

I Met Jesus: Pilate

John 18:28-19:16

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Our series in John is nearing its end. Over these months we've studied some fascinating people in the story: the religious and highly educated aristocrat Nicodemus; the Samaritan woman with the bad reputation; the friend Lazarus; the traitor Judas; and many others. We've met people from all walks of life and all kinds of backgrounds who met Jesus on the journey of their lives. In each case, that meeting was transformational – sometimes for good and their salvation and sometimes to their destruction (i.e. Judas).

Today's character is completely different from all the rest. He was a politician. A ruler. A Roman. Powerful. Cruel. Egotistical. His name is famous, but his story is not. Pontius Pilate.

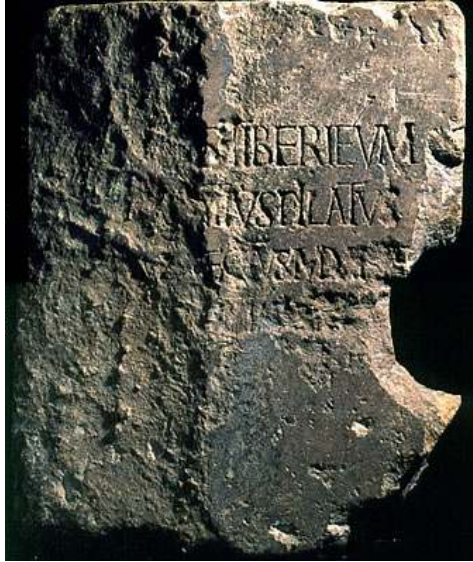
Who was Pontius Pilate?

First we need to realize he was a real human being. Sometimes these notorious people become to us one-dimensional caricatures more than real people. Pilate is most famous for being the prefect or governor of the province of Judea during the time of Christ. This placed him in the most dramatic moment in human history as the holy Son of God was put on trial for being a criminal, a blasphemer, and an insurrectionist. How could Jesus the great moral teacher and miracle worker ever be found guilty of a capital crime? What judge would make that determination? Pontius Pilate.

Let's first find out about Pilate. Where was he from? His background is sketchy. He was from the upper class of Roman society. He likely was born a Roman citizen and grew up enjoying all the benefits of Roman citizenry: wealth, education, literature, art, and entertainments such as the stadium races and the gladiator games. The gospel of Luke says he was married, but Roman rulers were hardly known for their marital faithfulness.

Rome was the greatest power in history and Pilate was born into a well-connected and well-heeled Roman family. We don't know how or when Pilate pursued a path of political rule but we know why – he was ambitious for power and prestige. He had friends in all the right places to live the luxurious life of a Roman ruler.

In 26 AD, he was appointed by the Roman emperor Tiberius as governor of the province of Judea. This would be somewhat like receiving news that you are now in charge of keeping peace and quiet at Vacation Bible School. That's an impossible task given the citizens of our VBS. Judea was a notorious powder-keg of religious and political unrest. The Jewish practice of religion was bizarre to the Romans and certainly at odds with their worship of the emperor. The appointment might have gone something like this, "Pilate, I have good news and bad news. The good news is that you are now a Roman governor. The bad news is you will govern the province of Judea." But to Judea he went and established his headquarters at the posh Mediterranean palace of Caesarea. For a long time historians questioned the historicity of Pilate as governor until 1961, when a tablet was found in Caesarea that said, *Pilate, Prefect of Judea* (see picture on next page). We were able to see this on our recent trip to Israel. This is historical evidence of the biblical Pilate.



He had command over 5,000 Roman soldiers whose primary responsibility was to collect taxes and keep the Jewish province from exploding. The Jews detested all things Roman including this egotistical governor. Pilate held the Jews in contempt as well. Luke 13 describes an incident in which Pilate massacred a group of Jews who were offering sacrifices in worship. There is another story from the historian Josephus in which Pilate enraged the Jews by bringing Roman standards bearing the emperor's image into the holy city of Jerusalem.

So the portrait of history is consistent with the biblical one. Pilate was a shrewd politician who liked to strut his stuff, especially at the expense of the Jews. He despised them. They despised him. At least they had something in common.

The Story of Pilate and Jesus (John 18:28ff.)

We pick up the story of Pilate in Jesus' most devastating moments. Around midnight he was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane. One of his own, Judas Iscariot, betrayed him. The Roman soldiers take him to Annas' house, then Caiaphas the high priest's house. He is interrogated and questioned with many false witnesses being called against him. What was this all about? They wanted to kill him and they needed to corroborate a capital offense charge against him. Many accusations were thrown out, but the witnesses didn't agree in their testimonies. So they went for the charge of blasphemy. The high priest puts him under oath and asks if he is the Son of God. Jesus' answers, *Yes I am* (Matthew 26:64).

