

Sermon: "Suffered under Pontius Pilate"

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Text: Mark 15:1-15

Sermon Outline.



Introduction ~ Bernie Madoff made history this past week. Madoff pleaded guilty in Federal District Court to the largest Ponzi scheme in history, defrauding his investors of more than \$ 65 billion, that's billion, dollars. Thousands of individuals and institutions lost everything they thought they had invested. The Securities and Exchange Commission missed the scandal completely. While the Federal investigation is continuing, it seems certain that Madoff had substantial help from his major subordinates.

Madoff will certainly spend the rest of his life in Federal prison. Noting Madoff's age, the Federal judge in the case, Justice Chin, revoked Madoff's bond because he is a flight risk. Forced to admit his crime, Bernie Madoff told the Court, "I am deeply sorry and ashamed... I always knew this day would come." Madoff will always be known for this breath-taking crime.



Pontius Pilate, the Roman prefect of Judea, will always be known as the man who sentenced Jesus of Nazareth to death.

Good morning! We're continuing our sermon series on the Apostles' Creed, and today we come to the phrase, "suffered under Pontius Pilate..." The Apostles' Creed specifies that the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ actually took place in public on the stage of world history *with the direct involvement of government*. As a gross miscarriage of justice, Pontius Pilate executes Jesus as God's Messiah, "the King of the Jews."

The Good News of Jesus Christ is not some myth or fairy tale that happened, "Long ago, in a galaxy far away." All its central events happen in a definite place and a definite time: Galilee and Judea during the Roman Empire.

Why is it crucial to emphasize this truth? Because

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you and I both live in the real world in real human history. The Gospel affirms that God Himself entered into that history, our history, in order to meet us and redeem us.

The mention of Pontius Pilate, a specific official of the Roman Empire, illustrates a basic structure of the Gospel and the Bible. The Bible says: This really happened, and God did it. The Christian faith is not a matter private belief, opinion and personal preference; it is based on the truth and the facts of known events in world history.

Our Text in the Gospel of Mark identifies three individuals by name: Jesus of Nazareth, a terrorist/revolutionary named Jesus Barabbas and Pontius Pilate. The Jewish Senate, the Sanhedrin, force Pilate to choose between these two men: Jesus or Barabbas. Through political cunning, they force Pilate to release a known terrorist and to execute an innocent Man. As a result, they gain advantage over Pilate, which they want to use to denounce him to his superiors and bring about his downfall.

I discovered something odd in preparing for this sermon. When I consulted the family DVD archives, I discovered that all the major motion pictures on Jesus get Pilate's character and personality either completely wrong or greatly out of focus. For example,

- *Jesus of Nazareth* has Pilate musing if Jesus, not Barabbas, is the real enemy of the Roman Empire.
- *The Jesus Film*, which is shown on mission fields all over the world, is based on the Gospel of Luke. *The Jesus Film* portrays Pilate as a surprisingly shallow political man, almost a cartoon figure. Pontius Pilate was a military man who always used a hammer when a scalpel or a tweezers was required.
- Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* depicts Pilate as being strongly sympathetic to Jesus. I almost shared the scene with Jesus before Pilate this morning because it is extremely realistic, even if blood-spattered. Most of you remember that I have deep appreciation for Gibson's work. I like it a lot; and yet, his take on Pontius Pilate is far, far too positive.

What do we know about this man?

What little we know about Pontius Pilate comes to us from the writings of Josephus, Philo and the Roman historian Tacitus, who

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wrote a generation after the fact. Pilate is a recognizable political "critter." Philo describes his personal character this way: Pilate is greedy, inflexible, cruel, and prone to resorting to robbery and oppression. He's a typical Roman military governor. He's a "shake-down artist." He uses his military and political power to shake down those he governs.



We have archeological proof that Pontius Pilate lived and ruled as prefect of Judea. In 1961, an inscription in Latin was uncovered not far from Caesarea with Pilate's name and title on it.

Pilate is known to have treated Jewish customs with contempt. Like his mentor in Rome, Sejanus, Pontius Pilate is a Roman Jew-hater. An example of his ham-fisted behavior.

