

# EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS ON THE GOSPELS.

FOR FAMILY AND PRIVATE USE.

WITH THE TEXT COMPLETE,  
And many Explanatory Notes.

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JOHN XVIII. 28–40.

28 Then led they Jesus from Caiaphas unto the hall of judgment: and it was early; and they themselves went not into the judgment hall, lest they should be defiled; but that they might eat the passover.

29 Pilate then went out unto them, and said, What accusation bring ye against this man?

30 They answered and said unto him, If he were not a malefactor, we would not have delivered him up unto thee.

31 Then said Pilate unto them, Take ye him, and judge him according to your law. The Jews therefore said unto him, It is not lawful for us to put any man to death:

32 That the saying of Jesus might be fulfilled, which he spake, signifying what death he should die.

33 Then Pilate entered into the judgment hall again, and called Jesus, and said unto him, Art thou the King of the Jews?

34 Jesus answered him, Sayest thou this thing of thyself, or did others tell it thee of me?

35 Pilate answered, Am I a Jew? Thine own

nation and the chief priests have delivered thee unto me: what hath thou done?

36 Jesus answered, My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is my kingdom not from hence.

37 Pilate therefore saith unto him, Art thou a king then? Jesus answered, Thou sayest that I am a king. To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Every one that is of the truth heareth my voice.

38 Pilate saith unto him, What is truth? And when he had said this he went out again unto the Jews, and saith unto them, I find in him no fault *at all*.

39 But ye have a custom, that I should release unto you one at the passover: will ye therefore that I release unto you the King of the Jews?

40 Then cried they all again, saying Not this man, but Barabbas. Now Barabbas was a robber.

THE verses we have now read contain four striking points, which are only found in St. John's narrative of Christ's passion. We need not doubt that there were good reasons why Matthew, Mark, and Luke were not inspired to record them. But they are points of such deep interest, that we should feel thankful that they have been brought forward by St. John.

The first point that we should notice is *the false conscientiousness of our Lord's wicked enemies*. We are told that the Jews who brought Christ before Pilate would not go into "the judgment hall, lest they should be defiled; but that they might eat the passover." That was scrupulosity indeed! These hardened men were actually engaged in doing the wickedest act that mortal man ever did. They wanted to kill their own Messiah. And yet at this very time they talked of being "defiled," and were very particular about the pass-over!

The conscience of unconverted men is a very curious part of their moral nature. While in some cases it becomes hardened, seared, and dead, until it feels nothing; in others it becomes morbidly scrupulous about the lesser matters of religion. It is no uncommon thing to find people excessively particular about the observance of trifling forms and outward ceremonies, while they are the slaves of degrading sins and detestable immoralities. Robbers and murderers in some countries are extremely strict about confession, and absolution, and prayers to saints. Fastings and self-imposed austerities in

Lent, are often followed by excess of worldliness when Lent is over. There is but a step from Lent to Carnival. The attendants at daily services in the morning are not unfrequently the patrons of balls and theatres at night. All these are symptoms of spiritual disease, and a heart secretly dissatisfied. Men who know they are wrong in one direction, often struggle to make things right by excess of zeal in another direction. That very zeal is their condemnation.

Let us pray that our consciences may always be enlightened by the Holy Ghost, and that we may be kept from a one-sided and deformed Christianity. A religion that makes a man neglect the weightier matters of daily holiness and separation from the world, and concentrate his whole attention on forms, sacraments, ceremonies, and public services, is, to say the least, very suspicious. It may be accompanied by immense zeal and show of earnestness, but it is not sound in the sight of God. The Pharisees paid tithe of mint, anise, and cummin, and compassed sea and land to make proselytes, while they neglected "judgment, mercy, and faith." (Matt. xxiii. 23.) The very Jews who thirsted for Christ's blood were the Jews who feared the defilement of a Roman judgment hall, and made much ado about keeping the passover! Let their conduct be a beacon to Christians, as long as the world stands. That religion is worth little which does not make us say, "I esteem all Thy commandments concerning all things to be right, and I hate every false way." (Ps. cxix. 128.) That Christianity is worthless which makes us compound for the neglect of heart religion and practical holiness, by an extravagant zeal for man-made ceremonies or outward forms.

The second point that we should notice in these verses, is *the account that our Lord Jesus Christ gives of His kingdom*. He says, "My kingdom is not of this world." These famous words have been so often perverted and wrested out of their real sense, that their true meaning has been almost buried under a heap of false interpretations. Let us make sure that we know what they mean.

Our Lord's main object in saying "My kingdom is not of this world," was to inform Pilate's mind concerning the true nature of His kingdom, and to correct any false impression he might have received from the Jews. He tells him that He did not come to set up a kingdom which would interfere with the Roman Government. He did not aim at establishing a temporal power, to be supported by armies and maintained by taxes. The only dominion He exercised was over men's hearts, and the only weapons that His subjects employed were spiritual weapons. A kingdom which required neither money nor servants for its support, was one of which the Roman Emperors need not be afraid. In the highest sense it was a kingdom "not of this world."

But our Lord did not intend to teach that the kings of this world have nothing to do with religion, and ought to ignore God altogether in the gov-

ernment of their subjects. No such idea, we may be sure, was in His mind. He knew perfectly well that it was written, "By Me kings reign" (Prov. viii. 15), and that kings are as much required to use their influence for God, as the meanest of their subjects. He knew that the prosperity of kingdoms is wholly dependent on the blessing of God, and that kings are as much bound to encourage righteousness and godliness, as to punish unrighteousness and immorality. To suppose that He meant to teach Pilate that, in His judgment, an infidel might be as good a king as a Christian, and a man like Gallio as good a ruler as David or Solomon, is simply absurd.

Let us carefully hold fast the true meaning of our Lord's words in these latter days. Let us never be ashamed to maintain that no Government can expect to prosper which refuses to recognize religion, which deals with its subjects as if they had no souls, and cares not whether they serve God, or Baal, or no God at all. Such a Government will find, sooner or later, that its line of policy is suicidal, and damaging to its best interests. No doubt the kings of this world cannot make men Christians by laws and statutes. But they can encourage and support Christianity, and they will do so if they are wise. The kingdom where there is the most industry, temperance, truthfulness, and honesty, will always be the most prosperous of kingdoms. The king who wants to see these things abound among his subjects, should do all that lies in his power to help Christianity and to discourage irreligion.

