

Title: "Suffered Under Pontius Pilate"      Text: Matt. 27:11-26  
Date: March 21-22, 2015                      Curtis Froisland

**[I believe in Jesus Christ]...  
who Suffered under Pontius Pilate...**

Have you ever considered why, in the Apostles' Creed—this ancient and widely used confession of faith—that the only persons mentioned besides the God-Man Jesus are the Virgin Mary and Pontius Pilate? The doctrines in the Creed are very important things that the church ancient and universal said "We all need to know this, it is crucial."

Now, Mary makes perfect sense because she was Jesus's mother, who received a vision from an angel, and conceived through a miracle of the Holy Spirit—perhaps signifying Jesus's fully, truly, human nature having already confessed him as Lord and Christ. From Mary we learn about angels as messengers, the miraculous nature of Christ's birth, and that he is fully human and divine.

But, this article of the Creed says "You need to know that Jesus suffered, was crucified, died, was buried, and it happened "under Pontius Pilate." The theologian **Karl Barth** said coming across Pilate in the Apostle's Creed is like a mangy dog wandering into a nice room smelling up the place.

Why not simply say we believe in Jesus Christ...who suffered, was crucified, dead, and buried?" Of all the people

with whom Jesus interacted in his ministry, of all the people he was associated with, even considering the many people who were involved in Jesus's arrest & trial (from Judas's betrayal, to Caiaphas the high priest, to the denials of Peter)...Why should "Pilate" be mentioned in this core summary of Christian Faith?

To find out we turn to the Gospel of Matthew and we find that by telling us about Pontius Pilate, Matthew teaches us three things:

1. The crucifixion of Jesus was a real historical event involving real human lives.
2. The crucifixion of Jesus is how the story of the world comes to its climax.
3. The crucifixion of Jesus requires a response of faith.

First:

**By including Pontius Pilate, Matthew tells us that Jesus's crucifixion was a real historical event involving real human lives.**

### 1. Historical Placement

Every year, around this time of Lent and Easter, there is this surge of interest in the "historical Jesus." This year perhaps you have seen the series on CNN "Finding Jesus." This surge probably represents the growing skepticism in our

culture towards all things Christian, but that doesn't mean that impulse toward historical inquiry is unimportant. Whether you are a Christian or a skeptic, it really does matter whether Jesus was a real person, whether he did the things the Gospel writers record.

So, let's look at a few things in Matthew's account that do fit the history and what we know about Pilate, the practices of the time, and the life of Jesus.

**A.** In v. 1 Matthew explains Pilate is the governor, and in the rest of the section he interchangeably refers to Pilate by name and by his title "governor." In an age where every piece of Biblical data is scrutinized, this is important. We know that Pilate actually was governor of Judea from about 26-36 AD.

We know this from two non-Biblical sources, Philo who lived around the same time as Pilate, and Josephus who was born around the end of Pilate's term in Judea. Perhaps more importantly, in 1961, "The Pilate Stone" was found in Caesarea Maritima a city on the northern coast of Judea. It is an inscription commissioned by Pilate in dedication to the emperor Tiberius.<sup>1</sup> The stone is dated to the period in question, around 30 AD. So the non-Biblical sources and archaeological evidence confirm that Pilate was governor of Judea at the time.

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<sup>1</sup> *Pilate Stone*, at the Israeli Museum, <http://www.english.imjnet.org.il/Popup.aspx?c0=13142>

**B.** But Matthew's depiction of Pilate's actions correspond to Philo and Josephus's description of his character as well.

We know from Philo and from Josephus, that Pilate was known to be cruel (in v. 23 Matthew tells us that Pilate recognizes Jesus's innocence, but v. 26 tells us he crucified him anyway), he was also spiteful toward the Jews (perhaps explaining part of Pilate's reluctance in this passage), and Pilate was known to be more concerned about the political repercussions of his actions than justice (as in v. 24 where he fears a riot).<sup>2</sup>

**C.** One last point on the historical evidence. Matthew tells us two things about the Roman practice of crucifixion that correspond to historical practice.

First, it was only the governor who could sentence someone to crucifixion, and Matthew says in v. 2 that the chief priests and the elders of the people took him to Pilate, and v. 26 that Pilate "handed [Jesus] over to be crucified."

Second, v. 26 says that Pilate "having scourged Jesus, handed him over to be crucified." The word "scourged" is a specific term to the use of a flagellum—a whip with pieces of bone or metal tied to the ends-- to beat the convicted before they were crucified. Often the convicted would die just from this beating, which explain why Simon of Cyrene had to carry the cross for Jesus.

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<sup>2</sup> Philo, *Embassy To Gaius*, ¶302.

So, the picture that Matthew paints is a totally plausible depiction of what Jesus's trial would have been like, which grounds the crucifixion in real verifiable history. It happened to a real person name Jesus, perpetrated by real people: the chief priests, elders, Pilate, and the soldiers.

Bart Ehrman, an agnostic New Testament scholar who teaches at UNC, wrote a book called "Did Jesus Exist?" to address the issue of the historicity of Jesus and his crucifixion. He states the evidence for Jesus's being a real person in Galilee who was crucified under Pontius Pilate. Here is Ehrman's concluding paragraph, remember he is an agnostic, in some ways hostile to Christianity:

*... when I try to reconstruct what actually happened in the past. I refuse to sacrifice the past in order to promote the worthy cause of my own social and political agendas. No one else should either. Jesus did exist, whether we like it or not.<sup>3</sup>*

So, the inclusion of Pilate in the Creed is a marker that grounds Christian belief in real time and space involving real people. In Matthew's theological history, Pilate is one among many of the points of contact with the real world. Because Pilate is there in the text, we can know that there was a man named Jesus, who claimed to be the King of Israel and of the Kingdom of Heaven, who was tried and crucified by Pilate.

