## Pontius Pilate

*It was early in the morning when Jesus was taken from Caiaphas to the building where the Roman governor stayed. But the crowd waited outside. Any of them who had gone inside would have become unclean and would not be allowed to eat the Passover meal. Pilate came out and asked, "What charges are you bringing against this man?" They answered, "He is a criminal! That's why we brought him to you."*

*Pilate told them, "Take him and judge him by your own laws."*

*The crowd replied, "We are not allowed to put anyone to death." And so what Jesus said about his death would soon come true. Pilate then went back inside. He called Jesus over and asked, "Are you the king of the Jews?"*

*Jesus answered, "Are you asking this on your own or did someone tell you about me?"*

*"You know I'm not a Jew!" Pilate said. "Your own people and the chief priests brought you to me. What have you done?"*

*Jesus answered, "My kingdom doesn't belong to this world. If it did, my followers would have fought to keep me from being handed over to the Jewish leaders. No, my kingdom doesn't belong to this world." "So you are a king," Pilate replied.*

*"You are saying that I am a king," Jesus told him. "I was born into this world to tell about the truth. And everyone who belongs to the truth knows my voice." Pilate asked Jesus, "What is truth?" Pilate went back out and said, "I don't find this man guilty of anything!*

John 18: 28-38

## Background

Pontius Pilate may be one of the most famous villains in history. Billions of Christians recite the Apostle’s Creed professing, “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.”

History provides numerous accounts about Pontius Pilate, the man:

* Antonio Frova, Italian archaeologist, in 1961 discovered a monument with Pontius Pilate’s name inscribed on it at the Mideast city of Caesarea on the Sea.
* Cornelius Tacitus, (circa 55 AD to 117 AD) historian and high-ranking Roman official who served as governor of the Roman provinces in Asia. Tacitus wrote of the execution of Jesus by Pontius Pilate in the reign of Tiberius.
* Philo of Alexandria, (circa 20 BC to 50 AD) considered the greatest Jewish philosopher of his time. He condemns Pilate for rape, insult, murder, and inhumanity.
* Flavius Josephus, (circa 37 AD to 101 AD) Jewish historian of royal and priestly lineage, Pharisee, and personal friend of Emperor Nero. Josephus describes three events of religious insensitivity during Pilate’s administration.

The Gospel of John contains the most detailed description of Pilate and his actions. In typical Johannine fashion, the story unfolds in seven scenes. Each scene reveals the character of Pontius Pilate. Ultimately, Pilate is the one who should have been judged and punished.

**Scene one:** Jesus is brought before Pilate. Charges are made. Pilate tries to pass the buck and tells the religious authorities to “judge him according to your own law.” They refuse. They surrender spiritual authority to Rome to punish a man who preached religious freedom.

**Scene two:** Pilate asks Jesus "Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus answers the question with a question. Pilate’s response shows a disdain for those in his charge. Jesus is the good shepherd who cared for all. Pilate doesn’t understand benevolent leadership.

**Scene three:** Pilate tries to use Barabbas to free Jesus. Pilate avoids making the right decision by hoping the religious leaders will choose the lesser of two evils. Barabbas is described as a “bandit.” This is the same word Jesus used to describe those who threaten the good shepherd’s sheep (John 10: 1-8). The crowd chooses to free the real criminal. Pilate’s plan fails.

**Scene four:** Jesus is flogged. Pilate hopes the violent punishment will be sufficient. Jesus is mocked and called “King of the Jews.” This is an insult against those pushing for his execution. The ploy fails. Jesus must suffer on the cross.

**Scene five:** Pilate declares “Ecce Homo” (Here Is the Man!). Pilate judges Jesus. Pilate is guilty of permitting the murder. Pilate demonstrates that he is not a real man of courage.

**Scene Six:** Jesus says those who “handed me over or betrayed me” did the greater sin. Judas betrayed Jesus. The religious leaders handed Jesus over to Pilate who handed him over to the soldiers for crucifixion. They are guilty but Jesus is condemned.

**Scene seven:** Pilate is reminded that his first priority should be loyalty to the emperor. Pilate states, “Here is your King” and surrenders Jesus. Ironically, Pilate inadvertently put Jesus on the Roman judge’s seat (right where he belongs!). Jesus will ultimately preside at the last judgment.

The religious leaders complete the tragedy by declaring that their lives are dedicated to serving the emperor. In that moment they reject God’s rule. The drama is complete. An innocent man is condemned to death.

## Reflections

Historically some people have blamed all Jewish people for Jesus’ death. That is categorically wrong. The Gospel of John makes it very clear that only a handful of powerful religious leaders manipulated the situation. They used Pilate’s past indiscretions against him. Pilate showed his cowardice by quickly caving in. History has shown us many examples of leaders who cared more about themselves than the people they were suppose to care for.

