



DEAN WELCH - TEACHER

---

**WELL ... ALMOST**

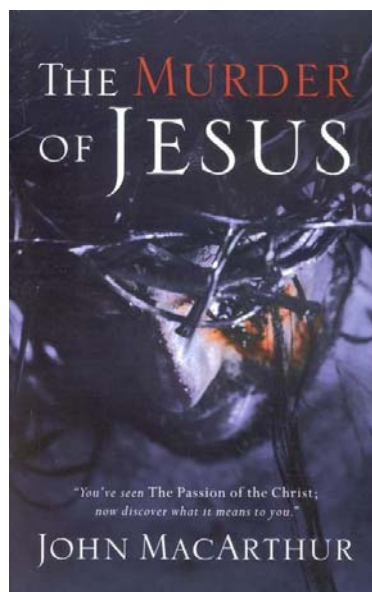
*["THE ROMAN TRIAL CONTINUES" – MATTHEW 27, LUKE 23, JOHN 19]*

---

# WEEKLY SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSON

APRIL 1, 2007

FROM THE *MASTER WORKS* SERIES STUDY OF:



## WELL ... ALMOST

[“THE ROMAN TRIAL CONTINUES” – LUKE 23, MATTHEW 27, JOHN 19]

**T**he plot of “To Kill A Mocking Bird” (Harper Lee) revolves around the courtroom trial of an innocent black man named Tom Robinson who was unjustly accused of raping a white woman in a racist white Southern community. In spite of his innocence and in spite of the valiant efforts made by his attorney, Atticus Finch, the fate of the defendant, Tom Robinson, was uncertain in the hands of a prejudiced jury. Atticus Finch provides clear evidence that the accusers, Mayella Ewell and her father, Bob, are lying: in fact, Mayella propositioned Tom Robinson, was caught by her father, and then accused Tom of rape to cover her shame and guilt. (Sounds a little like Joseph and Mrs. Potiphar, doesn't it?)

*Atticus provides impressive evidence that the marks on Mayella's face are from wounds that her father inflicted. Upon discovering her with Tom, he called her a prostitute and beat her. Yet, despite the significant evidence pointing to Tom's innocence, the all-white jury convicts him. The innocent Tom later tries to escape from prison and is shot seventeen times, killing him. It appears that a travesty of justice occurred here as Tom Robinson's verdict was chosen by the jury clearly because he was black. What a very tragic story.*

Nothing is quite as disturbing or moves us to anger as much as when an innocent person is convicted. Today, as we continue with the lessons from The Murder of Jesus, we see that the trials of Jesus were infinitely more tragic. Not only was Jesus innocent of the accusations made against Him, He was innocent of ever committing a sin. Yet in spite of the groundless accusations, Jesus was handed a death sentence. There was no attorney to plead His case, for even His closest friends had abandoned Him on this night. All that is left is a question asked by Pilate that will not go away. “What then shall I do with Jesus?” The problem of what to do with Jesus just will not go away even for us today—it's a question we cannot escape.

Over the last couple of weeks, we've studied about Jesus' arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane and being taken before the former high priest, Annas, about 1:30 in the morning, then before the high priest, Caiaphas, and the Sanhedrin, then over to the Roman governor, Pilate, for the first part of the Roman trial. This week you read about Pilate trying to pass the buck so as not to be swept up in condemning a man he knew to be innocent by sending Jesus to Herod. But it backfired on Pilate and Jesus ended up right back before him, with the chief priests and rulers demanding that Pilate sentence Jesus to die.

Open your Bible to **LUKE 23: 13-25 (NLT)** and let's pick up reading what happens after Herod sends Jesus back to Pilate:

*<sup>13</sup>Then Pilate called together the leading priests and other religious leaders, along with the people, <sup>14</sup>and he announced his verdict. "You brought this man to me, accusing him of leading a revolt. I have examined him thoroughly on this point in your presence and find him innocent. <sup>15</sup>Herod came to the same conclusion and sent him back to us. Nothing this man has done calls for the death penalty. <sup>16</sup>So I will have him flogged, and then I will release him." (<sup>17</sup>Now it was necessary for him to release one prisoner to them during the Passover celebration.)*

*<sup>18</sup> Then a mighty roar rose from the crowd, and with one voice they shouted, "Kill him, and release Barabbas to us!" <sup>19</sup>(Barabbas was in prison for taking part in an insurrection in Jerusalem against the government, and for murder.) <sup>20</sup>Pilate argued with them, because he wanted to release Jesus. <sup>21</sup>But they kept shouting, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" <sup>22</sup>For the third time he demanded, "Why? What crime has he committed? I have found no reason to sentence him to death. So I will have him flogged, and then I will release him." <sup>23</sup>**But the mob shouted louder and louder, demanding that Jesus be crucified, and their voices prevailed.** <sup>24</sup>So Pilate sentenced Jesus to die **as they demanded.** <sup>25</sup>As they had requested, he released Barabbas, the man in prison for insurrection and murder. But he turned Jesus over to them to do as they wished.*

A poet once wrote, *"Of all the words of tongue or pen, the saddest are these, `It might have been."* If that is true, then one of the most tragic words in human language must be the word **"almost."** "Almost" speaks of aborted opportunities and missed chances. And I'm sure that as long as this world exists, "almosts" will dot the pages of human history. "I almost climbed the mountain." "We almost reached our goal." "I almost closed the deal." "We almost got there in time." "I almost remembered her birthday." We've all had those "almost" experiences, haven't we?