The third point that we should notice in these verse *is the account that our Lord gives of His own mission*. He says, "To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth."

Of course we are not to suppose our Lord meant that this was the *only* end of His mission. No doubt He spoke with special reference to what He knew was passing through Pilate's mind. He did not come to win a kingdom with the sword, and to gather adherents and followers by force. He came armed with no other weapon but "truth." To testify to fallen man the truth about God, about sin, about the need of a Redeemer, about the nature of holiness,—to declare and lift up before man's eyes this long lost and buried "truth,"—was one great purpose of His ministry. He came to be God's witness to a lost and corrupt world. That the world needed such a testimony, He does not shrink from telling the proud Roman Governor. And this is what St. Paul had in view, when he tells Timothy, that "before Pontius Pilate Christ witnessed a good confession." (1 Tim. vi. 13.)

The servants of Christ in every age must remember that our Lord's conduct in this place is meant to be their example. Like Him we are to be witnesses to God's truth, salt in the midst of corruption, light in the midst of darkness, men and women not afraid to stand alone, and to testify for God against the ways of sin and the world. To do so may entail on us much trouble, and even persecution. But the duty is clear and plain. If we love life, if

we would keep a good conscience, and be owned by Christ at the last day, we must be “witnesses.” It is written, “Whosoever shall be ashamed of Me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him also shall the Son of man be ashamed, when He cometh in the glory of His Father with the holy angels.” (Mark viii. 38.)

The last point that we should notice in these verses is *the question that Pontius Pilate addressed to our Lord*. We are told that when our Lord spoke of the truth, the Roman Governor replied, “What is truth?” “We are not told with what motive this question was asked, nor does it appear on the face of the narrative that he who asked it waited for an answer. It seems far more likely that the saying was the sarcastic, sneering exclamation of one who did not believe that there was any such thing as “truth.” It sounds like the language of one who had heard, from his earliest youth, so many barren speculations about “truth” among Roman and Greek philosophers, that he doubted its very existence. “Truth indeed! What is truth?”

Melancholy as it may appear, there are multitudes in every Christian land whose state of mind is just like that of Pilate. Hundreds, it may be feared among the upper classes, are continually excusing their own irreligion by the specious plea that, like the Roman Governor, they cannot find out “what is truth.” They point to the endless controversies of Romanists and Protestants, of High Churchmen and Low Churchmen, of Churchmen and Dissenters, and pretend to say that they do not understand who is right and who is wrong. Sheltered under this favourite excuse, they pass through life without any decided religion, and in this wretched, comfortless state, too often die.

But is it really true that truth cannot be discovered? Nothing of the kind! God never left any honest, diligent inquirer without light and guidance. Pride is one reason why many cannot discover truth. They do not humbly go down on their knees and earnestly ask God to teach them.—Laziness is another reason. They do not honestly take pains, and search the Scriptures. The followers of unhappy Pilate, as a rule, do not deal fairly and honestly with their consciences. Their favourite question,—What is truth?—is nothing better than a pretence and an excuse. The words of Solomon will be found true as long as the world stands: “If thou criest after knowledge, and liftest up thy voice for understanding; if thou seekest her as silver, and searchest for her as for hid treasures; then shalt thou understand the fear of the Lord, and find the knowledge of God.” (Prov. ii. 4, 5.) No man ever followed that advice and missed the way to heaven.

NOTES. JOHN XVIII. 28–40.

28.—[Then led they Jesus from Caiaphas.] A careful reader of the Gospels will not fail to observe here, that John entirely passes over the examination of Caiaphas and the Sanhedrim

of the Jews, which is so fully described by Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Specially he omits our Lord's confession, when adjured, that He was the Christ. He takes it all for granted, as a thing well known, and passes on to dwell on his far more important examination before Pilate, the Roman Governor. In this he brings out many striking particulars, which, for wise reasons, Matthew, Mark, and Luke did not record. Writing, as John did, long after the other three, and writing more especially for Gentile readers, we can well understand that he would give far more prominence to the proceedings before the Gentile Governor, than to those before the Jewish Ecclesiastical Court. Yet it cannot be denied that there is a remarkable curtness and brevity in his statement of facts at this point. The Greek is literally they "lead,"—in the present tense.

[*Unto the hall of judgment.*] This is a Latin word, and admits of two views. The marginal reading, according to Schleusner and Parkhurst, is the correct translation. It is the "Governor's palace," rather than the hall of judgment. According to Josephus, the praetors, or governors of Judæa, who ordinarily lived at Caesarea, when they were at Jerusalem, used Herod's palace, in the upper part of the city, as their residence. Some say it was the famous tower of Antonia.

[*And it was early.*] The precise time here meant we cannot exactly tell. It cannot have been so early as day-break, because we are especially told by Luke that the elders and chief priests and the Sanhedrim assembled to examine our Lord "as soon as it was day." (Luke xxii. 66.) Considering that the day begins at the equinox about six, we may assume that early "cannot mean sooner than seven or eight o'clock.

[*And they went not.. judgment hall...defiled.*] The meaning of this sentence is, that the Jews would not go within the walls of Pilate's palace, lest by so doing they should contract ceremonial uncleanness. Pilate was a Gentile. Peter says in the Acts, "It is unlawful for a man that is a Jew to keep company or come unto one of another nation." (Acts x 28.) If the Jews had gone inside Pilate's house, they would have been made ceremonially unclean, and would have considered themselves defiled.

The sentence is an extraordinary example of the false scrupulosity of conscience which a wicked man may keep up, about forms and ceremonies and trifling externals in religion, at the very time when he is deliberately committing some gross and enormous sin. The notorious fact that Italian bandits and murderers will make much of fasting, keeping Lent, confession, absolution, Virgin Mary worship, saint worship, and image worship, at the very time when they are arranging robberies and assassinations, is an accurate illustration of the same principle. The extent to which formality and wickedness can go side by side is frightful, and little known. The Jews were afraid of being defiled by going into a Gentile's house, at the very moment when they were doing the devil's work, and murdering the Prince of life!—Just so, many people in England will attach immense importance to fasting and keeping Lent and attending saints'-day services, while they see no harm in going to races, operas, and balls, at other times! Persons who have very low notions about the Seventh Commandment, will actually tell you that it is wrong to be married in Lent! The very same persons who totally disregard Sunday abroad, will make much ado about saints'-day at home! Absurd strictness about Lent, and excess of riot and licentiousness in carnival, will often go together.

