

Series: Faces Around the Cross

Part One:

"...Suffered Under Pontius Pilate"

Mark 15:1-15

March 4, 2007

Over the next four weeks, as we come up to Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday, I want to take you to the day Jesus died. We're going to be looking at four people who played roles in that day. Those four are **Pontius Pilate**, who judged Jesus worthy of death and sent Him off to be crucified; then we'll look at **Peter**, who denied Jesus despite being a follower for the three years leading up to the crucifixion. Then we'll examine an interesting minor character in the story: **Simon of Cyrene**, the man who was forced to carry Jesus' cross the last part of the walk to Golgotha. And we'll finish with the disciple **John**, the only disciple actually present with Jesus when He was dying on the cross.

Now, the reason to look at these people isn't just to learn about them. There's value in just that, learning about people in the Bible, but we want to do more than that. The real value is when you get a lesson from someone's life. And these life lessons bring us closer and closer to Jesus. **When you look at Pilate, we have a total spiritual failure.** Then with Peter, a believer who falls flat on his face but recovers. With Simon of Cyrene, we get a lesson about walking with Jesus and bearing our own cross. And then finally with John, we get a lesson in faithfulness to the end.

I want to start today with Pontius Pilate. **Pilate was a spiritual disaster.** And at the heart of Pilate's disaster is that he was a **coward**. There's no sin in being afraid, but it is a sin to be a spiritual coward. And that's what Pilate was, a spiritual coward.

Let's look at his life. Pilate hated his assignment as Roman governor of Judea. He never understood the Jews and certainly that he never understood Jesus.

It's ironic that his name is remembered in the Apostles' Creed, an ancient creed that millions of Christians around the world recite as an affirmation of their faith. Part of that creed reads:

*I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He **suffered under Pontius Pilate**, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again.*

"He suffered under Pontius Pilate." That's the legacy of Pilate: He made Jesus suffer on the cross. Who is this man Pilate? And why do I call him a coward?

We can piece together a lot from sources outside the Bible. He came from a prominent Roman family, one that had many men who had military careers and had served in public office. We know he was posted to Judea in 26 AD. We also know he was an awful governor.

The Jews were unusual people as far as the Romans were concerned. They were fanatic about their God—a God no one could see. There were no statues of the God of Israel, and that seemed very odd to the Romans. Instead, the Temple at Jerusalem was the focus of their faith. Festivals of sacrifice—especially Passover—were at the center of Jewish religion.

To people like Pilate, the Jews were unreasonably exclusive. Here he was, the governor of Judea, but even he could not approach the Temple. Instead, well outside

the temple there was a fence with a sign warning any Gentile that if they got closer, they would be put to death. Few ever dared to test this.

Pilate showed complete insensitivity to Jewish scruples. Previous Roman governors declined to set up Roman standards in Jerusalem because of the Roman gods depicted on the standards. Pilate did, to the protest of all, especially the Jewish Council of Elders, the Sanhedrin. Reluctantly, he backed down. But he retaliated by setting up golden shields at the fortress in Jerusalem and minting coins with the same symbols. Again, there was protests and after a time, he backed down again.

So he set his mind to a practical problem: water for Jerusalem. An aqueduct was needed, and the temple treasury was running a huge surplus. He appropriated the money needed, then, you guessed it, the people protested that "holy money" was being used for secular purposes—and by a Roman! But this time, Pilate didn't back down. An angry mob of protesters, mostly from Galilee, gathered in the outer courtyard of the Temple. Pilate ordered his soldiers to crush what he saw as a rebellion. Many died that day. And many influential members of the Sanhedrin wrote Caesar asking that Pilate be fired.

That was the situation Pilate was in when Jesus came before him. He felt his governorship was hanging by a thread and he saw the case of Jesus as nothing but trouble. Compared to some other matters that had come before Him, Jesus was a minor nuisance. But he was determined not to bungle this case.

What did he know about Jesus before that day? He must have known some things. He must have known that He was a popular

traveling teacher from Galilee. He must have known that He was an opponent of the hypocrites who ran the Temple and who dominated the Sanhedrin. He must have known that some considered Him the Messiah.

