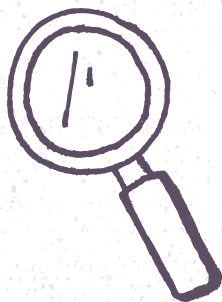


# A CONVERSATION WITH JESUS

ON



# TRUTH

DAVID HELM

CHRISTIAN  
**FOCUS**

# TWO WORDS BEFORE BEGINNING



## ONE

The book in your hands is one of six. Short volumes all. Think of them as people to meet, not pages to be read. In each, a charcoal sketch is drawn of a person who first appeared on the pages of John's Gospel. Both women and men. Real flesh and blood. All worthy of attention. And each one fully capable of standing on their own two feet.

Beyond this, they all have someone in common. Jesus. The Nazarene. The Christ—he who forever changed the world we live in. Anyway, they all met him. In person. And they talked with him. More than that. Each one had a *conversation with Jesus* about something important to them.

## TWO

I suppose something should be said about why 'these six'? Let's just say the selection is subjective. Author's prerogative. I liked them. I wanted to know them. And I learned significant things from each one of them. There are good reasons to think that you will connect with them too. Their struggles are our struggles. Their questions too. In fact, some people are saying there has never been another century to resemble the one these six lived in, until ours came along. And if that is the case, you may just run into yourself by running into them.

At any rate, there came a day when they all ran into Jesus. Of course, he is the only character to emerge in every encounter. I am confident that you will enjoy getting to know him.

# DIRECTOR'S NOTES



## CAST:



**PILATE:** Roman prefect, a pragmatist,  
dressed in authoritative robes



**JESUS:** a criminal, bloodied, with hands  
bound and clothes torn



**CROWD:** both the rabble and the  
religious, strange bedfellows united

## SETTING:

Jerusalem. A royal gated courtyard (Latin inscriptions overhead). Horse stalls to one side. Behind, a large municipal building made of stone.

It is early in the morning. Too early. At least for a Roman prefect who was recently, and reluctantly, disturbed by an angry and vicious crowd. The size and strength of the multitude is beyond reason.

At the center of the stage stands the man. Jesus. Alone. The obvious prisoner. And already badly beaten.

# A CONVERSATION WITH JESUS ON TRUTH



Lizzie: *I'm sorry.*

Senator: *Why should you be sorry, when you have told the truth?*

Lizzie: *I am sorry that—that that's the truth.*

Senator: *There is nothing either of us can do about that ... Alas, the truth is the truth.*

Lizzie: *Yeah, sure.*

### —THE RESPECTFUL PROSTITUTE<sup>1</sup>

We once believed in *truth*.

It was not very long ago, you will have to take my word on this, that most people—including the various schools of thought and intellectual traditions—agreed that we could speak of one set of statements as being true and another as being false. Of course, we also agreed that both sets could be true, just as both could be false.



In that world, a world which really did exist, the difference between something being true, or not, depended largely on the ancient evidentiary tools of *facts*, *moral certitudes*, or an appeal to *God*. For example, either one actually did go to the store on Tuesday to buy a pack of cigarettes (a statement of *fact*) or one did not. Just as in the United States, one shares a right to 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness' (a statement of *moral certitude*), or one does not. I should say, it was a very nice world to live in, and I for one would like to have it back.

But now, in this day, everything has changed. Evidence once used to corroborate statements of fact is often blatantly ignored, and self-evident knowledge—the shared ground upon which our moral certitudes once stood—appears to be shrinking in size every day. In addition, the more recent push against the person (or idea even) of *God* hasn't particularly helped matters. It is no wonder

then, that with *truth* and *God* on the outs, many of us are finding it difficult to believe in much of anything. Let's face it. If we no longer have facts, moral certitudes, or God to lean on, what tools are at our disposal to ascertain *what is truth?*

However, and even with all that said, what an exciting question this (*what is truth?*) really is! And fortunately for us, we are still free to pursue it. And that is precisely what this short book intends to do. 'What is truth?' is the question a Roman prefect asked Jesus, centuries before we got ourselves into this tangled mess. We aspire then, with this book, to look at the conversation this Roman ruler once had with Jesus. In doing so, we can only hope that we'll make some progress on the question. Or, at a minimum, to learn ways to better approach the day in which we live.

## PONTIUS PILATE, THE ROMAN GOVERNOR

The Gospel of John introduces us to a man who, had he lived now, would have felt right at home. His name was Pilate. And he was, by way of title, a Roman *governor*. As a governor, he was responsible for the administration of the local government in a large city.<sup>2</sup> We get our first glimpse of him in his outdoor, gated courtyard. Religious leaders appear to have awakened him on the morning they had Jesus arrested:

*Then they led Jesus from the house of Caiaphas to the governor's headquarters. It was early morning. They themselves did not enter the governor's headquarters, so that they would not be defiled, but could eat the Passover. So Pilate went outside to them and said, 'What accusation do you bring against this man?' They answered him, 'If this man were not doing evil, we would not*

*have delivered him over to you.' Pilate said to them, 'Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law.' The Jews said to him, 'It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death.'*

Did you notice that Pilate speaks twice in this first encounter? 'What did this guy do? ... You figure out what to do with him.' And so already, even before getting to his famous conversation with Jesus on what is truth, Pilate has divulged, with a bevy of clues, that he is like us: He is a busy man and without time. He is disinclined to spend his day seeking out answers to questions that require him to investigate or explore evidence. To put it bluntly, Pilate has no interest in finding out the truth of the matter.