The high priest tears his robes and now they think they have him because he claimed to be God. But there is still a big problem. When the Romans took over Judea earlier in the century, they took away from the Jews the ability to adjudicate capital offenses. Only the Romans could condemn someone to death. They needed the Roman governor to sign off on the death sentence. This would serve a couple purposes for the Sanhedrin: by having the Romans do their dirty work, their hands will seem cleaner in the matter. Secondly, the Old Testament law concerning blasphemy called for death by stoning. The Roman form of execution was far more appealing to them. Crucifixion. The Old Testament Law had something to say about that as well.

A hanged man is cursed by God." (Deuteronomy 21:23). Crucifixion was considered hanging and what better way to put an end to the nonsense about Jesus being the Messiah than to

have him die hanging on a cross? The Romans would indict him as a criminal and the Old Testament Law would indict him as "cursed by God." Then what will come of all the Messianic chatter? It would be their coup d'état. They couldn't help but smile at how clever their plan was. But they still had to get Pilate to go along with it.

The Questions and Character of Pontius Pilate

What accusation do you bring against this man? (John 18:29)

"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." This was to fulfill the word that Jesus had spoken to show by what kind of death he was going to die." (John 18:28-32)

Our passage plays out in a series of conversations between Pilate and the Jewish leaders outside the palace fortress, and Pilate and Jesus inside in the palace. The reason for the Jews remaining outside is that they practiced an application of Old Testament law that forbade being in the home of a Gentile. They would be ceremonially unclean and not be able to participate in Passover feast. So they stayed outside.

Immediately we see the hypocritical character of these Jewish leaders. Here is spiritual legalism and hypocrisy on display. They were ultra-concerned about the Old Testament law with respect to ceremonial cleanness, but with respect to plotting to kill an innocent man they have no concerns whatsoever. *Would you like to come in? NO! We must be religiously clean. Could we talk about killing Jesus outside?* Perhaps you've endured religious hypocrisy. You've thought about walking away from Christianity entirely wondering if there is anything real or authentic. I want you to see in this moment, real Christianity is the Christ inside the palace, not the pretenders outside.

Pilate asks them a question, *"What accusation do you bring against this man?"* (Verse 29) Jesus is bound and already bloodied and beaten. He doesn't look like much of a threat in his condition. *Trust us*, they reply. *"If this man were not doing evil, we would not have delivered him over to you."* (Verse 30) They want a rubber stamp.

We sense Pilate's antipathy for the Jews with his response, *"Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law."* (Verse 31) You don't become a governor by being stupid, except perhaps in Illinois. He knows why they are there. *"For he knew that it was out of envy that they had delivered him up."* (Matthew 27:18) They are in a dilemma. They want Jesus dead. Only Pilate has that power. *"It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death."* (John 18:31)

Are you the King of the Jews? (John 18:33)

"So Pilate entered his headquarters again and called Jesus and said to him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answered, "Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?" Pilate answered, "Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done?" (John 18:33-35)

Interestingly, all four gospels record this question, *"Are you the King of the Jews?"* He doesn't ask about blasphemy or healing on the Sabbath. Those were of no interest to a

Roman. Why would Pilate's interest be primarily if Jesus might see himself as a kind of king? The Romans were all about power and control. Do you remember what the wise men said to King Herod when they arrived in Jerusalem having seen the star in the east? *Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?*" (Matthew 2:2) How did Herod respond to that? He killed every two-year-old and younger throughout the region of Bethlehem. He wanted no rival to his throne. He was the "King of the Jews" near the beginning of his life and he dealt with the same political dynamite at the end, *"Are you the king of the Jews?"*

What is truth? (John 18:38)

Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world." "Then Pilate said to him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world— to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice." Pilate said to him, "What is truth?" (John 18:36-38)

Is Jesus a king? He is the King of kings. However, he describes a kingdom far different than the one Pilate knew and served. How did Pilate get his authority? Emperor Tiberius gave it to him. How does the President of the United States derive his authority? The election of the people and the Constitution. Human kingdoms and earthly authority come by the sword, or a vote or in a monarchy, by birthright. Jesus' authority and kingdom are from another world – the spiritual world – and his authority is given to him by God the Father.

So we have the juxtaposition of the two great kingdoms. The kingdom of man embodied by Pilate and the kingdom of God embodied by Jesus. For a pompous Roman governor, this is hard to take. A kingdom of truth?

We don't know much about Pilate, but we can know that he didn't rise to this position because of his perfect Sunday School attendance. Ancient Rome was even worse than our politics today. In our society, politicians often rise to levels of influence by peddling that influence, through favors and unethical behavior. An honest politician is a rare find and we should be thankful that there are some. Pilate the politician trafficked in a culture of lies and deceit. Read the story of Rome and it is filled with bloodshed and violence and men thirsty for power and willing to do anything to get it. The last thing you would call Rome was a kingdom of truth.