The messiah thing was the most troubling part about Jesus. For the Jews of Judea and Galilee, the Messiah was expected to be a warrior king who would reestablish the throne of David. Pilate's predecessors had dealt with two so-called Messiahs, and his successors would deal with two more.

But Jesus was different from all the others: no one had ever seen Him even hold a sword. Instead, all reports spoke of Him teaching the crowds and of miraculous healings. This Jesus was impressive, but He seemed to be only interested in religious things—things Pilate didn't understand or even care to learn about.

But everything changed on Thursday night, the night before Passover. Sometime that evening, a message came from the Sanhedrin: we intend to arrest Jesus and bring Him before you tomorrow morning for capital crimes. Do we have your support? Pilate saw this as an opportunity to get on the good side of the Sanhedrin. Pilate told them to proceed.

How do we know that Pilate was informed at this point? There are two clues found in the gospels. First, Jesus delayed a long, long time in the Garden of Gethsemane. That can best be explained by the fact that it took time for Judas to go the leaders of the Sanhedrin, for them to decide to act, for a messenger to get the message to Pilate and wait for his answer, and them to send out the "temple police", a Jewish contingent of soldiers. Also, John 18:3 implies that there were **Roman** soldiers involved in the arrest party as well. All this would have take a few hours to put together.

The second clue that Pilate had been informed on Thursday night is found in Matthew 27:19. We're told of a message that came to Pilate from his wife in the midst of Jesus' trial:

While Pilate was sitting on the judge's seat, his wife sent him this message: "Don't have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him."

By the way, we know her name: Claudia Procula. Again, this makes the most sense if Pilate had decided to go along with the Sanhedrin, ordered a detachment of soldiers to go with the messenger, and then went back to his living quarters and mentioned what was going on to Claudia.

Now, Friday morning comes. Jesus has been found guilty of blasphemy by a hastily called meeting of the Sanhedrin in the middle of the night. Now He's transferred over to Pilate on charges that the Romans cared about: rebellion and claiming to be king. Look in Mark 15:1-5:

1Very early in the morning, the chief priests, with the elders, the teachers of the law and the whole Sanhedrin, reached a decision. They bound Jesus, led him away and handed him over to Pilate.

2"Are you the king of the Jews?" asked Pilate. "Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied.

3The chief priests accused him of many things. 4So again Pilate asked him, "Aren't you going to answer? See how many things they are accusing you of."

5But Jesus still made no reply, and Pilate was amazed.

"Pilate was amazed." Actually meeting Jesus surprised Pilate. Jesus said so little in His defense—it was if He was stupid or crazy—or if He wanted to die.

The one time He answers Pilate in this passage is when Pilate asked Him directly, "Are you the King of the Jews?"

And Jesus' answer is literally, "You say." Just two words in Greek: *Su legeis*. The NIV translates His words as "Yes, it is as you say," which is a little different. Actually, Jesus was being a little guarded about His answer. Here's why: Pilate saw being "King of the Jews" as being a political rebel against Rome. Jesus saw being "King of the Jews" as being God's Messiah. So His answer kind of splits the difference, as if He were saying, "Well, yes, but what I mean by 'King of the Jews' and what you mean isn't the same."

Other than that, Jesus is pretty much silent, something foretold hundreds of years before in Isaiah 53:7:

*He was oppressed and afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
He was led like a lamb to the slaughter,
and as a sheep before her shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.*

Pilate does all the talking; Jesus is silent. He is silent because of His confidence in the plan of His Heavenly Father. **He knows there is no way forward that does not include the cross.**

The cross lies at the center of the plan of God. He must die on the cross. He must pay the price for forgiveness there. Only the God-Man, Jesus Christ, fully God and fully man can pay the price. Only God is pure enough to pay

that price; only a man can die for the sins of mankind. **The cross is a necessity.** You can't get around it.

Of course, Pilate couldn't even imagine anything like this. He must have seemed to Pilate to be the strangest rabbi in Israel. But the issue for Pilate wasn't one of truth or justice: it was, "How do I take care of the Jesus case in a way that doesn't hurt my standing with Rome?" He didn't need another embarrassment.

