that Jesus has made Himself out to be king.
- C. We see the first results of these Jewish machinations in John 18:33-38. Pilate hasn't pulled this line of questioning out of thin air. He's asking what the Jews have told him to ask. Jesus knows exactly what's going on; that's why He asks Pilate who came up with all this. Pilate, on the other hand, DOESN'T know what's going on. He's not a dumb guy, though; he knows that when the leaders of some subject nation show up with a man, saying "He's our king; kill him for us, would you?" that there's something fishy. So He asks Jesus, straight out, what He's done, and Jesus tells him, straight out, "Nothing that you care about," which was completely true. The Romans were practical people. They didn't care about kings of invisible spiritual realms; they were only concerned with kings who would try and stir up rebellion against them, and Jesus points out that, obviously, He isn't the problem kind of king. From this point on, Pilate believes Him.
- D. Pilate, though, makes a fatal error here. He asks the follow-up question about whether Jesus is a king, and Jesus naturally says yes. This is the "good confession" Paul mentions in 1 Timothy 6:13. It is simultaneously Jesus' true assertion of His authority and His death sentence, and Jesus knows it. He describes Himself and the way His kingdom is based on truth, and Pilate revealingly asks, "What is truth?" Pilate doesn't believe in anything. He's weak, cynical, corrupt, and guided by expediency, and that's why Jesus is going to die.
- E. That brings us to the next episode of this most ironic story, the description of **THE CROWN OF THE KING**. In between, here's what happens. Pilate comes out and announces to the chief priests that he finds no guilt in Jesus. He must have known as soon as the words left his lips that this was not going to be a popular opinion. The Jewish leaders would not have cared if Pilate had come out and announced that Jesus was the Son of God. They would still have wanted Jesus dead. Their hatred of Him had nothing to do with His guilt.
- F. Pilate next tries to make it hard for them to continue to prosecute the case. He tells them, "OK; I'm going to release one of two people from prison. One of them is Barabbas, a highway robber. The other is Jesus, your King. Pick one." Pilate thinks to himself that surely the Jews would rather have the harmless Jesus than the rebel and murderer, but he misjudges the Jews. The Jews aren't being rational here. They want Jesus dead, and if the price for that is Barabbas running around robbing and killing them, so be it. However, the chief

priests are still paying attention here. They see that Pilate has admitted to them that he knows Jesus claims to be the king of the Jews, and they're going to use that fatal admission to have him condemn Jesus.

- G. We see Pilate's next futile scheme to save Jesus in John 19:1-6. This is where the ironies really start piling up. Jesus is the King. He fully deserves all the poor honor a Roman governor could give Him. Instead, what happens is that Pilate has the real King mocked by making Him out to be a pretend king. He gives Jesus a purple robe, a crown of thorns, and a reed for a scepter, and parades Him in front of an entire Roman cohort, 600 men. It's easy to shrug off what Jesus is going through here, but let's all pause a moment to put ourselves in that position. He has just been scourged, a punishment as mentally humiliating as physically painful. Now He has literally hundreds of soldiers, who are not known for being the kindest people in the world, jeering at Him and calling out the cruelest, most hateful things they can think of. It's the stage-fright nightmare that so many people have, come hideously to life. The King is mocked for claiming to be king.

II. His People and His Throne.

- A. As ironic as this is, the story becomes even more bitterly ironic when **THE PEOPLE OF THE KING** take center stage. As Pilate should have expected, the chief priests aren't satisfied with Jesus being humiliated. They want Him dead. More specifically, they want Him crucified, and cry out to this effect when the scorned King is paraded before them. Pilate takes Jesus back inside, has another little conference with Him, but doesn't get anything especially helpful out of it. Here is where the action picks up in John 19:12-16.
- B. It starts out with Pilate once again attesting to Jesus' innocence and seeking to have Him released. For those of you who are keeping score at home, this is the fourth time Pilate does this during the sham trial of Jesus. It doesn't work this time either. Clearly, what's uppermost in Pilate's mind is not the question of the Lord's guilt or innocence, but of what he can get away with politically. He's about to learn that that's not very much.
- C. Once again, we see how cleverly the Jews are applying their simple strategy. We need to remember, folks: despite the fact that Jesus made them look ridiculous over and over again, these are not dumb people we're dealing with here. These Jewish leaders are very politically astute. They know they have an argument that Pilate cannot answer, and they make it in John 19:12. Basically, they say that anyone who claims to be a king inside the boundaries of the Roman Empire is an enemy of the Emperor and must be killed.
- D. But that's not the killer point. The killer point is what they say next. They tell Pilate that anyone who lets such a king live is also an enemy of the Emperor. Make no mistake about it; this is a threat. The Jews know that they can't touch Pilate directly. He has the Roman army behind him. What they can do, though, if Pilate acquits Jesus, is send a letter to the Emperor telling him all about it. The Roman Emperor at this time is a man named Tiberius. Tiberius is old, corrupt, and absolutely out of his mind. He's so paranoid that he sees conspiracies behind every bush, and anyone who looks even slightly treasonous is dead meat. What would such a man do to Pilate if the chief priests tell him about this King of the Jews? Pilate knows exactly what. He knows what the truth is, but he isn't willing to die for it, and that's why he orders the death of Jesus. From the moment when he gives Jesus the title of King in John 19:14, the Jews know they have won.
- E. There's one last ironic point in this portion of the text. It shows up in John 19:15. In this one verse, the leaders of the Jewish nation reject the King who has been promised for a thousand years, and they cry out their loyalty and allegiance to crazy old Tiberius Caesar. This is all the more ironic because about 30 years from the trial of Jesus, the Jews will rebel against Rome. So much for having no king but Caesar. Worse still, the men they will follow into battle have nothing like the messianic credentials of Jesus. They're not unconvinced here. They know the truth, but they'd just rather have Jesus dead than as their rightful King.
- F. This brings us, then to **THE THRONE OF THE KING**. We see what the Jews think is the end of the story in John 19:17-22, 30. Just as Jesus has been promising throughout His ministry, He is lifted up. He is exalted, just as a prophecy in Isaiah 52 says the Christ would be. However, this lifting up does not glorify Him in the eyes of men. It kills Him because He is being exalted on a cross. It's the final ironic honor of the King.
- G. However, even as this is taking place, there's one last irony in the background. The chief priests have beaten Pilate, but Pilate shows what a sore loser he is by what he puts at the top of the cross. The Jewish leaders have been saying Jesus is a king? Fine! Pilate is going to tell it like it is. He writes an inscription on the cross that proclaims the genuine royalty of Jesus. The Jews don't like this. Now that Jesus is safely on the cross and they don't have to pretend like He's this big threat to Rome anymore, they want to demote Him from King to so-called king. Pilate's not having any of it. He's going to take his revenge any way he can. Both Pilate and the Jewish leaders share a dirty little secret. They all know that Jesus' claims are legitimate, and also that He should not have been killed. The Jews strong-armed Pilate into killing Him anyway, but he's going to rub their noses in the fact that they have murdered their King.

Conclusion: His Reward. This concludes John's account of the trial and crucifixion of Jesus. It is extraordinarily vivid and real, but this should not surprise us. After all, John was there. His account makes clear that he, alone of all of the disciples of Jesus, was there observing all of these things, and he wrote down what he saw. However, his account of the ironic kingship of Jesus is not complete without his description of **THE REWARD OF THE KING** in Revelation 5. If this is a King you want to serve, come to Him today.