Chrysostom remarks, "Though they had taken up a deed which was unlawful, and were shedding blood, they are scrupulous about the place, and bring forth Pilate unto them."

Augustine remarks, "O impious blindness! They would be defiled, forsooth, by a dwelling which was another's, and not be defiled by a crime which was their own. They feared to be defiled by the prætorium of an alien judge, and feared not to be defiled by the blood of an innocent brother."

Bishop Hall remarks, “Woe unto you priests, scribes, elders, hypocrites! can there be any roof so unclean as that of your own breasts? Not Pilate’s walls, but your own hearts, are impure. Is murder your errand, and do you stick at a local infection? God shall smite you, ye whited walls! Do you long to be stained with blood—with the blood of God? And do ye fear to be defiled with the touch of Pilate’s pavement? Doth so small a gnat stick in your throats, while ye swallow such a camel of flagitious wickedness? Go out of Jerusalem, ye false disbelievers, if ye would not be unclean. Pilate hath more cause to fear, lest his walls should be defiled with the presence of such prodigious monsters of iniquity.”

Poole remarks, “Nothing is more common than for persons over-zealous about rituals to be remiss about morals.”

[*That...eat...passover.*] This sentence contains an undeniable difficulty. How could the Jews eat the passover now, when our Lord and His disciples had eaten it the evening before? That our Lord would eat the passover at the right time we may assume as a matter of course, and that time was Thursday evening. What then can be meant by the chief priests, and elders, and leaders of the Jews, eating the passover on Friday? This is a question which has received various answers.

(a) Some think that in our Lord’s time the whole Jewish Church had fallen into such disorder, and had so fallen away from original purity, that the passover was not kept strictly according to the primary institution, and might be eaten on almost any day within the passover feast.

(b) Some think that it was considered allowable to eat the passover at any time between sunset one day and sunset the next day, so long as it was eaten within the twenty-four hours.

(c) Some think that the passover eating here mentioned was not the eating of the passover lamb, but the eating of the passover feast, called “chagigah,” which took place every day during the passover week.—This is Lightfoot’s view.

(d) Some think that as there is no law without an exception, and even the law of the passover admitted of alteration in case of necessity (see Num. ix. 11), so the chief priests persuaded themselves that as they had been occupied by duty—the duty (forsooth!) of apprehending our blessed Lord—throughout the night when they ought to have kept the passover, they were justified in deferring it till the next day.

All these, it must be confessed, are only conjectures. There is probably some explanation which, at this distance of time, we are unable to supply. For the present the third and fourth suggestions seem to me the most reasonable.

Chrysostom observes, “Either John calls the whole feast the passover, or means that they were then keeping the passover; while Jesus delivered it to His followers one day sooner, reserving His own sacrifice for His preparation day, when also of old His passion was celebrated.”

One thing at any rate is very plain and noteworthy. The chief priests and their party made much ado about eating the passover lamb and keeping the feast, at the very time when they were about to slay the true Lamb of God, of whom this passover was a type! No wonder that Samuel says, “To obey is better than sacrifice.” (1 Sam. xv. 22.)

Bollinger calls attention here to the wide difference between inward sanctification of the heart, and outward sanctimoniousness about forms, ordinances, and ceremonies.

Calvin remarks, that it is one mark of hypocrisy, “that while it is careful in performing ceremonies, it makes no scruple of neglecting matters of the highest importance.”

29.—[*Pilate then went out...said, etc.*] This “going out” means that Pilate hearing that the chief priests had brought a prisoner to the courtyard, or open space before his palace, and know-

ing from experience, as a governor of Judæa, that they would not come into his palace for fear of defilement, but waited for him to come out to them, went out and spoke to them. His first question is one which became his office as a magistrate and judge. He inquires what is the charge or accusation brought against the prisoner before him. "Of what crime do you accuse this man?"

The well-known Valerian law among the Romans made it unlawful to judge or condemn any one without hearing the charge against him stated.

- 30.—[*They answered and said, etc.*] The reply of the chief priests to Pilate's inquiry, as given by John, is peculiar and elliptical. They began by saying that the prisoner was a convicted evildoer according to their law, or else they would not have brought Him there. They had found Him, by examination before the Sanhedrim, to be a breaker of the law, and they only came there to have sentence pronounced on Him by Pilate. "If He were not a person guilty and worthy of death, we would not have delivered Him up to thee. We have discovered Him to be such a person, and we now ask thee to sentence Him to death. We have convicted Him, and we ask thee, as our chief ruler, to slay Him." There is a proud, haughty, supercilious tone, we may remark, about this answer, which was not likely to please a Roman Governor.

It is plain, by a comparison with St. Luke's Gospel, that at this point the Jews added a statement which St. John has omitted. "If thou wouldst know the precise nature of this prisoner's evil-doing, we tell thee that we found Him perverting the nation, and forbidding to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that He is a King." (Luke xxiii. 2.) Why St. John omitted this we cannot tell, but he evidently takes it for granted that his readers knew this accusation was made, by telling us in verse thirty-three, that Pilate asked Him if He was "the King of the Jews."

Tholuck remarks, that "if the authorities had not regarded the prisoner as worthy of death, they would not have brought him to the procurator, as none but criminal cases needed confirmation by him."

