

69. Pilate on trials

February 26, 2012

What do all these words remind you of “Chicken, faintheart, fraidy-cat, gutless, jelly-fish, quitter, scaredy cat, weakling, wimp, wuss, and yellow”? Coward. I don’t think that anyone wants to be called a coward. But there was a man who was a coward and his cowardly actions were written about in the best selling Book in human history, the Bible. His name is “Pontius Pilate”.

Confucius, a Chinese thinker and social philosopher of 5th Century B.C. said, “To see the right and not to do it is cowardice.” That reminds of me a quote from a British statesman Edmund Burke, “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.” That is exactly what Pilate did.

Before we go into the texts from the Book of John, we need to check out a quick biography of Pontius Pilate. It will help us understand why he did such cowardly things to Jesus and made his name known all over as a coward.

Since Palestine was a troublesome spot, Rome decided that they needed Roman governors to control the area. And these governors began to rule Israel about A.D. 6. In A.D. 26, history tells us that Pilate arrived on the scene. Pilate lasted till A.D. 35 when he was sent home. Some say he committed suicide on the way back, or was killed by the Romans.

Pilate’s reign in Israel just didn’t start on the right foot. In his first visit to Jerusalem, he came with all the soldiers, the banners, the flags, and the whole enchilada of all the Roman arrogance and set them up in the Jewish temple. On all the Roman banners there was a sculptured image of the emperor. As many of you know, the Roman emperor was not only the ruler, but he was also a god for the Romans in emperor worship. Those emperor images on their banners offended the Jews because the Jews were really staunch about the idea that they didn’t want any other gods and idols, at least at this point in their history.

After Pilate made this mess, the Jews followed him all the way back to Caesarea and they kept bugging him for five days straight to remove those banners. He was so furious that he finally ordered them all to meet him in the amphitheater.

So, he got them all in the amphitheater and immediately surrounded them with his soldiers. And he informed them all that if they didn’t go back to Jerusalem and stop with the request that he would kill them all on the spot. The history tells us that the Jews were massive in number. Much to Pilate’s amazement, they all just bared their necks and said, “Go ahead, kill us all.” He was stuck. Wiping out all the rulers of Israel wouldn’t set real well with Rome, especially emperor Tiberius. He gave in and removed the image. And he started out his rule in Israel as a beaten man. The Jews had him under their thumb from the very beginning.

Now to make things worse, Jerusalem at one occasion during the first years of his rule they needed more water and the water supply was inadequate. Pilate determined to build a new aqueduct but he didn’t have any money so he robbed the temple treasury which didn’t go over real well with the Jews obviously. Now the Jews were marching through the streets and demonstrating and so Pilate infiltrated the people with plain-clothed Roman soldiers. At a given signal, they clubbed or stabbed the Jews to death to break up the riot. The emperor didn’t like that at all.

Later Pilate eventually made a temporary dwelling place in Herod's palace in Jerusalem. And in Herod's palace he hung shields on the walls with the picture of emperor Tiberius on them and the Jews began to complain about that again because they said that it was bringing false gods into their country. They asked him to remove them and he refused. Pilate didn't learn from the previous incident.

Now, Rome had built into the system, Pax Romana all over their territories, the right of any subject people to appeal their case to the emperor directly. Since Pilate wouldn't go along with them, they sent word to the emperor that Pilate wouldn't do it. And so the emperor Tiberius sent back word that Pilate was to take all of his shields down and comply with the Jews' request. And again, Pilate was a beaten man by the Jewish religious rulers.

A. THE INNOCENT FOR THE GUILTY

John 18:39-40 "But you have a custom that I should release someone to you at the Passover. Do you therefore want me to release to you the King of the Jews?" 40 Then they all cried again, saying, "Not this Man, but Barabbas!" Now Barabbas was a robber.

Why would the Jews want Barabbas set free? After all, he was a robber, a notorious criminal, an insurrectionist, and a murderer. It is far worse than asking for Osama Bin Laden to be set free instead of Billy Graham. Who would want that kind of a prisoner turned loose? When people want to avoid God's truth and His presence in their lives, they would replace Him in their minds and lives with anything and anyone including the one who can steal, kill, and destroy them.