Yet standing here before Pilate is THE TRUTH. What does that mean, *Jesus is the truth?* Jesus was incarnate God, the full expression of God's glorious and righteous character. His every word and action incarnated in this world the character of a holy God. His kingdom was not built on lies and a quest for power, but rather on righteousness, love, and self-sacrifice. Only hours before he had washed his disciples' feet to prove that point.

Let me tell you what happened from here. Pilate realizes that he is in a difficult spot. He tries to wiggle out of it by offering to release Jesus but the crowds vote for the release of the murderer Barabbas. Pilate does a half-measure and has Jesus flogged and again presents him to the crowd hoping the flogging would appease them. The crowd led by the chief priests begins to chant, *"Crucify Him!"* (John 19:6) Pilate wants to set Jesus free but the chief priests bring out their trump card. *"If you release this man, you are not Caesar's friend."* (John 19:12) This was a threat and Pilate knew it. Pilate's political instincts tell him better Jesus' head than his own. So he consents to their wishes and condemns Jesus to death by crucifixion and within that afternoon, Jesus would be dead.

Pilate ruled in Judea another six years after Jesus' death. The Jews' hatred of him reaches a fever pitch and they petitioned for his removal from office. He was recalled to Rome and history says he was forced to commit suicide. Thus ends the sad story of Pontius Pilate. What do you suppose is the eternal punishment for the man who personally gave the order for Jesus to be crucified?

What we Learn from the Life of Pilate

Pilate found himself in the clash of two kingdoms...so do we

We must see John 19 and the events around Jesus' crucifixion as much more than merely a localized Judean struggle for power. It was a decisive moment in time and human redemption and ultimately the clash of two kingdoms.

The two kingdoms – the kingdom of man and the kingdom of God/truth

Pilate represents the kingdom of man. It is a kingdom of self and the lust for power and the advance of self-glory. On the other side is Jesus. The one who has all glory and power, yet allowed himself to be arrested and beaten and ultimately died voluntarily to save us. Pilate and Jesus. Kingdom of Man and the kingdom of God.

No two kingdoms could be any different. We must realize that going on around us is the same battle between the same kingdoms. The kingdom of man urges us to live for ourselves and the idols our natural selves crave: power, money, and the glorification of self. These idols appear to satisfy and they never do, but they blind us to our real need. I remember talking with a politician and he said to me, "Why do I need God? I'm the _____." (he stated the political office he held).

The kingdom of God is in this world as well in the gospel of Christ and the church. This kingdom calls us to the opposite. Rather than live for self, we are called to die to ourselves and to live for God's glory, honor, and fame. If the symbol of the Kingdom of Man is a sword, the symbol of God's kingdom is the cross and a hero who died there. These two kingdoms couldn't be any more different.

They are in conflict and this plays out in big and small ways. So when the Church claims a transcendent definition of marriage as between a man and a woman, how does the Kingdom of Man respond? Or how about when there is some clear display of faith in God? Say when a Christian NFL football player bows in prayer before and after games, what does ESPN think? Or when the Catholic Church stands by its view of the sanctity of life from conception, how does CNN respond? We have to realize these are not simply the clash of preferences, but they are the clash of kingdoms and the battle is waged in the human heart. It explains the world around us.

Answer Pilate's question....what is truth?

Jesus cared deeply about truth. Nearly 80 times in the gospels he says, *Verily, Verily or Truly, Truly I say to you*. This means, what I am saying is the truth. Nowhere is this more clearly stated than in John 14:6, "*Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."*" (John 14:6)

Think about this claim. It is the same one Pilate heard.... *I am the Truth*. Let's work it backwards. I am the TRUTH. What is truth? Truth is the incarnation of God in a person. The absolute and unchanging character of God – holy, good, without deception or lie. It is reality

as God sees it and defines it and has revealed in creation and the Scriptures. I AM the truth. The truth is not some philosophical idea. The truth is personal and relational. I. Jesus. If truth is found in a person that embodies reality as God defines it, than to know him is to know the truth.

What if Pilate would have considered that? *"Hmmm....Truth. Really? I'm a politician. All I've known is lies. The truth sounds really good."*

What might Jesus have said? Perhaps he would have said, *"Pilate, I am the way, the truth, and the life. By believing in me you will have what all your political pursuits and all your wealth and all your power will never provide. Life. Love. Hope. Purpose. Forgiveness. Satisfaction. These are only found in me."*

Jesus' words were an offer to Pilate. With the woman at the well, Jesus offered water that would cause her to never thirst again. She accepted that offer and it led her to saving faith. Pilate did not. But that offer lives on through the gospel of Jesus. He is still the truth. All who are of the truth still hear his voice and believe. When we do, our citizenship changes, from the kingdom of man and all its perversion to the kingdom of truth found in Christ.

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