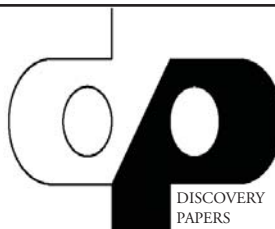




## PILATE'S PREDICAMENT



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John 18:28-40  
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Steve Zeisler  
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The gospels describe two groups of people in detail—Jesus' followers and his enemies. But Pontius Pilate doesn't fall in either category. John draws a full portrait of this man who has a deep interest in Jesus, yet who does not end up as either a disciple or an enemy. John's gospel was written in part to add detail and depth to information contained in the synoptic texts and his portrait of Pilate leaves us with great interest in the man. Yet, we do not know how (or if) his questions were resolved.

He exits the stage, as we will see, in the company of the wicked. Pilate enabled the crucifixion of the Righteous One when he could have prevented it. However, he rejected the testimony of Caiaphas and his minions. His questions of Jesus were significant and his last act was to affix a placard to the cross which insisted that Jesus was King of the Jews. Pilate and his wife have fascinated Bible readers from the beginning.

The Jews whom he ruled as Rome's governor hated him. In his commentary, D. A. Carson has written this about first century references to Pontius Pilate:

*Both from biblical and extra-biblical sources, historians have come to know him as a morally weak and vacillating man who, like many of the same breed, tried to hide his flaws under shows of stubbornness and brutality. His rule earned him the loathing of the Jewish people, small groups of whom violently protested and were put down with savage ferocity.<sup>1</sup>*

But Jesus didn't loathe him, however much others did. Jesus didn't fear him, or placate him. Jesus took down the facade that Pilate had built around himself. Jesus spoke directly to a man who needed to be loved by God and Pilate found himself captivated by Jesus in ways that were unsettling to him and hopefully instructive to us.

As we re-enter the text we note that the long night has ended, the cock has crowed, the disciples have fled, the priestly court has chosen lies in the place of justice—and now Rome enters the picture.

John 18:28-32—

**<sup>28</sup>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.**

We cannot miss the irony of a situation in which Jewish leaders are concerned about ritual defilement while plotting the death of the Savior. They shun the 'unclean' dwelling of a Gentile without acknowledging the dark and blasphemous conditions of their own hearts.

**<sup>29</sup>So Pilate went outside to them and said, "What accusation do you bring against this man?" <sup>30</sup>They answered him, "If this man were not doing evil, we would not have delivered him over to you."**

Verse 30 is an expression of disdain for Pilate on the part of the Jews—in effect, 'we don't have to answer your question.'

**<sup>31</sup>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." <sup>32</sup>This was to fulfill the word that Jesus had spoken to show by what kind of death he was going to die.**

Pilate returned the favor. They speak down to him, and he immediately reminds them of their powerlessness, their vassal status. They may only do what Rome permits them to do.

What follows is a series of conversations that occur as Pilate shuttles between the accusers outside the fortress and Jesus who is inside. I expect that, at first, Pilate thought he was dealing with something he had seen before: haughty priests, a messianic rabble rouser, warnings about trouble in the streets. In fact, he had never met anyone like Jesus.

**<sup>33</sup>So Pilate entered his headquarters again and called Jesus and said to him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” <sup>34</sup>Jesus answered, “Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?” <sup>35</sup>Pilate answered, “Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done?” <sup>36</sup>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.” <sup>37</sup>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.” <sup>38</sup>Pilate said to him, “What is truth?”**

Commentators disagree about the tone with which Pilate asks his question in verse 33. Is it a real question, a dismissive jab, a joke? I think he was surprised, asking in effect—how can an ordinary Galilean peasant like you have caused such a fuss?

Then, to Pilate’s further surprise, Jesus becomes the interrogator. If Pilate is asking *of his own accord*, this encounter may lead to eternal life. The governor was a proud, violent, and superstitious man—Jesus spoke to him as a sinner who needed a Savior. He continues to ask questions that penetrate the hearts of men and women with every kind of baggage and background.

Pilate’s question, *Am I a Jew?* also calls for interpretation. Romans regarded Jews with contempt and it is likely Pilate meant to indicate that he had been insulted. But his first question, *Are you king of the Jews?* followed by *Am I a Jew?* (in effect, are you my king) may suggest that he is unsettled by the disturbing authority Jesus possessed. The governor has been thrown off balance by his prisoner.