*Think about Al Gore, who "almost" became President but lost by a margin of a few votes. In 1776, one vote gave America the English language instead of German. In 1845, one vote brought Texas into the Union. In 1868, one vote saved President Andrew Johnson from impeachment. In 1923, one vote gave Adolf Hitler leadership of the Nazi Party. In 1941, one vote saved Selective Service -- just weeks before Pearl Harbor was attacked.*

But the most infamous "almoster" in history would have to be Pilate because of what we just read – he **almost released Jesus**. He almost lowered the gavel and said, "Not guilty." He almost said, "I dismiss all the charges because this man is innocent." He almost set Him free. What a change that would have made in our perception of Pilate. Why, we might be calling him "St. Pilate" today. He almost did it, you see. But he didn't. Yet he could have and that is his tragedy. He had the authority to do it. He wore the signet ring that said he had the power to do it. All he had to do was speak the word decisively, and Jesus would have been set free. And he did it, **ALMOST.**

Look again at **verse 23** says, *"<sup>23</sup>But they were insistent, with loud voices asking that He be crucified. And their voices began to prevail. <sup>24</sup>And Pilate pronounced sentence that their demand be granted."* He listened to their voices. We could even say, I suppose, that he listened to the voices of evil, to the voice of Satan. We've heard the voices, too, haven't we, voices saying, "Go on ahead and do it. No one will ever know!" or "Just one little drink won't hurt." Satan calls us into paths we should not.

This week as we looked at this final phase of the Roman trial, I hope you realized that **almost** won't cut it from a salvation standpoint. Remember the list that was posted after the sinking of the Titanic? There were only two columns: saved or lost. And the question we each have before us is the same one Pilate faced, *"What are you going to do with Jesus?"*

Which voices are you listening to today? You see Pilate didn't have to listen to those voices. There were other voices he could have listened to. What about his wife? Turn to **Matthew 27:19 (NLT)**. *<sup>19</sup>Just then, as Pilate was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent him this message: "Leave that innocent man alone. I suffered through a terrible nightmare about him last night."* He could have listened to his wife. And he almost did.

He could have listened to his own voice. Pilate was no dummy. He knew what was going on. He knew that Annas and Caiaphas, the chief priests, were corrupt and greedy. He knew they were lying about Jesus. He could have listened to his own voice, to reason and common sense. He almost did, but he didn't.

What happens with Pilate is what often happens with us today. We do our best not to have to take a position on some things. Just like Pilate, we too try to remain neutral. But what happened to Pilate happens today also. Pilate could not escape the situation. Hard as he wanted to—it would not go away. He examined Jesus and the result we see over and over in the verses is him saying, *"I find not fault in him..."* Look again at **Luke 23:14-16 (NIV)**: *<sup>14</sup>..."You brought me this man as one who was inciting the people to rebellion. I have examined him in your presence and have found no basis for your charges against him. <sup>15</sup>Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us; as you can see, he has done nothing to deserve death. <sup>16</sup>Therefore, I will punish him and then release him."*

Pilate thought he could punish Jesus as a half-way measure to humiliate Him and appease the leaders. Pilate really did not want to see Him die (which would have been unusual for this evil man).

Pilate also thought he could get out of the hot seat through mass opinion. An evil man, Barabbas, was due to be executed, so Pilate would give the crowd a choice of release for the holiday season: either Barabbas or Jesus. That should settle matters, he thought. But the crowd there was made up of supporters of the high priest—people aroused early and planted. They asked for Barabbas. Turn to **John 19:1-16 (NLT)** and follow along with another version of what happened here: *<sup>1</sup>Then Pilate had Jesus flogged with a lead-tipped whip. <sup>2</sup>The soldiers wove a crown of thorns and put it on his head, and they put a purple robe on him. <sup>3</sup>“Hail! King of the Jews!” they mocked, as they slapped him across the face. <sup>4</sup>Pilate went outside again and said to the people, “I am going to bring him out to you now, but understand clearly that I find him not guilty.” <sup>5</sup>Then Jesus came out wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. And Pilate said, “Look, here is the man!”*

*<sup>6</sup>When they saw him, the leading priests and Temple guards began shouting, “Crucify him! Crucify him!” “Take him yourselves and crucify him,” Pilate said. “I find him not guilty.” <sup>7</sup>The Jewish leaders replied, “By our law he ought to die because he called himself the Son of God.” <sup>8</sup>When Pilate heard this, he was more frightened than ever. <sup>9</sup>He took Jesus back into the headquarters again and asked him, “Where are you from?” But Jesus gave no answer. <sup>10</sup>“Why don’t you talk to me?” Pilate demanded. “Don’t you realize that I have the power to release you or crucify you?” <sup>11</sup>Then Jesus said, “You would have no power over me at all unless it were given to you from above. So the one who handed me over to you has the greater sin.”*

*<sup>12</sup>Then Pilate tried to release him, but the Jewish leaders shouted, “If you release this man, you are no ‘friend of Caesar.’ Anyone who declares himself a king is a rebel against Caesar.” <sup>13</sup>When*

*they said this, Pilate brought Jesus out to them again. Then Pilate sat down on the judgment seat on the platform that is called the Stone Pavement (in Hebrew, Gabbatha). <sup>14</sup>It was now about noon on the day of preparation for the Passover. And Pilate said to the people, "Look, here is your king!" <sup>15</sup>"Away with him," they yelled. "Away with him! Crucify him!" "What? Crucify your king?" Pilate asked. "We have no king but Caesar," the leading priests shouted back. <sup>16</sup>Then Pilate turned Jesus over to them to be crucified.*

So, what does Pilate do in light of the crowd's frenzy and demands? He's stuck between a rock and a hard place. Hmm, either his career or his conscience? As we've learned over the past few weeks, he couldn't afford to allow the people to tell Caesar that he was at odds again with them. He was sort of on probation from three earlier times. His conscience was a rather vague and ambiguous thing, but his neck was real. He chose the flesh—and saved his own neck, but all the while lost his very soul! He refused to commit and go out on a limb for an innocent man, although he recognized that Jesus was special.

Turn to **Matthew 27:24 (NLT)** and listen to what else Pilate did: *<sup>24</sup>Pilate saw that he wasn't getting anywhere and that a riot was developing. So he sent for a bowl of water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood. The responsibility is yours!" <sup>25</sup>And all the people yelled back, "We will take responsibility for his death—we and our children!"*

Pilate takes water and tries to wash his hands in an effort to show the crowds and rules he is innocent of Jesus' blood. Bottom-line though, Pilate rejects Jesus by default, letting him be crucified. Pilate bartered away his soul for temporary job security. How can we make a better—and safer—choice than Pilate did? Turn to **Galatians 1:10** and listen as I read: *<sup>10</sup>For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ.* Now, turn to **1 Thessalonians 2: 4:** *<sup>4</sup>but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so*

*we speak, not as pleasing men, but God who examines our hearts.*

Unlike Pilate, believers must seek to please God rather than pother people. But Pilate is not the only one who has played the game of "almost." Some of us have played that game, too, saying, "I almost said, 'Here I am, Lord, use me.'" *The definition of almost is: not exactly, not yet, or not in fact, but very close to being or happening as described.* But the Bible very clearly teaches us that there are no "almosts" with God. There is no "almost" heaven, no "almost" place where we can go. It is either heaven or hell. And Pilate's tragedy could be our tragedy too.

When we stand before God, procrastination will be no excuse for not making the choice. God is not going to give us a "Do-over" or a "Get-Out-of-Making-a-Decision-Free Card". Our lessons about Pilate tell me that NOW is the time to stand up for Christ, not later. But we all think that we are invincible and there will always be a tomorrow.

The four lessons we've had so far in this study have focused on Jesus' trials before the Jews and the Romans. How is Jesus still put on trial today? How can we be people who stand with Jesus regardless of the consequences?

People's reactions vary. Some flow immediately to the peddler of poison—the world and Stan. Others turn quickly to the Prince of Peace. Most of us, however, are caught somewhere in between, lingering on the edge of Satan's crowd yet hovering within earshot of the message of God. Pilate learned the hard way that this stance of "almost" is suicidal. The other voices will win. Their lure is too strong. Their call too compelling. And Pilate also learned that there is no darker hell than the one of remorse.

Washing your hands a thousand times won't free you from the guilt of an opportunity ignored. It's one thing to forgive yourself for something you did. It is something else to try to forgive yourself for something that you might have done, but didn't.

Jesus knew that all along. For our own good, he demanded and demands absolute obedience. He never has had room for "almost" in his vocabulary. You are either with him or against him. With Jesus "nearly" has to become "certainly." "Sometimes" has to become "always." "If only" has to become "regardless." And "next time" has to become "this time." No, Jesus never had room for "almost" and he still doesn't. "Almost" may count in horseshoes and hand grenades, but with the Master, it is just as good as a "never."

© 2007 R. DEAN WELCH  
APRIL 1, 2007