

How Pontius Pilate Lost His Soul

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By H.A. Ironside

Then said Pilate unto him, Speakest thou not unto me? knowest thou not that I have power to crucify thee and have power to release thee? Jesus answered, Thou couldst have no power at all against me, except it were given thee from above: therefore he that delivered me unto thee hath the greater sin. And from thenceforth Pilate sought to release him: but the Jews cried out, saying, If thou let this man go, thou art not Caesar's friend; whosoever maketh himself a king speaketh against Caesar. When Pilate heard that saying, he brought Jesus forth, and sat down in the judgment seat in a place that is called the Pavement, but in the Hebrew, Gabbatha. And it was the preparation of the passover, and about the sixth hour: and he saith unto the Jews, Behold your King! But they cried out, Away with him, away with him, crucify him. Pilate saith unto them, Shall I crucify your King? The chief priests answered, We have no king but Caesar. Then delivered he him therefore unto them to be crucified. And they took Jesus and led him away (John 19:10-16).

Four times in the New Testament outside of the Gospels, Pontius Pilate is mentioned by name. When Peter was preaching, after the healing of the lame man, as recorded in Acts 3:13: "The God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob, the God of our fathers, hath glorified his Son Jesus; whom ye delivered up, and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he was determined to let him go." In Acts 4:27 we read, "For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together." In Acts 13:28 Paul, when preaching in the synagogue at Antioch, retold the story of the rejection of Christ, and he said, "And though they found no cause of death in him, yet desired they Pilate that he should be slain." Again in 1 Timothy 6:13-14 the apostle said to this young preacher, "I give thee charge in the sight of God, who quickeneth all things, and before Christ Jesus, who before Pontius Pilate witnessed a good confession; That thou keep this commandment without spot, unrebukable, until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ."

This man, Pontius Pilate, occupies a large place in the Word of God, and strikingly enough, there is perhaps no name better known next to the name of our Lord

Jesus Christ than that of Pontius Pilate. Throughout all the Christian centuries, ever since the beginning of the second century when the so-called Apostles' Creed was compiled, thousands, and at times millions, of professed Christian people have recited Sunday after Sunday, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth and in Jesus Christ His Son who was conceived of the Holy Ghost, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate." And that man's name is going down to eternal infamy because of the stand he took when our Lord Jesus was brought before him for judgment.

Another name is intimately linked with that of Pilate in connection with the mock trial of our blessed Savior. It is that of Herod. He was a grossly carnal, depraved and immoral wretch whose vile life disgraced the title he bore. He lost his soul because of the sin of impurity, that same damning sin that is ruining so many today. It "has cast down many thousands; yea, many strong men have been slain by it." Everywhere it is prevalent, and until men judge the sin of impurity, until they come to the place where they are ready to be delivered from it, it is absolutely impossible to exercise saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. "Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Corinthians 6:9-10).

Men cannot be saved in their sins; they can be saved only when they are ready to judge their sins and to be delivered from them. Herod is the outstanding example of a man ruined for time and eternity through the sin of impurity. No such stain as that seems to be upon the life of Pontius Pilate. There is no intimation in Scripture nor yet in what has come down to us in secular history concerning this man, that he was an

immoral or licentious man. But it is very evident that the sin that kept him from getting right with God was another one altogether, and yet one that is very common among us today. The sin that ruined Pilate was that of selfish ambition. This man was procurator of Judea and as such was vice-king and represented the authority of Rome in Judea from about 26 A.D. until 37 A.D. He was characterized by an overweening pride and ambition, and because of this he lost his soul.

If you are unsaved, what is the sin that is keeping you from Christ? Is it that you dread what men might think of you if you came to God as a poor sinner, put your trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, and confessed Him as your Savior? This was what destroyed Pilate. He went contrary to his conscience because he felt if he did not do so, he would lose his opportunities for advancement in the Roman Empire. The threat of the Jewish hierarchy, "If thou let this man go, thou art not Caesar's friend: whosoever maketh himself a king, speaketh against Caesar," was too much for Pilate.

It is very interesting to go back and read in the four Gospels the different accounts of what took place that morning when the Lord of life and glory stood before Pilate's judgment seat. During the previous night He had passed through His mock trial before Caiaphas and Caiaphas' father-in-law, Annas, and very early in the morning, about 7 o'clock our time, He was dragged into the presence of Pilate. The Roman governor had hardly finished his breakfast when the clamoring mob appeared in the door of the judgment hall. Not one of them was ready to put his foot across the threshold because it was the Passover time and they were so religious, so punctilious about ritual ceremonies, that they would not dare step into the house of a Gentile lest they should be defiled. Yet they were deliberately rejecting the Savior that God had provided for them. How many there are today who, just like these people, are very

Careful about religious observances, but still refuse to own themselves sinners and receive the Lord Jesus Christ as their Savior.

Pilate, hastily summoned, took his place upon the judgment seat. The Lord Jesus Christ was placed before him. Historians, theologians, and artists have tried to picture Him standing there. We read that the people led Him bound to Pilate, and generally the artists take it for granted that it was His wrists that were bound, but some tell us that the word in the original implies that it was a hangman's rope that was placed around His neck! They led Him ignominiously along with the murderer's halter around His neck! They dragged Him in that way into the presence of Pilate. Our friends of the Episcopal church and different branches of the Catholic church are accustomed to place around the neck of a clergyman what is called "the stole," and this has come down from ancient times as a reminder of the rope that was around the neck of the Son of God as He was dragged before Pilate. There He stood; He had made Himself a little lower than the angels with a view to the suffering of death; He had become a Man, and now He takes the lowest place. He stands there condemned as a blasphemer by those He loved so tenderly, and they demand that Pilate pronounce the death sentence upon Him.

Conditions were such then that, in order to placate the Jews, it had been decreed that they might have the right of judgment in all cases having to do with the violation of their own laws; but the power of life and death rested with the Roman procurator. They had declared Jesus a blasphemer but had no authority to carry out their own judgment, and so came to Pilate that he might confirm it and put the Lord Jesus Christ to death. Pilate naturally asked the question, "What accusation bring ye against this man?" (John 18:29-30) They had no accusation which would stand in a Roman court; no accusation which would be of any value toward the condemnation of the prisoner. They answered, "If He were not a malefactor, we would not have delivered Him up unto thee," as much

as to say, "You insult us when you ask for an accusation. We would not have delivered Him unto you if we were not confident of His being a malefactor."

Pilate looked upon them with that contempt which the Romans always felt for the Hebrews, and said, "Very well, then, if you have no accusation, you take Him and judge Him according to your law." But they said, "It is not lawful for us to put any man to death." And Pilate looked on in wonder. He gazed on the face of the prisoner before him. What should he do with Him? He would have been as insensate as the marble images in his court, if his heart had not been moved by the plight of the prisoner, and so he entered the judgment hall again and called Jesus to him personally, and said, quietly, "Art Thou the King of the Jews?" Jesus answered by putting a question to him, "Sayest thou this thing of thyself, or did others tell it thee of me?" In other words, "Are you asking Me this because of a real desire to know, or did somebody tell you that I am the King of the Jews?" Then Pilate said, "Am I a Jew?" And you can see the look of contempt on his face. "Thine own nation and the chief priests have delivered thee unto me: what hast thou done?" In other words, "They say you claim to be the King of the Jews; is this true?" Convinced that up to this point he is really an honest man in perplexity, Jesus makes that good confession of which John wrote, "My kingdom is not of this world [that is, not of this present order]: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now is my kingdom not from hence" (John 18:36). Pilate looked up quickly and said, "Art thou a king then?" Jesus answered, "Thou sayest that I am a king. To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Every one that is of the truth heareth my voice" (37). Here is a challenge.

When Jesus stood before Caiaphas He answered not a word until Caiaphas put Him on oath and said, "I adjure thee by the living God." Then Jesus said, "Thou hast said; nevertheless I say unto you, Hereafter shall ye see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven." Then Caiaphas rent his garments and exclaimed, "He hath spoken blasphemy; what further need have we of witnesses? behold, now ye have heard his blasphemy" (Matthew 26:63-65). It was contrary to the law for the high priest to rend his garments, and the moment he did that the priesthood passed away from Israel. But Jesus did not answer Caiaphas until he put Him on oath. He knew there was no honesty, no desire to know what was true, but He gave to Pilate the benefit of the doubt.

Pilate seemed to be sincere, it seemed as though he would really like to know, and so Jesus explained very carefully, and then closed with the challenging word: "Every one that is of the truth heareth My voice." Let me bring that home to you. "Every one that is of the truth heareth My voice." Do not say to me, do not say to the Spirit of God, do not say to your own soul, "I cannot believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God; I cannot believe that Jesus Christ is the rightful head of a spiritual kingdom." To say that implies that you are not an honest man or woman, for Jesus Christ says, "Every one that is of the truth heareth My voice." If you are determined to be true, if you are determined to be real, if you mean to be honest to the deepest convictions of your own soul, you will know who He is. He says elsewhere, "If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself" (John 7:17). If a man says, "I would like to believe, but some way I cannot," the reason is not difficult to find. If you say you would like to believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, but you cannot, if you would like to believe that the Bible is truly the Word of

God but you cannot, it is because you are living in some sin that the Bible condemns.

That is why you cannot believe.

When someone said to Sir Isaac Newton, "I would like to believe but cannot," he said, "Sometimes in my absent-mindedness I come into my study and try to light my candle without taking the snuffer off, and of course I cannot light it, but when the snuffer is off, then I can light the candle." The snuffer is a hidden sin in your life from which you do not want to be delivered. If you honestly desire to be delivered from all iniquity, depend upon it you will have no trouble believing the gospel message if you come to God in repentance, acknowledging your guilt. "Every one that is of the truth heareth my voice." This was a challenge to Pilate. He stopped a moment, looked at the prisoner before him, and then asked the question in a weary kind of voice, "What is truth?" As much as to say, "Who can know what truth is?" Lord Bacon wrote:

"What is truth?" said jesting Pilate

And waited not for an answer.

Truth incarnate stood before him, yet Pilate had no eyes to see because he was blinded by worldly ambition.

If Pilate had said, "What is it? Explain it, make it clear to me," Jesus would have unfolded the truth to him, but he put the question, "What is truth?" and turned away. Yet he was convinced that Jesus was not guilty of any crime against the government. He said to the people, "I find in him no fault at all" (John 18:38). And then as they accused Him vehemently, somebody mentioned the fact that He was a Galilean, and Pilate immediately took it up and said, "Is He from Galilee? Well, Herod is the tetrarch of Galilee and is here at the present time. I will let him pass upon the case" (Luke 23:6-7). This seemed to Pilate a convenient way of getting out of taking a definite stand for or against the Lord Jesus Christ. We know what happened when Jesus went to Herod.

Herod, hard and cruel, with a conscience seared as with a hot iron, allowed those soldiers of his to mock the blessed Christ of God, and then sent Him again to Pilate. And Pilate said to himself, "How shall I get out of this? Here is Jesus; I must do something about Him. I do not believe He is guilty, but these Jews insist that He is. How can I get out of it?" Then he remembered that in order to curry favor with the Jews, an edict had been pronounced that at the Passover time the Roman government would set free one Jewish prisoner, whomsoever the Jews desired.

At that time there was a notable Jewish robber, Barabbas by name, in prison. Barabbas means, "son of the father." Jesus was the true "Son of the Father." Pilate said, "I am going to give you the opportunity of setting a prisoner free; you shall enjoy the prerogative and say who shall be free." "Will ye therefore that I release unto you the King of the Jews?" But they all cried out, "Not this Man, but Barabbas." Though Barabbas was a patriot he was a robber and murderer. Pilate hesitated and thought, "They have put me in a tight place, whatever shall I do now? If I let Barabbas go free, I do not know what to do with Jesus."

Just then a page came in and attracted his attention. He had come with a note for Pilate. It was a message from his own wife and it said, "Have thou nothing to do with that just man: for I have suffered many things this day in a dream because of him" (Matthew 27:19). It was probably signed by her. We know her name, for it has come down in history. Her name was Claudia Procula. The early Christians said she died a Christian. As Pilate looked at that his hand trembled. He loved his wife so tenderly and now she was pleading for the life of this prisoner and the people were still crying, "Barabbas! Barabbas! Release unto us Barabbas."

Pilate stood before them and presented Jesus as he said, "Behold the man!" Surely as they gaze upon Him, as they look upon that innocent and yet marred face,

their hard hearts will be softened; they will realize that He is no criminal. But they cried out the more vehemently, "Not this man, but Barabbas," and then He put the question that has come ringing down the ages, the question that comes to every man or woman today, "What shall I do then with Jesus which is called Christ?" "If I use the prerogative of releasing one man and that one is Barabbas, what shall I do with this Man?" That is the question that you must decide--what will you do with Jesus?

"What will you do with Jesus?

The call comes low and sweet,

As tenderly He bids you

Your burdens lay at His feet.

O soul, so sad and weary,

That sweet voice pleads with thee,

Then what will you do with Jesus?

Oh, what shall the answer be?"

There was no hesitation on their part. Stirred up by the chief priests they cried with one voice, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" Pilate stood there again in perplexity. He went back to the judgment seat and summoned Jesus once more and put the question, "Whence art Thou?" (John 19:9) In other words, "Where do you come from, and what is your origin? You are different from other men; who are you really? Whose case is it upon which I am called to pronounce judgment today?" But Jesus gave him no answer. It was evident that Pilate was no longer the honest inquirer. He was determined to placate the Jews and yet hold favor with Caesar, no matter what it might mean. However, he would like to release Jesus. But there is no reply. And Pilate said,

"Speakest thou not unto me? Knowest thou not that I have power to crucify thee, and have power to release thee?" In other words, "Don't you know that the issues of life and death are in my hands?" Then Jesus spoke, and He put the judge in the place of the prisoner when He said: "Thou couldest have no power at all against me, except it were given thee from above; therefore he that delivered me unto thee hath the greater sin." Now Pilate used every effort in his power to move the hearts of these people to pity, to sympathy, but the answer comes: "If thou let this man go, thou art not Caesar's friend: whosoever maketh himself a king speaketh against Caesar." There is an accusation at last! This man is setting himself up as a king in rebellion against Caesar, and now, Pontius Pilate, if you let Him go, we will send the charge to Rome that we found this man teaching sedition, and that instead of pronouncing sentence upon Him you let Him go free, and you will lose your position!

The governor had taken a basin of water and ostentatiously washed his hands in it, saying, "I am innocent of the blood of this just person" (Matthew 27:24). He brought Jesus forth once more with a crown of thorns pressed upon His brow and said, "Behold your king!" but again they cried, "Away with him! Away with him! Crucify Him!" Pilate asked but one more question, "Shall I crucify your king?" Again they exclaimed, "We have no king but Caesar." And weary with the struggle, Pilate gave up. What difference does it make? He will sacrifice one almost unknown Galilean Jew and save his own good name with Caesar; so he delivered Jesus to be crucified and they took Him and led Him away.

Pilate had every opportunity to be saved, but that overweening sin of ambition, that desire to be thought well of by Caesar, that desire to be looked up to by the people, was too much for him. He gave Jesus to the death of the cross in order to save himself from shame, and what was the result? The centuries since have fixed upon him eternal

infamy, "Crucified under Pontius Pilate." All his life long he had the memory of this miscarriage of judgment resting in his mind and on his life. The dreadful thing was upon his conscience, and when some four or five years later he went out into eternity as a suicide, he went to face forever the charge, "Jesus was crucified under Pontius Pilate." He is facing it today and he shall face it for all eternity. This man had the opportunity of siding with Christ in the hour of the Savior's great distress, but he delivered Jesus to the will of the people.

My friend, I bring the question home to you, "What will you do with Jesus which is called Christ?" Jesus is on trial here today; the Spirit of God is saying to you, "What are you going to do with Him?" You must do one of two things. Will you accept Him as your Savior, own Him as Lord, or will you reject and spurn Him? You may say, "But I am not going to do anything about it now. I am going to think it through." The very fact that you do not decide to receive Him as Savior and Lord is your decision to reject Him, at least at the present moment. Pontius Pilate tried to be neutral and found that it was an impossibility. You cannot be neutral. It is not enough to say that you recognize in Him the greatest and best of the sons of men; it is not enough to admit that no other ever taught as Jesus taught; it must be more than that. You must see in Him the sinner's Savior; you must come to Him in all your guilt and trust Him for yourself.

A few years ago a Jewish merchant died. He had a Christian friend who was in the same business, and they would often without any prejudice talk of the claims of Jesus Christ. The Jewish merchant had never accepted Christ as Savior, and when he was dying his family did not want to allow any Gentile to get near him; but the Christian associate was eager to see him, and they felt that they could not refuse him because he had been a close friend. But they said, "You must not talk religion to him, you must not excite him." He went in and sat for a moment by the bedside, touched the

hand of his friend, and then knelt by the bed and silently lifted his heart to God. Soon there was a movement on the bed. The old man opened his eyes, tried to sit up, lifted his hand, and struggling to speak, said, "Not Barabbas, but this Man," and he fell back dead. Do you see what he had done? He had reversed the sentence of his nation. His nation had said, "Not this Man, but Barabbas," but he said, "Not Barabbas, but this Man."

What are you saying? Do you prefer the robbers of earth, those who would rob you of everything good and pure and holy? Or will you definitely decide to take Jesus Christ to be your own personal Savior? "What shall I do with Jesus which is called Christ?" Pontius Pilate made a fearful mistake which is now irrevocable. It can never be changed; never can he get away from that awful sentence of the Creed, "Crucified under Pontius Pilate."

O my friend, be careful that you make not the same mistake by rejecting Christ. Will you receive Him? Will you take Him as your Savior? "Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before My Father which is in heaven" (Matthew 10:32). Will you make this good confession? Will you take Jesus Christ as your personal Savior? The very moment you come to the place where you are ready to receive Him, that moment He receives you. "Him that cometh unto me I will in no wise cast out." Never mind what sin has been holding you back. Do you desire to be saved from it? Then come to Him, come to Jesus. "Thou shalt call His name Jesus, for He shall save His people from their sins."