John 10:10 The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly.

Besides, it is the mob mentality which is the most unstable, ignorant, and volatile mindset that goes from penthouse to outhouse in a heartbeat. Riots after football and basketball games and the infamous L.A. Riot in 1992 are good examples.

If anyone should be able to say, "Jesus died for me," it was Barabbas. He knew what it was to have Jesus die on his behalf, the innocent for the guilty.

B. PILATE'S FAILING PROPOSALS

John 19:1-4 So then Pilate took Jesus and scourged Him. 2 And the soldiers twisted a crown of thorns and put it on His head, and they put on Him a purple robe. 3 Then they said, "Hail, King of the Jews!" And they struck Him with their hands. 4 Pilate then went out again, and said to them, "Behold, I am bringing Him out to you, that you may know that I find no fault in Him."

Let's face it. Pilate was a politician, and like any other power-hungry politicians, he was never at a loss for an idea to squirm his way out. So he played the card of sympathy.

The scourge was a leather whip, knotted and weighted with pieces of metal or bone; and many prisoners never survived the scourging. It pains us to think that the sinless Son of God was subjected to such cruelty. He was innocent, yet He was treated as though He were guilty; and He did it for us. He was slapped in the face before Annas, and spat on and beaten before Caiaphas and the council. Pilate scourged Him and the soldiers struck Him; and before they led Him to the cross, the soldiers mocked Him and beat Him with a rod. How much He suffered for us and how deeply He loves us!

In my opinion, the movie "The Passion of the Christ" portrayed His suffering during this scourging correctly. I know some people criticized me for endorsing the movie when it was released in 2004 because there were some off-the-wall theologies embedded. I didn't endorse the wrong theologies, rather I wanted Christians to see what our Savior went through to save our wretched souls. Nothing more.

If the scourging was not bad enough, the soldiers shoved a crown of thorns on His head and mocked Him and struck Him with their hands repeatedly. Why a crown of thorns? Back in Genesis 3:17-19, Adam and Eve's sin brought thorns and thistles into the world. So it was only fitting that the Creator wear a crown of thorns as He bore the sins of the world to redeem the condemned souls on the cross.

Pilate thought, "Surely the pathetic sight of Jesus would bring sympathy from the Jews to release Him." He was sadly mistaken by the cruel crowd. Like the sharks which smelled blood of their prey, they demanded His immediate crucifixion.

The cross involves much more than an exhibition of innocent suffering. On that cross, the Son of God paid the price for the sins of the world. It solemnly declared the love of God and defended the holiness and justice of God. We are not saved by feeling pity for Jesus. We are saved by repenting of our sins and trusting Jesus, the sinless Substitute.

The Roman soldiers went to such extremes and punishment because without them knowing the satanic forces were behind it and they were having a heyday. Besides, unsaved man despises the truth of God and Jesus is that truth.

Romans 8:7a Because the carnal mind is enmity against God

Just like these soldiers, in the 21st Century those who hate Christianity would tolerate the word "God," but when it comes to "Jesus"; all of a sudden a battle line is drawn. They despise the name of our Lord Jesus because a mere mention of His name reminds them of their own sins and depravity. They hate Jesus with their ungodly passion.

C. PILATE'S FATAL PANIC

John 19:5-11 Then Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. And Pilate said to them, "Behold the Man!" 6 Therefore, when the chief priests and officers saw Him, they cried out, saying, "Crucify Him, crucify Him!" Pilate said to them, "You take Him and crucify Him, for I find no fault in Him." 7 The Jews answered him, "We have a law, and according to our law He ought to die, because He made Himself the Son of God." 8 Therefore, when Pilate heard that saying, he was the more afraid, 9 and went again into the Praetorium, and said to Jesus, "Where are You from?" But Jesus gave him no answer. 10 Then Pilate said to Him, "Are You not speaking to me? Do You not know that I have power to crucify You, and power to release You?" 11 Jesus answered, "You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above. Therefore the one who delivered Me to you has the greater sin."

You might have seen this painting by artist Antonio Ciseri that is titled *Ecce Homo* which is a Latin phrase for "Behold, the Man."