Any religious leader who neglects personal responsibility for private gain goes against the will of God. This offense is not limited to any one religion or denomination. There are imperfect people in every human organization. No institution will ever be totally free of some corruption. That is why we all need a savior. Spirituality enables us to rise up. We can be transformed. We must always fight the temptation to do things our way.

Many religious leaders are very gifted people. The Gospels instruct, “To whom much has been given, much will be required” (Luke 12:48). Jesus was the Good Shepherd. He showed us a model of loving and caring leadership. We should follow his example. He fought the good fight.

Pilate tried to avoid personal responsibility. He tried to manipulate the situation and asserted his own blamelessness in the proceeding. He took no responsibility. He was willing to sacrifice an innocent to avoid conflict. Behold, Pilate was not a real man.

Pilate began by asking, “What is truth?” Pilate missed the most important lesson of all. Our lives and decisions should always look to God for guidance and truth. Those who follow the Good Shepherd and King are not afraid. They stand before the heavenly Judge confident of his abiding love and amazing grace.

## Questions

1. Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) sought a reflective life, not a public one (her father was a rich member of Congress). Bible and hymn verses inspired her. Her quest for truth was a life’s journey. Consider these verses. What’s the only crown should we care about?

One crown that no one seeks. And yet the highest head.

Its isolation coveted. Its stigma deified.

While Pontius Pilate lives. In whatsoever hell.

That coronation pierces him. He recollects it well.

2. Why is it important to take personal responsibility in times of conflict? Consider some examples of those who have. What difference does it make?

3. Martin Luther said my temptations have been my masters in divinity. How can we grow in the midst of trials? How does God help us? How can we help one another?

**Enneagram connections: Six**

Sixes are known for keeping a watchful eye for danger. They find safety in marshalling group protection. They are very cleaver and can find solutions in fight, flight, or friends. Pilate was governor so he had military protection. There are numerous examples recorded in history where Pilate used brute force to accomplish his goals. He had occasional conflicts in Rome, but he persevered. He lasted as governor of Israel longer than most leaders.

Low level types can use power as a tool to intimidate others. Pilate repeatedly demonstrated that he was willing to use violence as remedy to troublesome problems. Maybe he remained governor so long because that was the Roman way. They were a very violent culture. Romans were violent at the start and at the end. Rome’s conquests and forced slavery for opponents reflected this violence.

Six can tend to doubt and question almost everything. This reflects an insecurity about others and their motivations. Sadly this serves to isolate this type that also values the support of others.

Pilate may have been confused by meeting the Prince of Peace. Luke’s gospel relates second thoughts Pilate had because of his wife’s part in this story. Eastern Christian traditions indicate that Pilate and his wife eventually became faithful Christians.

I’d like to think he did change his ways. That helps give hope for all of us that we can get a second chance. If true, this would be a true transformation. Pilate was unwilling to protect Jesus life; might have been willing to risk his life for that same savior. I find that some of the greatest miracles can be seen in spiritual changes in people’s lives.

**<https://cpenneagram.com/enneagram-type-six>**

## *Ecce Homo*

*One crown that no one seeks*

*And yet the highest head*

*Its isolation coveted*

*Its stigma deified*

# While Pontius Pilate lives

*In whatsoever hell*

*That coronation pierces him*

*He recollects it well.*

Emily Dickinson, 1735

***PILATE****, on the tessellated pavement in front of his palace.*

*Ye have brought unto me this man, as one*

*Who doth pervert the people; and behold!*

*I have examined him, and found no fault*

*Touching the things whereof ye do accuse him.*

*No, nor yet Herod; for I sent you to him,*

*And nothing worthy of death he findeth in him.*

*Ye have a custom at the Passover;*

*That one condemned to death shall be released.*

*Whom will ye, then, that I release to you?*

*Jesus Barabbas, called the Son of Shame,*

*Or Jesus, Son of Joseph, called the Christ?*

***THE PEOPLE****, shouting.*

*Not this man, but Barabbas!*

***PILATE.***

*What then will ye*

*That I should do with him that is called Christ?*

***THE PEOPLE****.*

*Crucify him!*

***PILATE.***

*Why, what evil hath he done?*

*Lo, I have found no cause of death in him;*

*I will chastise him, and then let him go.*

***THE PEOPLE****, more vehemently.*

*Crucify him! crucify him!*

***A MESSENGER, to PILATE.***

*Thy wife sends*

*This message to thee,--Have thou naught to do*

*With that just man; for I this day in dreams*

*Have suffered many things because of him.*

***PILATE****, aside.*

*The Gods speak to us in our dreams! I tremble*

*At what I have to do! O Claudia,*

*How shall I save him? Yet one effort more,*

*Or he must perish!*

*Washes his hands before them.*

*I am innocent*

*Of the blood of this just person; see ye to it!*

CHRISTUS: A MYSTERY, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, 1872