

## Who Killed Jesus? Suspect #3 (Pontius Pilate)

1. Warm-up Question: Suppose you had to choose to engage in one of the following high-risk activities: (a) hang gliding off a mountain cliff; (b) handling a poisonous snake in a backwoods Appalachian church; (c) spending 30 minutes in a fenced lion preserve at the zoo; or (d) visiting a remote tribe known for their cannibalistic practices. Which activity would you choose and why?
  
2. Life sometimes backs us into a corner, forcing us into situations that call for great courage and sacrifice. Often we have to make tough choices between what our narrow self-interest versus what needs to happen for the greater good. Pontius Pilate faced that kind of choice. Read John 18:29 – 19:16, selected verses.
  - a. When Pilate asked Jesus if he was King of the Jews, Jesus replied, “My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over.” What do you imagine Pilate thought when he heard Jesus say this?
  
  - b. When Jerusalem’s religious leaders told Pilate that Jesus also claimed to be the Son of God, the text tells us, “When Pilate heard this, he was more afraid than ever. He entered his headquarters and asked Jesus, ‘Where are you from?’ But Jesus gave him no answer. . . . From then on Pilate tried to release him.” Why do you think Pilate was so afraid of Jesus?
  
  - c. In John 19:12, the religious leaders told Pilate, “If you release [Jesus], you are no friend of the emperor. Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself up against the emperor.” Now Pilate had to choose between preserving the life of an innocent man versus his own self-interest, *i.e.*, protecting his standing with the emperor, so as to retain his position of power. Describe how you think Pilate felt in that moment. Tell us about a time in your life when you’ve experienced similar feelings.
  
3. Our passage tells us that Pilate didn’t want to execute an innocent man. As portrayed in our passage, Pilate wasn’t a proactively evil man. But he wasn’t willing to risk his own position to oppose those who were engaging in proactive evil (*i.e.*, the religious leaders). As such, Pilate’s great sin was indifference mixed with a lack of courage.
  - a. In his novel “The Town Beyond the Wall,” Eli Wiesel describes a similar man who indifferently gazed out his window as Jews were repeatedly being hauled away by Nazis. Wiesel writes, “To be indifferent – for whatever reason – is to deny not only the validity of existence, but also its beauty. Betray, and you are [human]. Torture your neighbor; you’re still a [human]. Evil is human, weakness is human, indifference is not.” What do you understand Wiesel to be saying? Do you agree or disagree with him – and why?
  
  - b. We have a tendency to see the world in black and white. There are good people and bad people. Wiesel is suggesting there’s a third category that’s much larger

than the other two, resides between them, and often decisively tips the balance toward evil. That middle category is indifferent spectators who passively refuse to take sides. Looking back across your life, tell us about a situation where you were indifferent and passive, but now looking back, wish you had dared to get involved.

- c. Why is it so easy to get trapped in the indifferent middle?
4. Jeff shared the little-known story of Dr. John Fryer. Fryer was a psychiatrist who, in 1972, donned a mask to speak at the convention of the American Psychiatric Association. At great personal and professional risk, Fryer told his colleagues that he was gay, described the plight of gay psychiatrists (and gay people in general), and called for an end to the classification of homosexuality as a mental illness. His remarks shook the APA and resulted in declassification of homosexuality as a mental illness, making it possible for the gay civil rights movement to progress.
    - a. Suppose Fryer had played it safe and refused to speak to the APA, do you think his life would have been happier or more meaningful? Explain your answer.
    - b. Jesus said, “Those who try to save their life shall lose it, but those who lose their life shall find it.” Matthew 10:39. What do you think he meant?
    - c. God calls us all to dare to engage in acts of great courage and self-sacrifice. What’s one of the bravest things you’ve ever done – something that required you to overcome fear and take a lot of risk? (Bear in mind that bravery can take place not only in grand ways that change history, but also in small ways that impact individual lives.)
  5. Near the end of Sunday’s sermon, Jeff asked us to consider what makes the difference between someone who plays it safe (like Pilate) and someone who lives boldly (like Jesus). For guidance we looked back at what Jesus told Pilate in John 18:36, “My kingdom is not of this world.” All Pilate had was this material world. His kingdom was of this world. If all you’ve got is this material world, your goal will be material satisfaction – focus on yourself and play it safe. Jesus had an entirely different frame of reference. He understood that this world is surrounded by, and ultimately bleeds into, a whole greater level of reality that we call eternity. As a result, Jeff said, “Jesus wasn’t just living for the creature comforts of this material world, hoarding all his time here for himself because that’s all he had. No, he had eternity, and everything that is God’s was also his. So I he didn’t need to live with a sense of scarcity.”
    - a. Tell us about someone you’ve know who lives with a sense of scarcity, as if this life is all they have and their kingdom is only of this world. Compare them to someone you’ve known who lives with deep spiritual awareness and generosity, as if their kingdom is not just about this world, but all of eternity. Which one was happier? What makes the difference?
    - b. Is there something bold, maybe even a bit risky or sacrificial, that God is calling you to do right now?

## **John 18:28 - 19:16**

28 Then [the religious leaders] took Jesus to Pilate's headquarters. It was early in the morning. Pilate went out to them and said, 'What accusation do you bring against this man?' <sup>30</sup>They answered, 'If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you.' <sup>31</sup>Pilate said, 'Take him yourselves and judge him according to your law.' They replied, 'We are not permitted to put anyone to death.' <sup>32</sup>(This was to fulfill what Jesus had said when he indicated the kind of death he was to die.)

33 Then Pilate . . . summoned Jesus, and asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' <sup>34</sup>Jesus answered, 'Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?' <sup>35</sup>Pilate replied, 'I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?' <sup>36</sup>Jesus answered, 'My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here. . . .'

Pilate went out to the Jews again and told them, 'I find no case against him. <sup>39</sup>But you have a custom that I release someone for you at the Passover. Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?' <sup>40</sup>They shouted in reply, 'Not this man, but Barabbas!'

19 Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. <sup>2</sup>And the soldiers wove a crown of thorns and put it on his head, and they dressed him in a purple robe. <sup>5</sup>So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, 'Here is the man!' <sup>6</sup>When the chief priests and the police saw him, they shouted, 'Crucify him! Crucify him!' Pilate said to them, 'Take him yourselves and crucify him; I find no case against him.' <sup>7</sup>The Jews answered him, 'We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has claimed to be the Son of God.'

8 Now when Pilate heard this, he was more afraid than ever. <sup>9</sup>He entered his headquarters again and asked Jesus, 'Where are you from?' But Jesus gave him no answer. <sup>12</sup>From then on Pilate tried to release him, but the Jews cried out, 'If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor. Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against the emperor.'

13 When Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus outside and sat on the judge's bench. <sup>16</sup>Then he handed him over to them to be crucified.