Pilate was so desperate to get out of this political jam, he even gave the Jewish religious rulers permission to crucify Jesus by themselves in v6. But the Jews wanted him to crucify Jesus.

The Romans and Greeks had numerous myths about the gods coming to earth as men, so it is likely that Pilate responded to the phrase "Son of God" with these stories in mind. Already the governor had been impressed by the words and demeanor of our Lord Jesus; he had never met a prisoner like Him before. Was He indeed the Son of God who came to earth? If that is the case, he just had his soldiers to beat up the Son of God. That means that he was in a real deep poopoo.

To make the matter worse, his wife had sent him a strange message that he should have nothing to do with Jesus according to Matthew 27. He was thinking, "You are not helping me, woman." Wives can do that kind of thing quite well, don't you agree, husbands? Of course, with the exception of my wife.

Why did Jesus not answer Pilate's question in v9? Because He had already answered it. It is a basic spiritual principle that God does not reveal new truth to us if we fail to act on the truth we already know. Besides, Pilate had already made it clear that he was not personally interested in spiritual truth. All he was concerned about was maintaining peace in Jerusalem and getting himself out of hot water. Pilate did not deserve an answer!

Fear and anger often go together. When we are afraid we are weak, we go to the other extreme and try to appear strong. This is what Pilate did as he reminded Jesus of his Roman authority. But his statement did not demonstrate his power, but only his weakness. Because if he had the real authority to release Jesus, why did he not do it? He condemned himself with his own boastful words. He was a spineless and gut-less politician. Don't get me wrong, not all the politicians are that way. There are some real good politicians with integrity and biblical convictions.

V11 shows us three very important points we must keep in mind:

- 1) The power of authority is granted by the Lord.
- 2) Jesus was in charge and in complete control of the whole situation.
- 3) There are different degrees of sins and punishments in hell for those who reject Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord.

D. PILATE'S FINAL PRONOUNCEMENT

John 19:12-16 From then on Pilate sought to release Him, but the Jews cried out, saying, "If you let this Man go, you are not Caesar's friend. Whoever makes himself a king speaks against Caesar." 13 When Pilate therefore heard that saying, he brought Jesus out and sat down in the judgment seat in a place that is called The Pavement, but in Hebrew, Gabbatha. 14 Now it was the Preparation Day of the Passover, and about the sixth hour. And he said to the Jews, "Behold your King!" 15 But they cried out, "Away with Him, away with Him! Crucify Him!" Pilate said to them, "Shall I crucify your King?" The chief priests answered, "We have no king but Caesar!" 16 Then he delivered Him to them to be crucified. So they took Jesus and led Him away.

It is likely that apostle John used Roman time, so that "the sixth hour" would have been 6 a.m. But Mark tells us that Jesus was crucified "the third hour," which, in Jewish time, would have been 9 a.m.

Pilate was on the proverbial horns of the dilemma. He could not afford another revolt in Israel or Rome would eliminate him, because he knew the temper of emperor Tiberius.

Pilate had two choices – either save his soul or save his neck. There’s something kind of vague about one’s soul because he cannot see. But there’s nothing vague about his neck, right? So when it gets down to the nitty-gritty, chances are a person will do just about anything to save his neck rather than his eternal soul. A wrong decision.

Matthew 16:26 For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?

When Israel asked to have a king, and God gave them Saul, the nation rejected God the Father in 1 Samuel chapter 8. When the Jewish religious rulers asked for Barabbas, they rejected God the Son. Today, Israel and many people around the world are rejecting the pleading of God the Holy Spirit to repent and to turn their hearts to Jesus.

You have here exactly what every man has to face. That is an ultimate decision about what to do with Jesus Christ. Pilate cowardly tried everything to get rid of Jesus and he couldn’t get rid of Him. God forced him to make the decision himself. And so does He to every person.

E. APPLICATIONS

1) Receiving Jesus Christ as one’s Savior and Lord is not a cowardly thing, rather it is the most courageous thing any person can do against cynicism of the world toward Christianity.

2) God does not reveal new truth to us if we fail to act on the truth we already know.