

THE KING OF KINGS: A STUDY OF MATTHEW

The King's Commission: A Study of Matthew 21–28

STUDY SEVENTEEN

The Strangest of Foursomes

Matthew 27:11–26

On this one day in history, Jesus (the innocent captive), Pilate (the vacillating judge), Barabbas (the notorious criminal), and Mrs. Pilate (the troubled wife) came together, never to be drawn together again.

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

FOR many months, Jesus had been parading the transgressions of the religious leaders before the eyes of the nation. He had unmasked their false piety (Matthew 6:1–6), rebuked them for making legal loopholes to avoid obeying God's law (15:3–6), and criticized their worship as "a farce" (15:9). He rained down judgments on them, saying that they were full of greed, self-indulgence, and impurity (23:25–28).

Instead of repenting, the religious leaders determined to extinguish the light that exposed them. They tried tricking Jesus into incriminating Himself, accusing Him of lawbreaking, and even doing miracles by the power of Satan. None of their ploys worked.

The final straw came during Passover when Jesus single-handedly shut down their lucrative extortion racket by toppling the tables in the temple. Throughout the week, every verbal attack they launched, He turned back on them and sent them away embarrassed and fuming.

To the commoner, Jesus had become a national hero; but to the elite in their crumbling ivory towers, He was *enemy number one*.



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Committed to Excellence in Communicating Biblical Truth and Its Application

The Strangest of Foursomes

Matthew 27:11–26

So, when the chief priests, scribes, and elders had Jesus in their clutches at Caiaphas' house, they didn't waste the opportunity to take their pound of flesh. Caiaphas asked their verdict of his charge of blasphemy, and they howled, "Guilty!" and "He deserves to die!" (Matthew 26:66). Unleashed, they encircled Jesus like mad dogs, spitting on Him, beating Him, slapping Him from His blind side, and taunting, "Prophecy to us, you Messiah! Who hit you that time?" (26:67–68).

When the rising sun finally put an end to their cruel sport, they called to order a formal meeting of the Sanhedrin, ratified the death sentence, and hauled Jesus to Pilate to order His execution. Here, we pick up Matthew's account with Jesus beaten and bloodied, "standing before Pilate, the Roman governor" (27:11).



PREPARE YOUR HEART

In the enraged faces of the religious leaders, we see all of humanity's sins on awful display—envy, pride, hatred, guile, prejudice, revenge, anger, and murder. We grieve for the suffering of our Lord and all the suffering inflicted by sin in our broken world. Prepare your heart for studying this phase of Jesus' passion with the following prayer:

Father, as I witness the weight of humanity's crimes bearing down on Jesus, I see the accumulated suffering of the world in His beaten body. Through my study, break my heart for the hurting, deepen my devotion to Christ, and fill me with His love for my enemies as I follow Him. In His name I pray, amen.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

Read [Matthew 27:11–26](#) and review the two charts, "Trials of Jesus" and "Chronology from Gethsemane to Golgotha" in the previous *Searching the Scriptures* study. Notice that Matthew connects the fourth trial before Pilate (Matthew 27:11–14) with details from the sixth trial (27:15–26), omitting the fifth trial before Herod Antipas.



Observation: Jesus before Pontius Pilate

In the observation phase of *Searching the Scriptures*, we try to imagine ourselves in the biblical scene.¹ The setting was Pilate's headquarters in Jerusalem. His home was in Caesarea, but for festivals such as Passover, he would stay in a secondary residence in Jerusalem where additional soldiers were stationed to suppress uprisings.



The Strangest of Foursomes

Matthew 27:11–26

John tells us that the religious leaders refused to enter Pilate's residence "because it would defile them" (John 18:28). So, Pilate went out to speak to the accusers, perhaps by stepping onto a balcony overlooking a courtyard and stepping back in to speak to Jesus.

The Sanhedrin charged Jesus with blasphemy, which was punishable by death under Jewish law but not Roman law. Luke informs us how the accusers twisted the charges into a Roman capital offense: "This man has been leading our people astray by telling them not to pay their taxes to the Roman government and by claiming he is the Messiah, a king" (Luke 23:2).

What surprised Pilate about Jesus' answer to his question and response to his accusers, according to *Matthew 27:11–14*? What words do other Bible versions use to describe Pilate's reaction to Jesus in *27:14*?