- 31.—[*Then, said Pilate....take...judge...law.*] This sentence indicates a desire on Pilate's part to have nothing to do with the case. From the very first he evidently wished to put it away from him, and, if he could, to avoid condemning our Lord. How this feeling originated, we cannot tell. Matthew and Mark say that he knew Jesus was delivered to him from "envy." Matthew says that his wife warned him to have nothing to do with that "just person." (Matt xxvii. 18; xxvii. 19; Mark xv. 10.) It is quite possible that the fame and character of Jesus had reached Pilate's ears long before He was brought before him. It is hard to suppose that such miracles as our Lord wrought, would never be talked of within the palace of the chief ruler of Judæa. The raising of Lazarus must surely have been reported among his servants. Our Lord's triumphal entry into Jerusalem, attended by myriads of people shouting, "Blessed is the King," must surely have been noted by the soldiers and officers of Pilate's guard. Can we wonder that all this made him regard our Lord with something like awe? Wicked men are often very superstitious. His language now before us is that of one who would gladly evade the whole case, and leave the responsibility entirely with the Jews. "If He is, as you say, a malefactor, take Him into your own hands, and condemn Him to death according to your own law. Do as you like with Him; but do not trouble me with the case." The word we render "judge," is literally much stronger in sense. It is rather condemn to death. The only punishment the Jews might inflict, if any (which is more than doubtful), was death by stoning.

The pitiable and miserable character of Pilate, the Roman Governor, begins to come into clear light from this point. We see him a man utterly destitute of moral courage,—knowing what was right and just in the case before him, yet afraid to act on his

knowledge,—knowing that our Lord was innocent, yet not daring to displease the Jews by acquitting Him,—knowing that he was doing wrong, and yet afraid to do right. “The fear of man bringeth a snare.” (Prov. xxix. 25.) Wretched and contemptible are those rulers and statesmen whose first principle is to please the people, even at the expense of their own consciences, and who are ready to do what they know to be wrong rather than offend the mob! Wretched are those nations which for their sins are given over to be governed by such statesmen! True godly rulers should lead the people, and not be led by them, should do what is right and leave consequences to God. A base determination to keep in with the world at any price, and a slavish fear of man’s opinion, were leading principles in Pilate’s character. There are many like him. Nothing is more common than to see statesmen evading the plain line of duty, and trying to shuffle responsibility on others, rather than give offence to the mob. This is precisely what Pilate did here. The spirit of his reply to the Jews is, “I had rather not be troubled with the case: cannot you settle it yourselves, without asking me to interfere?”

Ellicott remarks, “It seems clear that from the first the sharp-sighted Roman perceived that this was no case for his tribunal, that it was wholly a matter of religious difference and religious hate, and that the meek prisoner who stood before him was at least innocent of the political crime laid to his charge with such an unwonted and suspicious zeal.” He also quotes the just and pertinent remark of a German writer, “Pilate knew too much of Jewish expectations to suppose that the Sanhedrim would hate and persecute one who would free them from Roman authority.”

Calvin thinks that Pilate said this ironically, as he would not have allowed them to inflict capital punishment. Gerhard also regards the saying as sarcastic and sneering. “If this prisoner has done anything against your Jewish superstitions, settle it yourselves.” Yet a comparison with Luke makes this rather improbable in my opinion. The Jews there tell him plainly that Christ made Himself a King. (Luke xxiii. 1.) This, even a Roman must allow, was a serious charge.

Henry suggests that perhaps Pilate thought they did not really want to kill Jesus, but only to chastise Him.

[*The Jews...not lawful for us...death.*] This answer of the Jews completely defeated the wretched Pilate’s attempt to put away the case before him, and avoid the necessity of judging our Lord. They reminded the Roman Governor that the power of taking away life was no longer in their hands, and that it was impossible for them to do as he suggested, and settle our Lord’s case in their own way.

Let us mark here what a striking confession the Jews here made, whether they were aware of it or not. They actually admitted that they were no longer rulers and governors of their own nation, and that they were under the dominion of a foreign power. They were no longer independent, but subjects of Rome. He that has power of condemning to death, and taking away the life of a prisoner, he is the governor of a country. “It is not lawful for us,” said the Jews, “to take away life. You, the Roman Governor, alone can do it, and therefore we come to thee about this Jesus.” By their own mouth and their own act they publicly declared that Jacob’s prophecy was fulfilled, “that the sceptre had departed from Judah,” that they had no longer a lawgiver of their own stock, and that consequently the time of Shiloh, the promised Messiah, must have come. (Gen. xlix. 10.) How unconscious wicked men are that they fulfil prophecy!

The idea of Chrysostom and Augustine, that the sentence only means that the Jews could not put any one to death during the passover feast, looks to me utterly improbable.

32.—[*That the saying...fulfilled, etc.*] This verse is one of John’s peculiar parenthetical comments, which are so frequent in his Gospel. Here, as in many other instances, the meaning

is, "By this the saying of Jesus was fulfilled;" and not "The thing took place, in order that the saying might be fulfilled." What precise saying is referred to, is a point on which commentators have not quite agreed.

(a) Some think, as Theophylact, Bullinger, Musculus, and Gerhard, that St. John refers to the saying recorded in this very Gospel (John xii. 33); and that the expression, "what death," only refers to the particular manner of His death by crucifixion.

(b) Others think, as Augustine, Calvin, and Beza, that St. John refers to the fuller saying in Matt. xx. 19, where our Lord foretells His own delivery to the Gentiles as well as His crucifixion.

Of the two views, the second seems to me the preferable one. The previous verse distinctly points to the inability of the Jews to put Jesus to death, and the necessity of the Gentiles doing the murderous work. And John remarks that this was just what Jesus had predicted,—that He would die by the hand of the Gentiles. I think, at the same time, that the crucifixion was probably included, being the death which the Gentiles inflicted, in contradistinction to the Jewish custom of stoning.

33.—[*Then Pilate entered into the judgment hall.*] The meaning of this must be that Pilate, disappointed in his attempt to put away the case from him, retired into his palace again, where he knew the Jews would not follow him, from fear of contracting ceremonial defilement, and resolved to have a private interview with our Lord, and examine Him alone.—It is quite clear that the conversation which follows, from this point down to the middle of the thirty-eighth verse, took place within the Roman Governor's walls, and most probably without the presence of any Jewish witnesses. If that was so, the substance of it could only be revealed to John by the inspiration of the Holy Ghost. Pilate's soldiers and a few guards of the prisoner may have been present. But it is highly improbable that John, or any friend of our Lord's, could have got inside the Governor's palace. If the beloved Apostle did manage to get in and hear the conversation, it is a striking example of his attachment to his Master. "Love is strong as death." (Cant. viii. 6.)