So the Lord offers a further explanation. *My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would fight.* Jesus’ kingdom is not established by force, it is not advanced by political schemes and it is not measured by the ability of a few to ‘lord it over’ the many (see Mark 10:42).

What is different about the reign of Jesus? The kingdoms of this world operate on a system of patronage and reward. Kings give gifts and grant status to buy the loyalty of important subjects. In Jesus’ kingdom the poor are blessed; the last are first; leaders are the servants of all. Jesus’ truest followers consider discipleship to be a privilege without insisting on rewards in this life.

Further, every monarchy in this world will come to an end. We might recall Nebuchadnezzar’s disturbing statue dream: head of gold, torso of silver, legs of bronze, feet of iron and clay. That dream was a prediction of failed empires; of conquerors being conquered in return. Every kingdom in this world will end. Every familiar way of life will fade and change. Jesus’ reign is not of this world because it does not end. And surely Pilate, confronted with Jesus’ personal authority and disturbing words, is growing more unsettled by the minute.

But there is yet another challenge: *I have come into the world to bear witness to the truth.* The governor’s famous response, *what is truth*, once again is open to interpretation. Is it a dismissive, cynical brush off or a real question?

The question of truth continues today. Some of our contemporaries speak as if the intrepid journey, the continuous search, is more admirable than any discovery of ‘hard’ truth. Others suggest that truth is irrelevant compared to the use of force. For them a liar with a gun is much more impressive than someone who speaks the truth and is unarmed. Thus it is more important to know what pays off than to know what is true.

And it is commonplace today to encounter the argument that truth cannot exist, that all knowledge is socially constructed, that all paths to anywhere are equally valid. Pluralism, in this sense, is praised as an advance on older truth claims. Yet, in a recent New York Times opinion piece an NYU student named Zachary Fine wrote this:

*Pluralism has had unforeseen consequences. The art critic Craig Owens once wrote that pluralism is not a ‘recognition, but a reduction of difference to absolute indifference, equivalence, interchangeability.’ Some millennials who were greeted by pluralism in this battered state are still feeling its effects. . . . As a result, we continue to struggle when it comes to decisively avowing our most basic convictions.<sup>2</sup>*

In an older version of that same argument, Dorothy Sayers wrote more than 70 years ago of her concern about an inability to distinguish truth from falsehood:

*In the world it is called Tolerance, but in hell it is called Despair ... the sin that believes in nothing, cares for nothing, seeks to know nothing, interferes with nothing, enjoys nothing, finds purpose in nothing, lives for nothing, and remains alive because there is nothing for which it will die.*<sup>3</sup>

Tolerance, despair, meaninglessness, equivalence ... at the end of the day Pilate's question remains, *What is truth?*

The truth is not discovered by weighing one argument against another. We must follow a Person. *For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth.* The truth comes to find us, witnessed by God himself, incarnate in this world. Good laws and good ideas, even good stories, aren't enough. There he stands before Pilate. *I have come to bear witness to the truth. Follow me.*

In this context we might do well to recall the Lord's word's in John 7:17. *If anyone will do God's will, he will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority.* A prior willingness to obey the truth enables us to receive the witness of Jesus. Pilate's double-mindedness is at the heart of his predicament.

John 18:38b-40—

**<sup>38</sup>After he had said this, he went back outside to the Jews and told them, "I find no guilt in him. <sup>39</sup>But you have a custom that I should release one man for you at the Passover. So do you want me to release to you the King of the Jews?" <sup>40</sup>They cried out again, "Not this man, but Barabbas!" Now Barabbas was a robber.**

Lacking the courage to do the right thing, Pilate wants someone else to choose for him, someone else to be held responsible. This never works. Jesus said to him, and he says to us, *For this purpose I was born, for this purpose I came to into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.* We must hear and respond on our own.

John's portrait of Pilate does not have a tidy conclusion. The governor acquiesced to the lynch mob, but it is also true Jesus had to die and could not have been saved from execution by any man. Pilate's unfinished interaction with the Lord can give us the means for questioning ourselves. May we be persuaded by the One who came as witness to the truth.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According To John* (Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 590.

<sup>2</sup>Zachary Fine, "My So-Called Opinions" (*New York Times*, April 6, 2014).

<sup>3</sup>Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Other Six Deadly Sins*, An Address given to the Public Morality Council at Caxton Hall, Westminster, October 23, 1941. (Methuen, 1943)