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# What Is Truth?

JOHN SIBURT

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It is Wednesday morning at Abilene Christian University's 2006 Lectureship and our journey through John's Gospel is nearing an end. So far it has been a great trip, thanks in part to the helpful tour guides who have led us through this world as imagined by John. I am grateful for the work of the previous theme speakers and for the opportunity to join them in sharing a word from John's Gospel with you this morning. Before we journey any further together, may I suggest that we send word back home and let our loved ones know that we will be home soon but that our journey is not quite complete. Let them know that we have enough clean underwear, and that our travels into John's world have not kept us from finding a good barbeque joint here and there. Tell them of some of the amazing signs of life and light that Jesus has done in our presence, of all the ways that we have seen the glory of the Word made flesh and dwelling among us. And make sure they know that "the hour" that Jesus has so often told us about is finally here. Let them know that "the hour has come."

Jesus knows it has come. Finally, the defining moment of his entire ministry, of his entire life, is here. And so, in the Gospel of John, he prays, "Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I will make you known." With those words Jesus stands up and leads his disciples to a garden in the Kidron Valley. The disciples have walked this road with Jesus before. What they do not know is what will happen there tonight. Jesus knows. As he walks, he thinks about what he is about to do. And he thinks about why he will do it. He remembers how things used to be in the beginning when God created the world. He remembers when the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep. God spoke light into the world. And it was good. God spoke all sorts of life into existence. And it was even better. God spoke love into existence, making humanity in his own image. And it was the best. Jesus remembers how good it was in the beginning. He was there and, in fact, all of these good things—light, life, and love—were created through him. Along the road to the garden, as the sun slowly slides behind the mountains, and the rocks crunch under his feet, Jesus remembers how good it was back then.

It *was* good. It is not now. No, now darkness covers the face of the earth again. And not only has light given way to darkness, life has given way to death. Love to hatred. As darkness falls over the Kidron valley, Jesus sadly remembers how long it has been since God's light really lit up the world. There have been momentary illuminations: the covenant with Abraham, the deliverance from Egypt with Moses and the giving of the law, and the building of the temple. But each time, the darkness eventually snuffed out the light.

Each time the goodness of God's reign was interrupted by an opposition force. The opposition is now in power, and the effects of his rule on the world are painfully evident. The ruler of this world has managed to construct an economy whereby he can enslave the rich with their wealth and the poor with their poverty. The ruler of this world has managed to convince empires that the best defense is a good offense. He has sold war as the only path to peace. Amazingly, the ruler of this world has found a way to enlist religion as a partner in his destructive schemes. He has convinced the religious that God is now more concerned with



them living their best life now than in loving God and their neighbors. He has pre-occupied the religious with image-driven displays of personal piety and impressive productions of corporate ritual, while their communities crumble around them. He has brokered peace deals between the church and the empire with such mastery that now the church cannot stand up against his regime without jeopardizing its very existence. Darkness covers the face of the earth and it is not good.

But here and now in this very hour the light will shine again. Jesus has come to drive out the darkness and to draw all people to himself.

Jesus prepares to embrace the moment right there in the garden. Soon, he and the disciples see light coming from over the hill. The light gradually gets brighter and brighter. It is accompanied by the sounds of marching feet and clanging armor. Judas leads the marching processional of soldiers and police with their torches and swords into the garden and Jesus steps forward to meet them: "Whom are you looking for?" Jesus says. The soldiers reply, "Jesus of Nazareth." Jesus says, "I AM." And just like that Judas, the temple police, and hundreds of soldiers bow in submission. The forces of darkness have pooled their resources to bring down the light of the world and he knocks them to their knees with two words: "I AM."

Peter is standing only a few feet away from the "I AM," his heart and head racing: "This is it, he thinks. This is the hour. This explains how Jesus has been acting lately. He said the woman pouring oil on him was preparing him for burial. He said he would not be here much longer. He said the hour has come." Peter has it figured out. He feels the tension between Jesus and the authorities. He knows a fight has been brewing. And as Jesus stands tall yet again and says "Whom are you looking for?" and "I told you that I am he," Peter reaches down and starts tapping his fingers on his sword. And as the first soldier makes his move towards Jesus, Peter's fingers spring into action, grabbing hold of his sword and propelling it towards the head of the nearest enemy. Peter knows they are outnumbered and that he may lose his life, but this is the battle he has been waiting for. He is ready to die with the Messiah.

But before Peter kills the man, Jesus grabs him and pulls him back and orders him to stand down. Jesus reaches out his hands to receive the cuffs and allows his captors to escort him to the high priest's headquarters. Peter is in disbelief: "What just happened? Did I really just see that? He didn't even put up a fight. Did he lose his nerve? Is he not who I thought he was? I stuck with him because I knew this hour would come. I knew he would deliver us. I thought I was sure about Jesus but now I am not." Later, at the court of the high priest, Peter is asked, "Aren't you one of his followers?" He replies, "I am not." "Aren't you one of his disciples?" "I am not." "Weren't you with him in the garden? Didn't you cut that guy's ear off? Yes, that is his blood on your sword." "I am not."

And a rooster crows.

Jesus hears it from inside. "Peter, Peter. Such a big heart. So tired of living in darkness. So clueless about the kingdom to come. So willing to die for me. Can't bear the thought of me dying for him. He'll grieve for awhile. Tomorrow morning when the rooster crows, he will relive the shame of this betrayal. He will question everything he ever believed, but when I am lifted up, Peter will find new life. For the first time ever, he will know what it means to be truly loved, truly served, truly forgiven. I will transform the rooster's crow from a painful reminder into the sweet sound of amazing grace. Peter will learn love and will live love."

And speaking of living God's love, Jesus remembers a time when the Pharisees did live it. As he stands before Annas and then Caiaphas, father and son, joined together in opposition against him, he wonders when they unlearned love. How did they manage to read God's law in such a way that the poor, sick, and outcast were to be avoided by God's people instead of redeemed by them? When did religion become sport for the competitively self-absorbed? At what point did they convince themselves that the glory showered upon them by other people was more essential than sharing in the glory of God? When did church become such big business? And why were they so enamored with and intimidated by the Romans? Haven't they



ever read Exodus? Don't they know how easily empires fall? Here they are preparing for Passover, do they not remember what Passover is for?

Jesus stands there in front of the high priest and the other Jewish religious leaders and absorbs their hateful glares. They hate him for threatening their power, for jeopardizing their traditions, for claiming to be who he truly was. But Jesus will not back down. He stands by everything he ever said and everything he ever did. He has come to his own, and his own do not accept him. Instead they put him through a joke of a trial and then send him before Pilate the Roman governor in hopes that he will do their dirty work for them. After all, they have a Passover feast to attend. Jesus stares into their eyes and sees nothing but darkness; perhaps, just maybe when he is lifted up, light will shine through those eyes again. But for now, they send Jesus to Pilate.

When Pilate signed up for a government career, the brochure had pictures of beaches on the upper Mediterranean coast. How did he end up in the Middle East babysitting a bunch of rowdy Jewish children constantly engaging one another in sibling rivalry? How did he get stuck policing the Jews with their petty intramural squabbles? Today will be no exception. The Jews are bringing another troublemaker to him. Pilate asks, "What accusation do you bring against this man?" And the Jewish authorities say, "If he were not a criminal we would not have brought him." In other words, "We don't have a reason and don't need a reason, we just want this guy dead and you are the one with the clout to do it." Pilate goes back inside to speak with Jesus for the first time. He says to Jesus, "Are you the king of the Jews?" Jesus responds, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?"

*Pilate:* I am not a Jew am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?

*Jesus:* My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.

*Pilate:* So are you a king?

*Jesus:* You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.

*Pilate:* What is truth?

"What is truth?" Now, isn't that the question? That's the question worth asking. Pilate thinks to himself, "The only truth on my mind is what to do with you, Jesus. Are you really a king? How much of a threat are you to the empire? Are you some kind of pawn that the Jewish leaders are using to strengthen their hand, or can you be my pawn in stirring up conflict among them?" Pilate walks back outside and tells the crowd "I find no case against him. But you have a custom that I release someone for you at Passover. Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?" And the Jews say, "Not this man, but Barabbas!"

Pilate decides that the truth is that Jesus is no threat. He will just have some fun at this man's expense, mock the supposed king, and then let him go. He has his soldiers flog Jesus, place a crown of thorns on his head, dress him in royal purple and take turns paying homage to the "King of the Jews" by slapping him in the face. He brings Jesus back outside with every intention of letting him go, and tells the Jews that he finds nothing wrong with Jesus. But the chief priests refuse to let Pilate off the hook. They engage him in a strategic battle over the fate of Jesus. Pilate refuses to do their dirty work and they refuse to do it for themselves. The Pharisees stir up the crowd, "Crucify him! Crucify him!"

This trial is no longer merely about the fate of one man, it has become yet another international incident containing significant political and religious implications for those involved. Sensing that things are getting out of hand, Pilate goes back inside with Jesus:

*Pilate:* Where are you from?

*Jesus:* (Silent)

*Pilate:* Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?

*Jesus:* You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin.

Having received little help from his prisoner, Pilate goes back outside to continue this political chess match with the priests. The Jewish priests make the first move by trying to hem in Pilate, making the situation a test of his patriotism: "If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor. Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against the emperor." But Pilate did not achieve his position without learning some political tricks of his own. If the Jews want to make this a matter of imperial loyalty, so be it. He makes his next move:

Pilate: Here is your king!

Jews: Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!

Pilate: Shall I crucify your king?

Jews: We have no king but the emperor.

And so the deal has been struck. Pilate cajoles the Jews into pledging their loyalty to the empire and in exchange the Jews are rid of Jesus. You know how politics work; you have to give a little to get a little. Yet another deal has been brokered between empire and religion. The result is that Jesus is handed over to be crucified.

By this time the trial has drawn a crowd. The fate of Jesus is big news. All the major networks are covering it. Fox News is trying to get the inside story from Peter, but he continues to deny having knowledge of any of it. Chris Matthews is doing a face to face with Pilate: "Pilate, what happened here. Give us the true story." Pilate says, "Well the truth is that the empire will do whatever is necessary to avoid the sectarian violence that continues to plague this region. I am doing what I have to do to keep the peace." Anderson Cooper is embedded with the Jewish leaders. He asks them, "What is going on here. What is the true story?" Annas replies, "The truth is that this man is a change agent who threatens the integrity of God's church. We would rather sacrifice one man's life than lose the identity markers of an entire movement." Nancy Grace is even here. She wants the exclusive with the man himself. She cannot wait to ask Jesus, "Are you really the King of the Jews, or merely the leader of some kind of cult?"

But Jesus is not granting any interview today. He is letting his actions speak for him. It is quite a spectacle, this trial. Get ready, because the reporters are going to want to talk to an eyewitness. They are going to want to know the truth. As those who have walked beside Jesus today, from the garden until now, we are ready to give an eyewitness account.

What is the true story here? Is it as reported on the news that Jesus will be executed? Is it that he has been humiliated? Is the truth that Jesus is going to be killed?

What is truth? The truth is that while all the characters around us have mere bit parts in this unfolding drama, Jesus remains both the lead actor and director.

What is truth? The truth is that Jesus is not being executed, he is being enthroned. The truth is that Pilate has Jesus labeled as the "King of the Jews" because that's who he really is. The truth is that the shouts of "King of the Jews" do not humiliate Jesus, they glorify him. The truth is that he is not being put away by his opponents, he is being returned to the presence of God.

What is truth? The truth is that the good shepherd is laying down his life for his friends. His life is not being taken from him; he is freely giving it away. The truth is that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, and this Son takes up his own cross and carries it to Golgotha, and there he is crucified. The truth is that every single thing he does reveals his glory, from the soldiers dividing up his clothes and casting lots



for his tunic to the "King of the Jews" sign hanging above him in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek. From the new community he forms at the foot of the cross to the words he utters while hanging there, everything Jesus does in the laying down of his life is in order to glorify God. And once he lives out the entire script, the drama comes to an end with three simple words: "It is finished."

What is truth? The truth is that when the soldiers come by to break the legs of the crucified, they find on this Passover Sabbath that the Lamb of God is already slain. He is not holding on for dear life, he has freely given his life in a display of God's love.

What is truth? The truth is that when the soldiers pierce the side of Jesus to see if he is dead, blood and water pour out. Blood and water flow from the side of the Word made flesh. As the blood and water fall to the ground and begin to seep into the earth, it strikes us that these are not signs of death. The truth is that they are the beginnings of new life. We look at the DNA in the blood and discover that it traces back to the beginning of time. It is made up of all the components of God's good creation: light, life, and love. As it soaks into the earth we can see a new creation being born. The darkness is no longer covering the earth. The light is shining once again. A new creation has taken life from the blood of the Lamb. The opposition force has been eliminated and God reigns over creation yet again. A world once set off course by a piece of fruit now finds itself nourished by living water and the bread of life.

We stand here basking in the light of God's love, a love that darkness has not, cannot, and will not overcome. Joining us in the light are two familiar faces stepping forward from out of the shadows: Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus. Up until now they have followed Jesus in secret. Up until now they have lived in darkness. Up until now they did not fully see. But now, they step out into the light to give Jesus his proper burial and to honor the One that God gave the world because he loved the world so much. Joseph and Nicodemus step out of the shadows to give glory to the One who is high and lifted up. John hopes that we will too. That as our eyes adjust to the light, as the stench of death fades away, we too will step out of the shadows to give glory to this one high and lifted up.

It is Wednesday morning at ACU Lectureship, and today before our very eyes the hour has come. Jesus has been lifted up; the good shepherd has laid down his life. He has laid it down for Peter, for the Jews, for Pilate, for his beloved disciples, for you, for me, for the entire world. And it is good. And that is truth.

It is a truth you will not see tonight on the evening news. A truth not on display in empires and economies. A truth not found in Sunday's paper, even in the religion section. But it is found in John's Gospel. And we have journeyed there together, so that we may return home, and tell others what we have seen. We have seen his glory, the glory of God's Son, full of grace and truth.

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