[*And called Jesus.*] This expression literally means, that he called Jesus with a loud voice to follow him inside the palace; and came out of the outer court, or area, where he had first met the party which had brought the Prisoner to him. It is as though he said, "Come in hither, Prisoner, that I may speak with thee privately!"

[*And said...art Thou...King...Jews?*] The first question that Pilate asked of our Lord, was whether he really admitted that He was what the Jews had just accused Him of being. "Tell me, is it true that Thou art the King of the Jews? Dost Thou really profess to be the King of this ancient people, over whom I and my soldiers are now rulers?"—It is far from improbable that Pilate, living so long in Jerusalem, may have often heard of the old Jewish kings, and of the dominion they received. It is far from unlikely, moreover, that he thought it possible he had before him one of those mock Messiahs, who, like Theudas rose up at this period, and kept the minds of the Jews in agitation. "They accuse Thee of setting up Thyself as a King. Art Thou really a King? Dost Thou lay claim to any royal authority?" The humble attire and lowly appearance of our Lord can hardly fail to have struck Pilate. "Can it be true that Thou, a poor man, with no signs of a kingdom about Thee art the King of the Jews?"

In order to estimate aright this question which Pilate put, we must remember that Suetonius, the Roman historian, distinctly says that a rumour was very prevalent throughout the East at this period, that a King was about to arise among the Jews who would obtain dominion over the world. This singular rumour, originating no doubt from Jewish prophecies, had of course reached Pilate's ears, and goes far to account for his question.

It is noteworthy that each of the four Gospel writers distinctly records that this was the

first question that Pilate put to our Lord. It seems to show that the chief thing impressed on the mind of Pilate about Jesus, was that He was *a King*. As King he examined Him, as a King he sentenced Him, and as King he crucified Him. And one main object that he seems to have had in view in questioning our Lord, was to ascertain what kind of a kingdom He ruled over, and whether it was one that would interfere with the Roman authority. On the whole, the question seems a mixture of curiosity and contempt.

- 34.—[*Jesus answered him, Sayest thou, etc.*] Our Lord's motive in this answer to Pilate was probably to awaken Pilate's conscience. "Dost thou say this of thine own independent self, in consequence of any complaints thou hast heard against Me as a seditious person? Or dost thou only ask it because the Jews have just accused Me of being a King? Hast thou, during all the years thou hast been a Governor, ever heard of Me as a leader of insurrection, or a rebel against the Romans? If thou has never heard anything of this kind against Me, and hast no personal knowledge of my being a rebel, oughtest thou not to pay very little attention to the complaint of my enemies. Their bare assertion ought not to weigh with thee."

Grotius paraphrases the verse thus: "Thou hast been long a ruler, and a careful defender of the Roman majesty. Hast thou ever heard anything that would impeach Me of a desire to usurp authority against Rome? If thou hast never known anything of thyself, but others have suggested it, beware lest thou be deceived by an ambiguous word."

There is undoubtedly some little obscurity around the verse, and it becomes us to handle it reverently. It certainly looks like an appeal to the Roman Governor's conscience. "Before I answer thy question let Me ask thee one. For what reason and from what motive art thou making this inquiry about my being a King? Canst thou say, from thy own personal knowledge, that thou hast ever heard Me complained of as setting up a kingdom? Thou knowest thou canst not say that. Art thou only asking Me because thou hast heard the Jews accuse Me of being a King today? If this is so, judge for thyself whether such a King as I appear to be is likely to interfere with thy authority."

Poole says, "Our Saviour desired to be satisfied from Pilate, whether he asked Him as a private person for his own satisfaction, or as a judge, having received any such accusation against Him. If he asked Him as a judge, he was bound to call others to prove what they had charged Him with."

Burgon remarks that Jesus did not need information in asking this question. He asked, as the Lord asked Adam, "Where art thou?" (Gen. iii. 9) in order to arouse Pilate to a sense of the shameful injustice of the charge.

- 35.—[*Pilate answered, etc.*] The answer of Pilate exhibits the haughty, high-minded, supercilious, fierce spirit of a Roman man of the world. So far from responding to our Lord's appeal to his conscience, he fires up at the very idea of knowing anything of the current opinions about Christ.—"Am I a Jew? Thinkest thou that a noble Roman like me knows anything about the superstitions of Thy people. I only know that Thine own countrymen, and the very leaders of Thy nation, have brought Thee unto me as a prisoner worthy of death. What they mean I do not pretend to understand. But I suppose there is some ground for their accusation. Tell me plainly what Thou hast done."

Pilate's answer seems tantamount to an acknowledgment that he knew nothing against our Lord. But as He had been brought before him as a prisoner, and he was pressed to condemn Him, he asks Him what He has done to bring this hatred of the Jews upon Him.

He that would know the depth of scorn contained in that sentence, "Am I a Jew?" should mark the contemptuous way in which Horace, Juvenal, Tacitus, and Pliny speak of the Jews.

Stier remarks, "The Romans were only concerned with what was DONE; not with

dreams, like the Jews; nor with wisdom, like the Greeks.” Pilate’s question was characteristic of his nation.

36.—[*Jesus answered.. kingdom...not...world.*] In this famous sentence our Lord begins His answer to Pilate’s question, “Art Thou the King of the Jews?” “Thou askest whether I am a King. I reply that I certainly have a kingdom, but it is a kingdom entirely unlike the kingdoms of this world. It is a kingdom which is neither begun, nor propagated, nor defended by the power of this world, by the world’s arms or the world’s money. It is a kingdom which took its origin from heaven, and not from earth,—a spiritual kingdom,—a kingdom over hearts and wills and consciences,—a kingdom which needs no armies or revenues,—a kingdom which in no way interferes with the kingdoms of this world.”

The literal rendering of the Greek would be “out of this world.” But it evidently means “belonging to, dependent on, springing from, connected with.” It is the same preposition that we find in John “Ye are from beneath; I am from above: ye are of this world; I am not of this world.”

