**Pilate: Middle of the Roader**

*by Luther Blackmon*

The weak and vacillating Pilate is about to become famous but in an unexpected manner. He is about to become an unwilling actor in the greatest drama the world has ever beheld. If someone had told him that he would be remembered only because of the greatness of the man who stands before him in the judgment hall, he would have likely found it very amusing. It is true nonetheless. But for his part in the trial of Jesus of Nazareth, Pilate would be a forgotten name in the dusty archives of Roman jurisprudence.

The Roman Governor did not grasp the significance of the situation that faced him. He understood neither the accused nor the accusers. On the one side he faces a mob of hate‑filled Jews whom he despises, but whom political expediency says he must try to please. On the other hand stands the spotless Son of God. Pilate asks, "What accusation bring ye against this man?" The Jews answered, "If he were not a malefactor we would not have delivered him up to thee." They are saying in substance, "Don't bother yourself about whether he is guilty or not, Pilate, we have already tried him. You just waive the Roman trial and condemn him to death." But Pilate was not minded to become their tool. He wanted to hear the evidence, and to give the accused a chance to be heard.

In the Jewish trial, Jesus had been condemned on the charge of blasphemy. He claimed to be the Son of God. But the Jews knew that Pilate would not listen to a charge like that. Blasphemy was not a violation of Roman law. So they had to change it. Now they accused him of treason. They said, "He forbids to give tribute to Caesar, saying that he himself is a king." This was a false statement. Jesus had said, "render" unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's." What made this charge even more hypocritical, the Jews hated Caesar. But now it serves their purpose to feign great loyalty to Caesar.

At this juncture in the trial Pilate rose from the judgment seat and beckoning Jesus to follow him went into the palace. Here he would examine him away from the clamor of the mob. This examination convinced the Procurator that whatever this man was, he was no enemy of the Roman Empire. So he came out and announced bluntly, "I find no fault in him." Why then did he not release him? Here is a quotation from Chandler: "Mankind has asked for nearly two thousand years why a Roman, with the blood of a Roman in him, with the glorious prestige and the stern authority of the Roman empire at his back, with the Roman legions at his command, did not have the courage to do the high Roman act. Pilate was a moral and intellectual coward of the arrant type. This is his proper characterization and a fitting answer to the world's eternal question" (Vol. 2, pg. 116).

But without making excuses for the weak and cowardly Pilate, I think there are some mitigating circumstances. Pilate was a heathen with a heathen's conception of life and death. If he believed in any kind of god, he thought his god was only one of many. It is doubtful that he expected anything beyond the grave except an imposing monument and a name in Roman history. With this view of things it is easy to see why he would try to keep what he had in this world.

He was in a bad spot now. He had repeatedly outraged the Jews by flaunting the image of Caesar before them. He had appropriated money from the "Corban" for secular uses. His last encounter with the Jews had resulted in their taking a petition to Tiberius, and the Emperor had taken their part. The strain on his relationship with the Jews would hardly stand another clash. So he tried now to compromise.

Pilate's Effort to Compromise

His first ruse was to send Jesus to Herod. The Jews had mentioned that Jesus was from Galilee. That was Herod's territory. Let him try this troublesome case. But Herod only mocked him and sent him back to Pilate. Herod's action amounted to another acquittal.

Again he tried to appeal to the mob by offering them a choice between Barabbas, a seditionist and a murderer, and the lowly Jesus. He thought surely they would prefer to have the release of Jesus above that of Barabbas. But Pilate reckoned without considering the depth of hatred and religious prejudice that moved these Jews. Jesus had unmasked their hypocrisy and exposed their human traditions. They hated him because they feared him. His teaching spelled the end of their national religion. Had they known their sacred scriptures for which they professed such profound respect, they would have known that their national religion was meant to end when it had served its purpose. But they did not know. And they would not consider that this Jesus might be right. He had attacked their traditions, and he must die. It was as simple as that.

A third effort at compromise is made when Pilate orders Jesus to be scourged. A Roman scourging was enough to move the hardest heart to sympathy. Men often died under the scourge. Pilate thought perhaps when the Jews had seen his pale and bleeding form they might relent. But they were unmoved.

Pilate's wife did not help his state of mind any. She came in and warned him "Have thou nothing to do with that just man for I have suffered many things in a dream this day because of him." This was the last straw. At first, Pilate had likely thought of Jesus as only a visionary fanatic. But his wife's dream coupled with the statement of the Jews that he had claimed to be divine shook him up. "What if he really were a god?" In the mythology and ancient annals of his race there were many legends of the sons of the gods who walked the earth in human form and guise.

Most wicked men are superstitious – filed with dread. Pilate called Jesus into the palace the second time. When he comes, out he once more announces to the mob that he will release the prisoner. But the Jews had worked themselves into such a frenzy that Pilate saw that any further effort to save this prisoner would create an incident of such proportions that it would likely cost him his office. So Pilate washed his hands. He knew that Jesus had done nothing worthy of death and should be released. But he also knew that if he released him he would likely lose his job. So Pilate took "the middle of the road" – he washed his hands. But washing his hands did not solve the Governor's problem. It only stamped his character. It did not release the brave and innocent victim, nor lift from the shoulders of the craven Pilate his responsibility. It was his decision to make and no one else could make it for him, or take the blame.

There are times when a man must stand alone, even in a crowd, and fight a battle which his fellows can neither see nor understand. A battle which may well decide whether he will be a man or a mere male member of the human race; whether he will be a patriot or a traitor; a saint or a sinner; a gospel preacher or a job holder. I know that it is not easy. And I know that there are often circumstances that make the decision more difficult than the world or even his friends, can ever know or appreciate. But I also know that no circumstance can justify one's failure to choose the right. Whatever the price, he has no choice – he must pay it.

It was a part of God's plan that Jesus should thus die. But this did not lessen the infamy of Pilate's ignoble act. In every civilized land on earth, for 1900 years, the name of Pilate has been spoken in the same breath with that of Judas. Judas is remembered and despised for what he did – Pilate for what he did not do. --- *Truth Magazine* (Sept. 1962), pp. 16‑17 ---