Shortly after Pilate arrives in Judea and Galilee in 27 AD, he needlessly provokes the Jews in Jerusalem. He sneaks into the city the Imperial Standards with their embossed images of the Emperor. Because of the Roman custom of Emperor worship, Pilate's action smacks of blatant idolatry to the Jews. Previous prefects and governors had been careful never to offend in this way.

Well, the Jews sent a delegation from Jerusalem to Caesarea to demand the removal of the standards. They pleaded with Pilate for five days. On the sixth day, Pilate ordered a detachment of soldiers, and at a given signal they would draw their swords. But when this occurred, the Jews all lay down on the floor and exposed their necks and declared that they would rather die than break God's law. Pilate finally recognizes he risks sparking a revolution, so he backs down and orders the Imperial Standards out of Jerusalem.

Here in our text, Pontius Pilate is forced to make a decision about Jesus of Nazareth. The basic truth for you and me is this:

- Your making a decision about Jesus of Nazareth is inescapable. Pilate tried to evade making a choice, but made one anyway. Clearly, you and I cannot evade or avoid making a choice about Jesus. You

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must make a choice, a personal decision, about Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

■ In our text, there are three reasons why you and I cannot evade making a choice about Jesus.

I. The first reason is that sooner or later you will be confronted with the truth about Jesus.

A. Jesus was falsely accused by the chief priests as a dangerous revolutionary. When Pilate examined Jesus himself, Pilate discovered a different Jesus than he expected: a man of peace whose kingdom is not of this world.

Note the question Pilate asks in verse fourteen (vs. 14). "Crucify him!" they shouted. "Why? What crime has he committed?" asked Pilate. In a backhanded way, Pilate affirms the sinlessness of Jesus Christ.

B. John's Gospel shows us two positive elements in Jesus' private hearing before Pilate:

Pilate actually took the time to check Jesus out for himself. However brief, Pilate gave Jesus an almost honest hearing. That's something in Pilate's favor.

In John's Gospel, we see Jesus bringing the conversation down to the root issue: the exact nature of Jesus' kingship. Jesus' statement helps Pilate decide on Jesus' innocence. Jesus actively helped Pilate make up his mind.

Pilate was un-made by the political pressure that came to bear moments later.

C. For the person who is searching for the truth this morning, you can learn something positive from Pilate's judicial inquiry:

1. Check Jesus out for yourself.
2. Jesus will actively help you come to your conclusions...

Pilate was unmade and undone when he refused to follow the facts right to their conclusion regardless of the political consequences.

Sooner or later, you, too, will be forced to confront the facts about Who Jesus is and Who Jesus claims to be.

II. The second reason you cannot evade making a personal decision about Jesus is that Jesus will bring you face to face with the truth about yourself.

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A. In terms of biological age, Jesus and Pilate were roughly about the same age. Pilate was easily the most stupid and inept governor sent by Rome to Judea.

In AD 40, Herod Agrippa wrote to the Roman Emperor complaining about the Roman administration in Judea. Describing the personal character of Pontius Pilate, Herod says he is, "naturally inflexible, a blend of self-will and relentlessness."

Three times, Pilate tries to release Jesus, fully convinced of Jesus' innocence. Pilate's motives were anything but pure. Since Jesus was giving the Sanhedrin fits, Pilate wanted to keep Jesus around as a problem to occupy their attention. It would take the heat off of him!

Pilate has Jesus scourged in front of the crowd at the stake in the square in the Fortress of Antonia. That brutality only encourages the Chief Priests. They sense Pilate's weakness.

Finally, Pilate gives in. Pilate delivers Jesus up to be crucified, nailed to a Roman cross by His hands and His feet, and hoisted up to hang there, suspended between earth and heaven – for all to gaze upon – until He died. That's what Pilate did to Jesus.