That the above was our Lord’s plain meaning, when He spoke the words before us, is to my mind as evident as the sun at noonday. The favourite theory of certain Christians that this text forbids Governments to have anything to do with religion, and condemns the union of Church and State, and renders all Established Churches unlawful, is, in my judgment, baseless, preposterous, and utterly devoid of common sense. Whether the union of Church and State be right or wrong, it appears to me absurd to say that it is forbidden by this text. The text declares that Christ’s kingdom did not spring from the powers of this world, and is not dependent on them; but the text does not declare that the powers of this world ought to have nothing to do with Christ’s kingdom. Christ’s kingdom can get on very well without them; but they cannot get on very well without Christ’s kingdom.

The following leading principles are worth remembering, in looking at this vexed question:—

(a) Every Government is responsible to God, and no Government can expect to prosper without God’s blessing. Every Government therefore is bound to do all that lies in its power to obtain God’s favour and blessing. The Government that does not strive to promote true religion, has no right to expect God’s blessing.

(b) Every good Government should endeavour to promote truth, charity, temperance, honesty, diligence, industry, chastity, among its subjects. True religion is the only root from which these things can grow. The Government that does not labour to promote true religion cannot be called either wise or good.

(c) To tell us that a Government must leave religion alone, because it cannot promote it without favouring one church more than another, is simply absurd. It is equivalent to saying that, as we cannot do good to everybody, we are to sit still and do no good at all.

(d) To tell us that no Government can find out what true religion is, and that consequently a Government should regard all religions with equal indifference, is an argument only fit for an infidel. In England at any rate a belief that the Bible is true is a part of the Constitution; an insult to the Bible is a punishable offence, and the testimony of an avowed atheist goes for nothing in a court of law.

(e) It is undoubtedly true that Christ’s kingdom is a kingdom independent of the rulers of this world, and one which they can neither begin, increase, nor overthrow. But it is utterly false that the rulers of this world have nothing to do with Christ’s kingdom, may safely leave religion entirely alone, and may govern their subjects as if they were beasts and had no souls at all.

Chrysostom says that our Lord’s reply meant, “I am indeed a King but not such a King

as thou suspectest, but one far more glorious.”

[*If my kingdom...servants fight...Jews.*] Our Lord proceeds to give proof that His kingdom was not of this world, and therefore not likely to interfere with the Roman authority. “If the kingdom of which I am head, were like the kingdoms of this world, and supported and maintained by worldly means, then my disciples would take up arms and fight, to prevent my being delivered to the Jews. This, as thou mayest know by inquiry, is the very thing which I forbade last night. Thine own soldiers can tell thee that they saw Me reprove a disciple for fighting, and heard Me tell him to put up his sword.”

Let us mark that a religion propagated by the sword, or by violence, is a most unsatisfactory kind of Christianity. The weapons of Christ’s warfare are not carnal. Even true Christians who have appealed to the sword to support their opinions, have often found themselves losers by it. Taking the sword, they have perished by the sword. Zwingle dying in battle, and the Scotch Covenanters, are examples.

Stier thinks that by “my servants” in this verse our Lord meant the angels! This, however, seems very improbable.

Bullinger makes some good remarks on this sentence, in reply to the Anabaptists of his time. He says, among other things, “Just as it does not follow that the Church is worldly, because we who are flesh and blood, and are the world, are members of the Church,—so no one, unless he wants common sense, will say that the Church is worldly, because in it Kings and Princes serve God, by defending the good and punishing the bad.”

Calvin observes that this sentence “does not hinder Princes from defending the kingdom of Christ; partly by appointing external discipline, and partly by lending their protection to the Church against wicked men.” Beza says much the same.

Hutcheson observes, “This text is not to be understood as if Christ disallowed that they to whom He has given the sword should defend His kingdom therewith; for if magistrates were as magistrates should be, nursing parents to the Church, and ought to kiss the Son, then certainly they may and should employ their power as magistrates for removing idolatry, and setting up the true worship of God, and defending it against violence.”

[*But now...my kingdom not...hence.*] The true meaning of this little sentence is not very clear. May it not mean, “Now, in this dispensation, my kingdom is not an earthly one, and is not of this world. A day will come by and by, after my second advent, when my kingdom will be a visible one over the whole earth, and my saints shall rule over the renewed world.”—This may seem fanciful to some; but I have a strong impression that it is the true meaning. The adverb “now” is very decided and emphatical.

37.—[*Pilate therefore...Art Thou a King?*] Here Pilate returns to his question, though he puts it in a different way: “Art Thou in some sense a King, if not such a King as the Kings of this world? Thou speakest of Thy kingdom and Thy servants. Am I to understand that Thou art a King?” We should observe the distinction in the language here, compared with that of verse thirty-three. There it was, “Art Thou the King of the Jews?” Here it is simply, “Art Thou a King?”

[*Jesus answered, Thou sayest...I am a King.*] This sentence is a direct acknowledgment from our Lord’s lips that He is a King; a King only over hearts, consciences, and wills, but still a real true King. “Thou sayest,” is equivalent to an affirmation. “Thou sayest truly: I am what thou askest about. I admit that I am a King.”

There can be no doubt that this “is the good confession before Pontius Pilate,” which St. Paul specially impresses on the attention of the timid disciple Timothy, in his pastoral epistle. (1 Tim. vi. 13.)

[*To this end...born...witness...truth.*] Here our Lord informs Pilate what was the great

end and purpose of His incarnation. "It is true that I am a King, but not a King after the manner of the world. I am only a King over hearts and minds. The principal work for which I came into the world, is to be a witness of the truth concerning God, concerning man, and concerning the way of salvation. This truth has been long hidden and lost sight of. I came to bring it to light once more, and to be the King of all who receive it."

I think the "truth" in this sentence must be taken in the widest and fullest sense. The true doctrine about man, and God, and salvation, and sin, and holiness, was almost buried, lost, and gone, when Christ came into the world. To revive the dying light, and erect a new standard of godliness in a corrupt world, which neither Egypt, Assyria, Greece nor Rome could prevent rotting and decaying, was one grand end of Christ's mission. He did not come to gather armies, build cities, amass treasure, and found a dynasty, as Pilate perhaps fancied. He came to be God's witness, and to lift up God's truth in the midst of a dark world. He that would know how miserably small is the amount of truth which even the most civilized nations know without Christianity, should examine the religion and morality of the Chinese and Hindoos in the present day.

Some think that "I was born" points to Christ's humanity, and "came into the world," to His divinity.

[*Every one...of truth...heareth my voice.*] I think that in this sentence our Lord tells Pilate who are His subjects, disciples, and followers. "Wouldest thou know who are the members of my kingdom? I tell thee that it consists of all who really love the truth and desire to know more of God's truth. All such hear my voice, are pleased with my principles, and subjects of my kingdom." It is like our Lord's words to Nicodemus: "He that doeth truth cometh to the light." (John iii. 21.)

Thus our Lord shows Pilate that His kingdom was not an earthly kingdom, that His business was not to wear a crown and found an earthly monarchy, but to proclaim truth; and that His followers were not soldiers and warriors, but all earnest seekers after truth. Pilate therefore might dismiss from his mind all idea of His kingdom interfering with the authority of Rome.

Let us note that the position of Christ in the world must be the position of all Christians. Like our Master we must be witnesses for God and truth against sin and ignorance. We must not be afraid to stand alone. We must testify.

The expression "every one that is of the truth" is remarkable. It must mean every one that really and honestly desires to know the truth, receives my teaching, and follows Me as a Master. Does it not show that our Lord, when He appeared, gathered around Him all who were true-hearted lovers of God's revealed will, and were seeking, however feebly, to know more of it? (Compare John iii. 20; and viii. 47.) That there were many such, like Nathanael, among the Jews, anxiously looking for a Redeemer, we cannot doubt. "These," says our Lord, "are my subjects and make up my kingdom." Just as when He speaks of Himself as a shepherd, He says, "My sheep hear my voice;" so when He speaks of Himself as God's great witness to truth, He says, "All friends of truth hear my voice."

The wise condescension with which our Lord adapts His language to Pilate's habits of thought as a Roman, is very noteworthy. If He had used Jewish figures of speech, drawn from Old Testament language, Pilate might well have failed to understand Him. But every Roman in high position must have heard the arguments of philosophers about "the truth." Therefore our Lord says, "I am a witness to truth." In speaking to unconverted people, it is wise to use terms which they can understand.

Theophylact suggests that here is an appeal to Pilate's conscience "If you are a real seeker after truth you will listen to Me."

38.—[*Pilate saith...What is truth?*] This famous question, in my judgment, can only admit of one interpretation. It is the cold, sneering, sceptical interjection of a mere man of the world, who has persuaded himself that there is no such thing as truth, that all religions are equally false, that this life is all we have to care for, and that creeds and modes of faith are only words and names and superstitions, which no sensible person need attend to. It is precisely the state of mind in which thousands of great and rich men in every age live and die. Expanded and paraphrased, Pilate's question comes to this:—"Truth indeed! What is truth? I have heard all my life of various philosophical systems, each asserting that it has found the truth, and each differing widely from the others. Who is to decide what is truth and what is not?"—The best proof that this is the right view of the sentence is Pilate's behaviour when he has asked the question. He does not, as Lord Bacon remarked two centuries ago, wait for an answer, but breaks off the conversation and goes away.—The supposition that he asked a question, as an honest inquirer, with a real desire to get an answer, is too improbable and unreasonable to require any comment. The right way to understand Pilate's meaning is to put ourselves in his place, and to consider how many sects and schools of philosophers there were in the world at the time when our Lord appeared,—some Roman, some Grecian, and some Egyptian,—all alleging that they had got the truth, and all equally unsatisfactory. In short Gallio, who thought Christianity a mere "question of words and names,"—Festus, who thought the dislike of the Jews to Paul arose from "questions of their own superstition,"—and Pontius Pilate, were all much alike. The worldly-minded Roman noble speaks like a man sick and weary of philosophical speculations;—"What is truth indeed? Who can tell?"—Nevertheless truth was very near him. If he had waited he might have learned!

Lightfoot alone thinks that Pilate only meant, "What is the true state of affairs? How can one so poor as Thou art be a King? How canst Thou be a King and yet not of this world!"

[*And when...said this...went out...Jews.*] The meaning of this sentence is that Pilate "went out" of the palace where he had been conversing with our Lord apart from the Jews, and returned to the courtyard, or open space at the gate, where he had left the Jews at the thirty-third verse. He broke off the conversation at this point. Very likely the mention of "truth" touched his conscience, and he found it convenient to go out hurriedly, and cover his retreat with a sneer. A bad conscience generally dislikes a close conversation with a good man.

Augustine says, "I suppose that when Pilate said, What is truth? the Jews' custom, that one should be released at the passover, came into his mind at that instant, and for this reason he did not wait for Jesus to tell him what truth was, that no time might be lost!" This, however, seems rather improbable.

[*And saith.... I find...no fault at all.*] In this sentence comes out the true impression of Pilate about our Lord.—"After examining this man I can discern in Him no guilt, and nothing certainly to warrant me in condemning Him to death. He says, no doubt, and does not hesitate to avow it, that He is a King. But I find that His kingdom is not one which interferes with the authority of Cæsar. Such Kings as this we Romans do not care for, or regard as criminals. In short, your charge against Him entirely breaks down, and I am disposed to dismiss Him as not guilty."

Our Lord, we may remember, came to be a sacrifice for our sins. It was only fitting that he who was one of the chief agents in killing Him, should publicly declare that, like a lamb without blemish, there was "no fault in Him."

39.—[*But ye have a custom, etc.*] In this verse we see the cowardly, weak, double-minded character of Pilate coming out. He knows in his own conscience that our Lord is innocent, and that if he acts justly he ought to let Him go free. But he fears offending the Jews, and wants to contrive matters so as to please them. He therefore prepares a plan by which he

hoped that Jesus might be found guilty and the Jews satisfied, and yet Jesus might depart unhurt, and his own secret desire to acquit Him be gratified.—The plan was this. The Jews had a custom that at passover time they might obtain from the Roman Governor the release of some notable prisoner. Pilate craftily suggests that the prisoner released this passover should be our Lord Jesus Christ.—“Let us suppose that Jesus is guilty,” he seems to say: “I am willing to condemn Him, and declare Him a criminal worthy of death, and a malefactor, in order to please you. But having pronounced Him a guilty criminal, what say you to my letting Him go free, according to the passover custom?”—This cowardly and unjust judge hoped in this way to please the Jews, by declaring an innocent person guilty, and yet at the same time to please himself by getting His life spared. Such are the ways of worldly and unprincipled rulers. Between the base fear of men, the desire to please the mob, and the secret dictates of their own conscience, they are continually doing wicked things, and pleasing nobody at all, and least of all themselves.

About this “custom,” and when it began, we know nothing. St. Mark’s account would lead us to suppose that as soon as Pilate came out of his palace, the multitude cried out for the usual passover favour to be granted to them. (See Mark xv. 8.) Pilate would seem to have caught at the idea at once, and to have suggested that Jesus should be the person released.

There seems a latent meaning in Pilate’s use of the expression “the King of the Jews.” Some think that it is a sneer.—“This miserable, poor, lowly King; will you not have Him let go?”—Others think that Pilate had in view our Lord’s claim to be the Messiah. “Would it not be better to release this man who asserts that He is your own Messiah? Would it not be a scandal to your nation to kill Him?”—A desire to release our Lord, side by side with a cowardly fear of offending the Jews by doing what was just and right, runs through all Pilate’s dealings. He evidently knows what he ought to do, but does not do it.

Henry thinks Pilate must have heard how popular Jesus was with some of the Jews, and must have known of His triumphal entry into Jerusalem a few days before. “He looked on Him as the darling of the multitude, and the envy of the rulers. Therefore he made no doubt they would demand the release of Jesus; and this would stop the prosecution, and all would be well.” But he had not reckoned on the influence of the priests over the fickle multitude.

40.—[*Then cried they all, etc.*] This verse describes the complete failure of Pilate’s notable plan, by which he hoped to satisfy the Jews and yet release Jesus. The fierce and bigoted party of Caiaphas would not listen to his proposal for a moment. They declared they would rather have Barabbas, a notorious prisoner in the hands of the Romans, released than Jesus. Nothing would content them but our Lord’s death. Barabbas, we know from St. Luke (xxiii. 19), was a murderer as well as a robber. The Jews were asked to decide whether the holy Jesus or the vile criminal should be let go free and released from prison.—Such was their utter hardness, bitterness, cruelty, and hatred of our Lord, that they actually declare they would rather have Barabbas set free than Jesus! Nothing in short would satisfy them but Christ’s blood. Thus they committed the great sin which Peter charges home on them not long after: “Ye denied Jesus in the presence of Pilate, when he was determined to let Him go.—Ye denied the Holy One and the Just, and desired a murderer to be granted unto you.” (Acts iii. 13, 14.) They publicly declared that they liked a robber and a murderer better than Christ!

The Greek word rendered “cried,” signifies a very loud cry or shout. It is the same word that occurs at the raising of Lazarus. “He cried, Lazarus, come forth!” (John xi. 43.)

The expression “again” must either refer to the loud cries the Jews had raised, when they first brought Jesus to Pilate and demanded His condemnation; or else it must refer to a former cry for Barabbas to be released. According to Matthew they TWICE demanded this,

with an interval of time between. (Compare Matt. xxvii. 15-26.)

The singularly typical character of all this transaction should be carefully noticed. Even here at this juncture we have a lively illustration of the great Christian doctrine of *substitution*. Barabbas, the real criminal, is acquitted and let go free. Jesus, innocent and guiltless, is condemned and sentenced to death. So is it in the salvation of our souls. We are all by nature like Barabbas, and deserve God's wrath and condemnation; yet he was accounted righteous and set free. The Lord Jesus Christ is perfectly innocent; and yet He is counted a sinner, punished as a sinner, and put to death that we may live. Christ suffers, though guiltless, that we may be pardoned. We are pardoned, though guilty, because of what Christ does for us. We are sinners, and yet counted righteous. Christ is righteous, and yet counted a sinner. Happy is that man who understands this doctrine, and has laid hold on it by faith for the salvation of his own soul.

In leaving this chapter, it is vain to deny that there are occasional difficulties in harmonizing the four different accounts of our Lord's examination and crucifixion. This of course arises from one Gospel writer dwelling more fully on one set of facts, and another on another. But we need not doubt that all is perfectly harmonious, and that if we do not see it, the reason lies in our present want of perception. If each Evangelist had told the story in precisely the same words, the whole result would have been far less satisfactory. It would have savoured of imposture, concert, and collusion. The varieties in the four accounts are just what might have been expected from four honest independent witnesses, and, fairly treated, admit of explanation.

Augustine remarks, "How all the Evangelists agree together and nothing in any one Evangelist is at variance with the truth put forth by another,—this whosoever desires to know, let him seek it in laborious writings, and not in popular discourses, and not by standing and hearing, but by sitting and reading, or by lending a most attentive ear and mind to him that readeth. Yet let him believe, before he knows it, that there is nothing written by any one Evangelist, that can possibly be contrary either to his own or another's narration."

Melancthon suggests that the whole history of the passion, in this chapter, is a vivid typical picture of the history of Christ's Church in every age. He bids us observe what a multitude of portraits it contains! Saints both weak and strong,—enemies of many kinds—traitors, hypocrites, tyrants, priests, rulers, mobs, violence, treachery, the flight of friends, the bitter language of foes. What is it but a kind of prophetic history of Christ's Church?

The character of Pontius Pilate is so ably drawn out by Ellicott, that it may be well to quote it, in concluding this chapter. "Pilate was a thorough and complete type of the later-Roman man of the world. Stern, but not relentless,—shrewd and world-worn,—prompt and practical,—haughtily just,—and yet, as the early writers correctly observed, self-seeking and cowardly,—able to perceive what was right, but without moral strength to follow it out,—the Procurator of Judæa stands forth a sad and terrible instance of a man whom the fear of endangered self-interest drove not only to act against the deliberate convictions of his heart and conscience, but further to commit an act of cruelty and injustice, even after those convictions had been deepened by warnings and strengthened by presentiment."