## IGNORANCE ON MATTERS OF TRUTH

Pilate, like many today, preferred ignorance to truth. This is especially striking, though,

given that Pilate's professional responsibilities included safeguarding the law. On the morning when Jesus was hauled before him, the truth claims surrounding him were at fever pitch. A man's life hung in the balance. Yet, Pilate's preferred response was to abdicate responsibility: 'Tell me again, why am I seeing this man? It's early in the morning, I have a full day. And look. If this is a religious question, settle it yourselves. Your truth is not my domain.' Pilate cuts a very modern figure when it comes to truth. He simply plans to ignore Jesus, disregard the multitude, and get on with his day.

Yet, the religious leaders prevailed by concluding their opening salvo with, 'It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death.' As religionists, they were not allowed to condemn a man to death, only Rome could authorize that. And so, on this day, Pilate appears to be stuck. Something must be done, given his official capacity, with Jesus and the truths,

or not, that surround him. And this is all very good for us! For it means that we will get our conversation with Jesus on *truth* after all.

The setting now shifts. It moves from Pilate's outer grounds to his inner headquarters. In other words, from his courtyard to his court-room. And this must be so, given the serious charges the religious leaders have brought against Jesus. Roman law *must* intervene. Ignorance was no longer an option. And as it was for Pilate, so I hope it is for us. The claims of Jesus are so profound, and his imprint on human history so large, that it would be worth our while to assess these claims.

## INQUIRY AND THE ISSUE OF TRUTH

John's Gospel makes it clear that Pilate took the initiative in this conversation. Pilate's preference for ignorance gave way to inquiry. By using a direct question, he appears well versed in handling one of the ancient tools

for establishing the truth of a matter. Pilate begins: 'Are you the king of the Jews?' It seems like an obvious place to start. Pilate has likely been told that this man is a threat to Rome. He claims to be some kind of a king, suggesting that the charge of insurrection is being brought.

If this is the case, certainly some corroborating evidence will be close at hand. The question Pilate asks falls neatly into the statement of *fact* category for establishing truth. Either Jesus is, or he isn't, a king. All Pilate intends to do is let the facts decide. And by opening with this direct question, Pilate appears to be looking for some.

That said, Pilate, the questioner, is a more complex character than I may have led you to believe. It is true that he is like us in some respects, but he is also unlike us in others. His uniqueness stems from his role in Rome's ancient judicial system.

Pilate wears many hats. You might as well know that at the outset. At times he will serve in the conversation as prosecuting attorney for the religious leaders. We will find Pilate asking questions in his effort to determine what is true, and what is not, about Jesus. His assumption is that these answers will lead to a verdict on his guilt or innocence. However, at other times Pilate will act as counsel for the defense, going so far as to try to get Jesus off the hook. And in the end, he will also function as the presiding judge (who will end up sentencing Jesus to death by crucifixion). Put differently, the contours of Roman law mean that Pilate carries the weight of many responsibilities into this conversation: He must establish the truth, defend the truth, and then ultimately decide on the truth. What you and I learn from him in the process will go a long way in determining what we do with Jesus and his concept of truth.

Jesus responds to Pilate's opening question—'Are you the king of the Jews?'—with one of



his own: 'Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?' The conversation is underway, but it already sounds unconventional. In a court of law, questions normally produce answers, not another question. What are we to make of this? Why is Jesus, prisoner before the bar of justice, probing the prosecutor? Could he be trying to learn if Pilate's question is a *personal* one? Is he unaware that the trial has begun? Does he think that Pilate is hoping to elicit testimony from him that is self-incriminating? And if so, is Jesus taking issue with him?

We may never know for sure. However, the way Pilate responds leads me to think that we can rule out the notion that he had a *personal* interest in the question he was asking. He responds defensively. 'Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done?' Clearly, these are not the words of a man who is open to exploring the deeper truths that would

have confronted him had Jesus been a king. Rather, they reveal what we have already suspected, Pilate is a pragmatic man. His inquiry is professional by nature. He is simply a lawyer performing a well-practiced function. In short, Pilate's reply betrays a desire to bring this case to a speedy end.

## THE INTRUSIVE NATURE OF TRUTH

It is precisely at this point though, that Jesus intrudes with some of his most provocative testimony in the trial. It will be worthwhile for us to slow down lest we miss what he says. Pilate asks: 'What have you done?' At that moment, Jesus sensitively shifts the ground on which the remainder of the conversation stands. He alters his defense from simply providing evidence related to statements of *fact* to something more closely aligned with *moral certitudes* and the idea of *God*. Here is what he says to Pilate:

*'My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants*