

Pilate Made the wrong Choice

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Overview

PILATE COULDN'T UNDERSTAND WHY THE PEOPLE WANTED TO KILL JESUS

Pilate's story is told in the Gospels. He is also mentioned in Acts 3:13; Acts 4:27; Acts 13:28; 1 Tim. 6:13.

In Jesus day, any death sentence had to be approved by the Roman official in charge of the administrative district. Pontius Pilate was governor of the province of Judea, where Jerusalem was located.

When the Jewish leaders had Jesus in their power and wanted to kill him, they had to obtain Pilates permission. So it happened that early one morning Pilate found a crowd at his door demanding a man's death.

Pilate's relationship with the Jews had always been stormy. His Roman toughness and fairness had been weakened by cynicism, compromises, and mistakes. On several occasions his actions had deeply offended the religious leaders. The resulting riots and chaos must have made Pilate wonder what he had gotten himself into.

He was trying to control people who treated their Roman conquerors without respect. Jesus trial was another episode in Pilate's ongoing problems.

For Pilate, there was never a doubt about Jesus innocence. Three separate times he declared Jesus not guilty. He couldn't understand what made these people want to kill Jesus, but his fear of the pressure the Jews would place on him made him decide to allow Jesus crucifixion.

Because of the people's threat to inform the emperor that Pilate hadn't eliminated a rebel against Rome, Pilate went against what he knew was right. In desperation, he chose to do wrong.

We share a common humanity with Pilate. At times we know the right and choose the wrong. He had his moment in history and now we have ours. What have we done with our opportunities and responsibilities? What judgment have we passed on Jesus?

Dominated by Rome

His constant political struggles made him a cynical and uncaring compromiser, susceptible to pressure. Although he realized Jesus was innocent, he bowed to the public demand for his execution

Roman governor of Judaea during the time of Jesus' ministry

Matthew 27:2

Then they bound him and took him to Pilate, the Roman governor.

The religious leaders had to persuade the Roman government to sentence Jesus to death because they did not have the authority to do it themselves.

The Romans had taken away the religious leaders' authority to inflict capital punishment. Politically, it looked better for the religious leaders anyway if someone else was responsible for killing Jesus.

They wanted the death to appear Roman-sponsored so the crowds couldn't blame them. The Jewish leaders had arrested Jesus on theological grounds—blasphemy; but because this charge would be thrown out of a Roman court, they had to come up with a political reason for Jesus' death. Their strategy was to show Jesus as a rebel who claimed to be a king and thus a threat to Caesar.

Pilate was the Roman governor for the regions of Samaria and Judea from A.D. 26-36. Jerusalem was located in Judea. Pilate took special pleasure in demonstrating his authority over the Jews; for example, he impounded money from the temple treasuries to build an aqueduct. Pilate was not popular, but the religious leaders had no other way to get rid of Jesus than to go to him.

Ironically, when Jesus, a Jew, came before him for trial, Pilate found him innocent. He could not find a single fault in Jesus, nor could he contrive one.

Pilate was governor over Judea

Luke 3:1

It was now the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius, the Roman emperor. Pilate was governor over Judea; Herod Antipas was ruler over Galilee; his brother Philip was ruler over Iturea and Traconitis; Lysanias was ruler over Abilene.

Tiberius, the Roman emperor, ruled from A.D. 14 to 37. Pilate was the Roman governor responsible for the province of Judea; Herod (Antipas) and Philip were half brothers and sons of the cruel Herod the Great, who had been dead more than 20 years. Antipas, Philip, Pilate, and Lysanias apparently had equal powers in governing their separate territories. All were subject to Rome and responsible for keeping peace in their respective lands.

Causes the slaughter of certain Galileans

Luke 13:1

About this time Jesus was informed that Pilate had murdered some people from Galilee as they were sacrificing at the Temple in Jerusalem.

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Tries Jesus and orders his crucifixion

John 18:28-40

Jesus' trial before Caiaphas ended in the early hours of the morning. Then he was taken to the headquarters of the Roman governor. His accusers didn't go in themselves because it would defile them, and they wouldn't be allowed to celebrate the Passover feast.

[29] So Pilate, the governor, went out to them and asked, "What is your charge against this man?"

[30] "We wouldn't have handed him over to you if he weren't a criminal!" they retorted.

[31] "Then take him away and judge him by your own laws," Pilate told them. "Only the Romans are permitted to execute someone," the Jewish leaders replied.

[32] This fulfilled Jesus' prediction about the way he would die.

[33] Then Pilate went back inside and called for Jesus to be brought to him. "Are you the King of the Jews?" he asked him.

[34] Jesus replied, "Is this your own question, or did others tell you about me?"

[35] "Am I a Jew?" Pilate asked. "Your own people and their leading priests brought you here. Why? What have you done?"

[36] Then Jesus answered, "I am not an earthly king. If I were, my followers would have fought when I was arrested by the Jewish leaders. But my Kingdom is not of this world."

[37] Pilate replied, "You are a king then?"

"You say that I am a king, and you are right," Jesus said. "I was born for that purpose. And I came to bring truth to the world. All who love the truth recognize that what I say is true."

[38] "What is truth?" Pilate asked. Then he went out again to the people and told them, "He is not guilty of any crime."

[39] But you have a custom of asking me to release someone from prison each year at Passover. So if you want me to, I'll release the King of the Jews."

[40] But they shouted back, "No! Not this man, but Barabbas!" (Barabbas was a criminal.)

Scripture in Review

By Jewish law, entering the house of a Gentile would cause a Jewish person to be ceremonially defiled. As a result, he could not take part in worship at the temple or celebrate the feasts until he was restored to a state of “cleanness.”

Afraid of being defiled, these men stayed outside the house where they had taken Jesus for trial. They kept the ceremonial requirements of their religion while harboring murder and treachery in their hearts.

This Roman governor, Pilate, was in charge of Judea (the region where Jerusalem was located) from A.D. 26 to 36. Pilate was unpopular with the Jews because he had raided the temple treasuries for money to build an aqueduct. He did not like the Jews, but when Jesus, the King of the Jews, stood before him, Pilate found him innocent.

Pilate knew what was going on; he knew that the religious leaders hated Jesus, and he did not want to act as their executioner. They could not sentence him to death themselves—permission had to come from a Roman leader. But Pilate initially refused to sentence Jesus without sufficient evidence. Jesus’ life became a pawn in a political power struggle.

Pilate made four attempts to deal with Jesus:

- (1) He tried to put the responsibility on someone else (John 18:31);
- (2) He tried to find a way of escape so he could release Jesus (John 18:39);
- (3) He tried to compromise having Jesus flogged rather than handing him over to die (John 19:1-3); and
- (4) He tried a direct appeal to the sympathy of the accusers (John 19:15).

Everyone has to decide what to do with Jesus. Pilate tried to let everyone else decide for him—and in the end, he lost.

If Pilate was asking this question in his role as the Roman governor, he would have been inquiring whether Jesus was setting up a rebel government. But the Jews were using the word *king* to mean their religious ruler, the Messiah. Israel was a captive nation, under the authority of the Roman empire. A rival king might have threatened Rome; a Messiah could have been a purely religious leader.

Pilate asked Jesus a straightforward question, and Jesus answered clearly. Jesus is a king, but one whose kingdom is not of this world. There seems to have been no question in Pilate's mind that Jesus spoke the truth and was innocent of any crime. It also seems apparent that while recognizing the truth, Pilate chose to reject it.

It is a tragedy when we fail to recognize the truth. It is a greater tragedy when we recognize the truth but fail to heed it

Pilate was cynical; he thought that all truth was relative. To many government officials, truth was whatever the majority of people agreed with or whatever helped advance their own personal power and political goals.

When there is no basis for truth, there is no basis for moral right and wrong. Justice becomes whatever works or whatever helps those in power. In Jesus and his Word we have a standard for truth and for our moral behavior.

Barabbas was a rebel against Rome and, although he had committed murder, he was probably a hero among the Jews. The Jews hated being governed by Rome and paying taxes to the despised government. Barabbas, who had led a rebellion and failed, was released instead of Jesus, the only One who could truly help Israel.

Pilate releases Jesus to be crucified.

John 19:1-42

Then Pilate had Jesus flogged with a lead-tipped whip. [2] The soldiers made a crown of long, sharp thorns and put it on his head, and they put a royal purple robe on him. [3] "Hail! King of the Jews!" they mocked, and they hit him with their fists.

[4] Pilate went outside again and said to the people, "I am going to bring him out to you now, but understand clearly that I find him not guilty." [5] Then Jesus came out wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. And Pilate said, "Here is the man!"

[6] When they saw him, the leading priests and Temple guards began shouting, "Crucify! Crucify!"

"You crucify him," Pilate said. "I find him not guilty."

[7] The Jewish leaders replied, "By our laws he ought to die because he called himself the Son of God."

[8] When Pilate heard this, he was more frightened than ever. [9] He took Jesus back into the headquarters again and asked him, "Where are you from?" But Jesus gave no answer. [10] "You won't talk to me?" Pilate demanded. "Don't you realize that I have the power to release you or to crucify you?"

[11] Then Jesus said, "You would have no power over me at all unless it were given to you from above. So the one who brought me to you has the greater sin."

[12] Then Pilate tried to release him, but the Jewish leaders told him, "If you release this man, you are not a friend of Caesar. Anyone who declares himself a king is a rebel against Caesar."

[13] When they said this, Pilate brought Jesus out to them again. Then Pilate sat down on the judgment seat on the platform that is called the Stone Pavement (in Hebrew, Gabbatha).

[14] It was now about noon of the day of preparation for the Passover. And Pilate said to the people, "Here is your king!"

[15] "Away with him," they yelled. "Away with him—crucify him!"

"What? Crucify your king?" Pilate asked.

"We have no king but Caesar," the leading priests shouted back.

[16] Then Pilate gave Jesus to them to be crucified.

So they took Jesus and led him away. [17] Carrying the cross by himself, Jesus went to the place called Skull Hill (in Hebrew, Golgotha).

[18] There they crucified him. There were two others crucified with him, one on either side, with Jesus between them.

[19] And Pilate posted a sign over him that read, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews."

[20] The place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and the sign was written in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek, so that many people could read it.

[21] Then the leading priests said to Pilate, "Change it from 'The King of the Jews' to 'He said, I am King of the Jews.' "

[22] Pilate replied, "What I have written, I have written. It stays exactly as it is."

[38] Afterward Joseph of Arimathea, who had been a secret disciple of Jesus (because he feared the Jewish leaders), asked Pilate for permission to take Jesus' body down. When Pilate gave him permission, he came and took the body away.

[39] Nicodemus, the man who had come to Jesus at night, also came, bringing about seventy-five pounds of embalming ointment made from myrrh and aloes.

[40] Together they wrapped Jesus' body in a long linen cloth with the spices, as is the Jewish custom of burial.

[41] The place of crucifixion was near a garden, where there was a new tomb, never used before. [42] And so, because it was the day of preparation before the Passover and since the tomb was close at hand, they laid Jesus there.

Scripture in review

To grasp the full picture of Jesus' crucifixion, read John's perspective along with the other three accounts in Matthew 27, Mark 15, and Luke 23. Each writer adds meaningful details, but each has the same message—Jesus died on the cross, in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, so that we could be saved from our sins and given eternal life.

Flogging could have killed Jesus. The usual procedure was to bare the upper half of the victim's body and tie his hands to a pillar before whipping him with a three-pronged whip. The number of lashes was determined by the severity of the crime; up to 40 were permitted under Jewish law (Deut. 25:3).

After being flogged, Jesus also endured other agonies recorded here and in the other Gospels.

The soldiers went beyond their orders to whip Jesus—they also mocked his claim to royalty by placing a crown on his head and a royal robe on his shoulders.

The truth finally came out—the religious leaders had not brought Jesus to Pilate because he was causing rebellion against Rome, but because they thought he had broken their religious laws.

Blasphemy, one of the most serious crimes in Jewish law, deserved the death penalty. Accusing Jesus of blasphemy would give credibility to their case in the eyes of Jews; accusing Jesus of treason would give credibility to their case in the eyes of the Romans. They didn't care which accusation Pilate listened to, as long as he would cooperate with them in killing Jesus.

Throughout the trial we see that Jesus was in control, not Pilate or the religious leaders. Pilate vacillated, the Jewish leaders reacted out of hatred and anger, but Jesus remained composed. He knew the truth, he knew God's plan, and he knew the reason for his trial. Despite the pressure and persecution, Jesus remained unmoved. It was really Pilate and the religious leaders who were on trial, not Jesus.

When you are questioned or ridiculed because of your faith, remember that while you may be on trial before your accusers, they are on trial before God.

When Jesus said the man who delivered him to Pilate was guiltier than Pilate, he was not excusing Pilate for reacting to the political pressure placed on him. Pilate was responsible for his decision about Jesus. Caiaphas and the other religious leaders were guilty of a greater sin because they premeditated Jesus' murder.

These words pressured Pilate into allowing Jesus to be crucified. As Roman governor of the area, Pilate was expected to keep the peace. Because Rome could not afford to keep large numbers of troops in the outlying regions, they maintained control by crushing rebellions immediately with brute force. Pilate was afraid that reports to Caesar of insurrection in his region would cost Pilate his job and perhaps even his life.

When we face a tough decision, we can take the easy way out, or we can stand for what is right regardless of the cost. If we know the good we ought to do and don't do it, we sin (James 4:17).

The Jewish leaders were so desperate to get rid of Jesus that, despite their intense hatred for Rome, they shouted, "We have no king but Caesar." How ironic that they feigned allegiance to Rome while rejecting their own Messiah! Their own words condemned them, for God was to be their only true King, and they had abandoned every trace of loyalty to him. The priests had truly lost their reasons for existence—instead of turning people to God, they claimed allegiance to Rome in order to kill their Messiah.

This place called *Golgotha*, "the skull," was probably a hill outside Jerusalem along a main road. Many executions took place here so the Romans could use them as an example to the people.

Roman soldiers in charge of crucifixions customarily took for themselves the clothes of the condemned men. They divided Jesus' clothing, casting lots to determine who would get his seamless garment, the most valuable piece of clothing. This fulfilled the prophecy in Psalm 22:18.

Even while dying on the cross, Jesus was concerned about his family. He instructed John to care for Mary, Jesus' mother. Our families are precious gifts from God, and we should value and care for them under all circumstances. Neither Christian work nor key responsibilities in any job or position excuse us from caring for our families. What can you do today to show your love to your family?

Jesus asked his close friend John, the writer of this Gospel, to care for Jesus' mother, Mary, whose husband, Joseph, must have been dead by this time. Why didn't Jesus assign this task to his brothers? As the oldest son, Jesus entrusted his mother to a person who stayed with him at the cross—and that was John.

Until this time, a complicated system of sacrifices had atoned for sins. Sin separates people from God, and only through the sacrifice of an animal, a substitute, could people be forgiven and become clean before God. But people sin continually, so frequent sacrifices were required. Jesus, however, became the final and ultimate sacrifice for sin. The word *finished* is the same as “paid in full.” Jesus came to *finish* God’s work of salvation (John 4:34; John 17:4), to pay the full penalty for our sins.

With his death, the complex sacrificial system ended because Jesus took all sin upon himself. Now we can freely approach God because of what Jesus did for us. Those who believe in Jesus’ death and resurrection can live eternally with God and escape the penalty that comes from sin

Pilate wished to release Jesus

Acts 3:13

For it is the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, the God of all our ancestors who has brought glory to his servant Jesus by doing this. This is the same Jesus whom you handed over and rejected before Pilate, despite Pilate's decision to release him.

Pilate had decided to release Jesus, but the people had clamored to have Barabbas, a murderer, released instead (see John 19:1-16). When Peter said “You handed him over to be killed,” he meant it literally. Jesus’ trial and death had occurred right there in Jerusalem only weeks earlier. It wasn’t an event of the distant past—most of these people had heard about it, and some may very well have taken part in condemning Jesus.

Pilate allows Joseph of Arimathea to take Jesus' body

Matthew 27:57-58

As evening approached, Joseph, a rich man from Arimathea who was one of Jesus' followers, [58] went to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body. And Pilate issued an order to release it to him.

Joseph of Arimathea was a secret disciple of Jesus. He was a religious leader, an honored member of the Sanhedrin (Mark 15:43). In the past, Joseph had been afraid to speak against the religious leaders who opposed Jesus; now he was bold, courageously asking to take Jesus' body from the cross and to bury it.

The disciples who publicly followed Jesus had fled, but this Jewish leader, who followed Jesus in secret, came forward and did what was right.

Lessons from his life:

Great evil can happen when truth is at the mercy of political pressures
Resisting the truth leaves a person without purpose or direction

Key verses:

"What is truth? Pilate asked. With this he went out again to the Jews and said, I find no basis for a charge against him. But it is your custom for me to release to you one prisoner at the time of the Passover. Do you want me to release the king of the Jews?" (John 18:38-39).

To ask Jesus to come into your heart please pray this Prayer:

Dear Lord Jesus, I believe you are the Christ, the Son of the Living God. I ask you to forgive me of my sins and coming into my heart. I accept you as savior and will follow you as Lord. Amen.

References:

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Additional comments and charts are taken from: Life Application Study Bible.
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