That's when a possible solution presented itself. You can read about it in Mark 15:6-14:

6Now it was the custom at the Feast to release a prisoner whom the people requested. 7A man called Barabbas was in prison with the insurrectionists who had committed murder in the uprising. 8The crowd came up and asked Pilate to do for them what he usually did. 9"Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?" asked Pilate, 10knowing it was out of envy that the chief priests had handed Jesus over to him. 11But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have Pilate release Barabbas instead.

12"What shall I do, then, with the one you call the king of the Jews?" Pilate asked them.

13"Crucify him!" they shouted.

14"Why? What crime has he committed?" asked Pilate.

But they shouted all the louder, "Crucify him!"

Here's a possible solution: a custom of releasing a prisoner at Passover. Pilate didn't want to acquit Jesus and throw the Sanhedrin into a rage; on the other hand, he really didn't

want to find Him guilty, because He really seemed harmless. Plus, there was that dream his wife had. Remember? I mentioned that earlier. It's recorded in Matthew 27:19. She sent this message:

"Don't have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him."

Romans were very, very superstitious. They looked at dreams, weather, cloud formations, even the spatter from a wine glass as omens and signs. But dreams were taken very seriously. Pilate must have been sweating when he finished reading that note from Claudia.

So Pilate tries to get out of the jam by offering the people a choice between a thug named Barabbas and the Rabbi from Galilee, Jesus. He thought it would be an easy way out. They call out for Barabbas. And more than that. We read in John 19:12, someone called out, "If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar."

That was Pilate's "tipping point." His whole career—even his whole life—depended on being a "friend of Caesar." Being a "friend of Caesar" meant being part of the circle of advisors and administrators around Emperor Caesar Tiberius. **The very idea of losing that status was too much.** You can almost hear Pilate thinking: "Let the Galilean die! My career is more important than this Jesus."

Look at vs. 15:

Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.

Pilate was a coward. It was fear that made him put Jesus to death. Yes, he made a big show of washing his hands, putting all the blame on the crowd, but there's no getting around the fact that Jesus died on a **Roman cross** at the hands of **Roman soldiers** and under the direction of him, the **Roman governor**.

I want us to think about fear for a minute. **Fear is the thing that unites us to Pilate.** We all have our fears. Pilate had Jesus crucified because of his fear of losing his status.

There's a passage over in Revelation 21:8 that I didn't understand for many years. It says that the **cowardly** will end up in the lake of fire—what the Book of Revelation calls hell. The reason I didn't understand it is that while I always knew that being a coward wasn't a good thing, it never seemed bad enough to get a special mention on a person's ticket to hell!

It took getting really involved in evangelism for me to understand what the big deal about cowardice was. The reality is that it's fear that keeps a lot of people away from Jesus. Not fear **of** Jesus. Fear about what people will think, or fear of what they think that they might be losing.

And there's a difference between **having fear** and **being a coward**. In battle, everybody's afraid. The only people who aren't afraid are crazy. You change from being afraid to being a coward **when you surrender to your fears and let them take over**. Pilate changed from being afraid to being a coward when he sent Jesus to die.

Today, you may have fears about being a follower of Christ. You're afraid of being labeled a religious freak. You're afraid of the

cost, and there is a cost. You're afraid of the lifestyle changes that will demand. And you're right; following Him involves a new way of life. You're afraid of the weird people you'd be identifying with. I understand that fear. I remember back in 1971 when I was on the verge of following Him. My intellectual objections held me back, but they were being answered one by one. But as I thought of what that would mean—remember I was a teenager at the time—all I could think of was the fact that whenever I went by a church it seemed to be full of old wrinkly people who smelled funny. (Sorry, that's what I thought!) I was **afraid** of being identified with them. I wanted to be with, you know, **cool people**.

But it was Jesus Himself that drew me in, and then, guess what? **I found that the coolest people in the world were the ones following Him!**

Today is a good day to say no to your fears and to say yes to your faith, to say yes to Jesus. Pilate collapsed and gave into fear and is remembered for that for all time. The Bible says, "The perfect love of God drives out fear" (1 John 4:18). You don't have to do be fearful. Put your trust in Jesus today. He will never ever disappoint you. You can have confidence in Him. Today's the day!

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