Pilate didn't see in Jesus the defiant spirit of a political revolutionary like, say, Barabbas, who had been convicted of insurrection. Pilate was unconvinced of Jesus' guilt, but he was also unwilling to provoke the Jewish authorities by releasing Jesus. Caught in a dilemma, Pilate tried shifting responsibility so he didn't have to issue a verdict. What did he do in *Matthew 27:15–18*?



The Strangest of Foursomes

Matthew 27:11–26

While waiting for the crowd's response, what happened to further convince Pilate of Jesus' innocence (*Matthew 27:19*)?

Can you sense Pilate's intense inner turmoil? What caused the situation to escalate to the point of mob violence in *27:20–26*? How did Pilate try to shift responsibility again? What happened at the end of this final trial?

I'm convinced that Jesus died on a cross prepared for Barabbas. No one ever could say like Barabbas, "He died in my place," as Barabbas could say it. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Interpretation: The Man Who Missed His Cross

Barabbas is an Aramaic name that means either “son of the father” (*bar-abba*) or “son of the teacher” (*bar-rabban*). Some early Greek manuscripts of Matthew's gospel render his name as Jesus Barabbas. Noting *Matthew 1:21*, what striking comparisons and contrasts can you make between Jesus Barabbas the revolutionary and Jesus Christ the Redeemer?



The Strangest of Foursomes

Matthew 27:11–26

According to *Mark 15:7*; *Luke 23:19*; and *John 18:40*, what crimes did Barabbas commit? What would have been his punishment for these crimes?

What theological truth does the release of guilty Barabbas and the execution of innocent Jesus in his place illustrate? For help with the answer, read page 279 of Pastor Chuck Swindoll's commentary, *Insights on Matthew 16–28*. Also, reflect on *Isaiah 53:4–6* and *1 Peter 2:22–25*.

Can you imagine Barabbas hearing the Roman soldiers marching toward his cell and opening the door? They grab him and drag him out, and he is certain he is heading for crucifixion. But when he comes out of his cell, he's a free man. He's pardoned to watch the crucifixion of the One who took his place on his cross. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



The Strangest of Foursomes

Matthew 27:11–26



Correlation: John's Description of the Final Trial

John's account fills in some dialogue between Pilate and Jesus that further demonstrates Jesus' innocence in Pilate's mind. What did Jesus say to Pilate in private to reach out to him, according to [John 18:33–39](#)?

Even after Pilate ordered Jesus to be flogged, perhaps to satisfy the crowd's thirst for blood and avoid the need for crucifixion, Jesus still spoke kindly to Pilate. What did Jesus say in [John 19:10–16](#) to illustrate God's sovereign hand guiding this evil scene?

What do you make of Pilate? Was he responsible for Christ's death or a victim of his circumstances?

Jesus, Pilate, Barabbas, and Pilate's wife came together in a brief period of time and played such a significant role in the final trials of Jesus and, ultimately, His death. There are lessons to learn from each of these four. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



The Strangest of Foursomes

Matthew 27:11–26



Application: Lessons from the Strangest Foursome

What lessons can we draw from the example of each of the characters who played a role in our passage?

1. *Jesus, the innocent captive.* He inspires us to stand firm, without wavering, with few words when we know we're right.
2. *Pilate, the vacillating judge.* His example teaches us to listen to the voice of integrity, not the shouts of the majority, when we face a dilemma.
3. *Barabbas, the notorious criminal.* He lives because of the power of Christ's substitutionary death. Grace gives us the pardon we don't deserve and the power to live free.
4. *Mrs. Pilate, the troubled wife.* Sounding a warning to those you love may spare them disaster.

Which of these characters do you most need to model in your current circumstances? In what ways?

As you close this study, take a moment to marvel at Jesus who didn't sin when sinned against, nor retaliate when insulted, nor seek revenge for His sufferings. His own people shouted for His death, and the worst of men took delight in His pain, but He only returned good for evil, love for hate. Innocent in every way and perfectly pure, He bore our sins just as He bore Barabbas' crimes. Why? To open our prison cells and set us free!



The Strangest of Foursomes

Matthew 27:11–26



A FINAL PRAYER

Father, When I consider the price Your Son paid to ransom my captive soul, it causes me to tremble. Such love. Such sacrifice. I am left with only one response. Such an extreme price for my salvation calls for extreme devotion, which I freely give to the One who suffered so I might be healed, who died so I might live. In His name I pray, amen.

ENDNOTES

1. Learn more about Pastor Chuck's *Searching the Scriptures* method on the Web page, "[How to Study the Bible for Yourself](#)" at [insight.org](#).