B. Pilate took water and washed his hands before the crowd and said, "I am innocent of this man's blood. It is your responsibility." Pilate convinced himself that he had done nothing with Jesus when he was the only man in the city who could pass the death sentence. Pilate tried to do nothing and his refusal to choose led to the cross, to his recall to Rome, to his banishment to Vienne on the Rhone River in France, where he died in disgrace, an apparent suicide.

C. By contrast, we see Jesus choosing... Choosing to die for the likes of you and me. Jesus willingly died for you and me. Though Jesus was totally without sin, He chose. He chose to take your sin and mine on Himself.

Choosing death, not drifting into it, not backing into it; but choosing death because it was... what needed to be done... that you and I might be saved from our sins and be given eternal life.

D. It is literally true that Jesus died so that a guilty and condemned man, Barabbas, might go free. Jesus was executed in the place of Barabbas. Barabbas the terrorist deserved to be executed; he had committed murder. Pilate is forced to release Barabbas. Barabbas

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does not deserve to be set free; neither do you and I. Jesus paid the penalty you and I deserve so that you and I can be forgiven and set free from our sins and our guilt.

III. The third reason why you and I cannot avoid making a decision about Jesus of Nazareth is that Jesus is alive from the dead.

A. Pontius Pilate had to write a report to Rome about Jesus' execution. We know this report existed in the Imperial archives at least until the 250's AD. Here's how we know.

1. Tertullian, a lawyer from Carthage, practiced law in Rome.
2. Because he had access to the Imperial archives, he took the opportunity to study Pilate's report. He mentions seeing and reading the report of Pontius Pilate in his writings. The report of Pontius Pilate specifically mentioned the discovery of the empty tomb of Jesus!
3. Tertullian discovered all these facts about the empty tomb before he became a Christian.

B. Pontius Pilate will have to face Jesus again. So will you and I. But the positions will all be changed and changed dramatically. Jesus will be the Judge, not Pontius Pilate. Jesus is alive from the dead. One day, each human being will stand before the risen Christ.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ means that no one can evade making a decision about Jesus.

The Son of Man, who bore my sin and shame, is now gloriously alive from the dead forever. Because Jesus is alive from the dead, people everywhere are now called and required to decide:

What are you going to do with Jesus?

Will you refuse Him, reject what He has done for you? Or will you accept Him as your Savior and King and serve Him as your Lord?

Conclusion ~ Pilate's decision about Jesus of Nazareth represents the defining moment of his life. A couple of years after Jesus' crucifixion, Pilate was recalled to Rome in disgrace. Your personal decision about Jesus represents the ultimate "defining moment" of your life.

* What is "a defining moment?" A defining moment is an event, decision or personal encounter in which your life and your personal

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character are revealed, defined, altered or decisively transformed once and for all.

- Because of it, you can never go back to what you were before. Whether you are changed for the better, you are changed for good, permanently.
- A defining moment changes or fixes and determines your life direction.

When Pilate woke up that fateful day, he had no idea he would face the defining moment of his life. You see...

- Without repentance, a person will not recognize when a "defining moment" comes at you. Pilate was clueless; you and I know the outcome, the rest of the story.
- Without repentance, a person will choose the wrong path and do the wrong thing in a defining moment. Pilate was full of arrogance and pride; you and I know how things turned out for him.
- Friend, it takes repentance and humility to get a defining moment right in your life... Repentance and humility before the living God. It works the same for everyone, the believer in Jesus and the person who has yet to make any serious commitment to Jesus Christ.

So have you come to the moment in your life when you recognize you need to say, "Yes," to Jesus and what He's done for you... say, "Yes," to belonging to Jesus, living out your, "Yes," as a fully committed Christ-follower?

Whatever else happens, you can get life's ultimate defining moment right today by inviting Jesus into your life and following Him as His disciple.

"Lord Jesus, I need You in my life.

Thank You for dying on the cross for my sin.

I'm glad You rose from the dead. I'm grateful You are alive to make me alive... forever.

I open the door of my life to You and receive You as my Savior and Lord. Thank You for forgiving my sins and for giving me eternal life.

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Make me the kind of person You want me to be.

Lord Jesus, come into my life.

I pray in Jesus' Name... Amen."