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<sup>3</sup> Bart Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, (New York, NT: 2012), 339.

## 2. God is involved in History!

I'm telling you all this historical data, not just because it addresses the preoccupations of our culture and time, but because it points to a reality at the center of Christian hope. Our God is not a god who is disconnected from his Creation, nor one who is connected but much too impotent to do anything about it. Jesus is not a teacher who pointed the way to God, but Matthew tells us at the beginning of his Gospel that Jesus is "Immanuel, God with us" (1:23) and that he comes in to the broken rebellious mess of what it means to be human, "because he will save his people from their sins" (1:21).

This is not the tragic martyrdom of a great man—at least not only that—it is the execution of the Son of God for the sins of the world as the culmination of God's eternal plan. Matthew alludes to Isa. 53 all throughout, check your cross-references when you get home. And Acts 2:23 says Jesus was:

<sup>23</sup> ...delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, [and we] crucified and killed [him] by the hands of lawless men.

God is not a far off tyrant wagging his finger at the world saying: you must do better. God is the man Jesus Christ who invaded history with redeeming love, who laid down his life so that real people—like you and me—could be forgiven and restored. God came into history on a rescue mission—to rescue you! By including Pilate, Matthew tells us that

Jesus's crucifixion was a real historical event involving real human lives in which God was deeply involved.

Ed Clowney tells the story of **Guenter Rutenborn** a German pastor who after the second world war wrote a play called "The Sign of Jonah." The characters in the play, like the citizens of post-war Germany, struggle to come to grips with the atrocity of the holocaust and their part in it. Everyone knows that everyone is guilty at some level, but at the same time everyone wants to blame someone else. I was just following orders—and up the chain of command it goes...until finally a judge decides "God. God is to blame." And the people convict God and sentence him to become a man, a Jew in fact, to be homeless, a wanderer.

But the Gospel says that God did become a man, not because we forced him, but because he loves us. Not because he was guilty—but because we were. And he entered into human history to rescue us, and we hung him on a cross.

That is what it means to say God is involved in history.

But there is another reason Matthew has Pilate there, it tells us that:

**The crucifixion of Jesus is how the story of the world comes to its climax.**

As the Bible tells it, this is the story of the world:

In the beginning God created all that is out of nothing, and he placed man and woman over it to be his representatives, to enact his kingly rule to the ends of the earth.

But humanity fall's into sin because they question God's goodness and they fail to trust him. Sin and death come into the world through this Fall, and God curses Adam and Eve—representatives of all humanity—in judgment. But God is merciful and begins to unfold a plan of redemption.

He calls Abraham and promises to bless all the nations through him... Abraham's people become the Hebrews, the people of Israel. They grow in number and though they are captive in Egypt, God delivers them and leads through through his prophet Moses. God gives Israel the Law to guard them, to bless, but also to increase their dependence on Him.

They enter the Promised Land of Israel, and the Kingdom grows, King David expands the fame of Yahweh and the borders of Israel, but as great as he is, David is a flawed shepherd. His son Solomon too is both great and sinful... and the sons of their sons become more and more wicked. Finally, God sends Assyria and then Babylon to carry Israel off into captivity.

Though they are able to return to the Land, the presence of the Lord does not return, and they remain under foreign rule: the Babylonians, then Greeks, the Romans. The prophets, especially Isaiah, foretell a miraculous salvation of the



LORD, an answer for sin and great shepherd King who would bring in the Gentiles, and rule with justice and sit on the throne forever. Matthew begins his Gospel by encapsulating the story of the world in Jesus's genealogy which ends in 1:17:

*17 So all the generations from Abraham to David were fourteen generations, and from David to the deportation to Babylon fourteen generations, and from the deportation to Babylon to the Christ fourteen generations.*

The first five chapters of Matthew set up Jesus as God-with-us, the Savior from Sin, the blessing to the nations, the true Israelite, the faithful One, the King of Heaven...

This story is echoing in the background as we read Pilate's question to Jesus: "Are you the King of the Jews?" When Jesus remains silent before his accusers we see an allusion to the Servant promised in Isaiah we see the fulfillment of **Isa. 53:7**:

*He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,  
yet he opened not his mouth;  
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,  
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,  
so he opened not his mouth.*

And when Pilate offers the crowd: should I release the robber Barabbas or Jesus called "Christ" and when Jesus is

crucified between two other robbers (v. 38). We see the fulfillment of **Isa. 53:12**:

*he poured out his soul to death  
and was numbered with the transgressors;  
yet he bore the sin of many,  
and makes intercession for the transgressors.*

The big story is there as the Jews, represented by the chief priests and the elders, and the Gentiles, represented by Pilate, all of humanity together rejects God's anointed one—bringing our condemnation to its fullest and most heinous point: the murder of God.

The big story is there as the Pilate, representing Tiberius Caesar--ruler of the whole earth, Lord of Lords, emperor of the Pax Romana (the Peace of Rome), condemns Jesus to death. The Kingdom of Man tortures and executes the King of God's Kingdom...but not before Pilate's soldiers hold a mocking coronation for Jesus in v. 27-31 and beat him to the point of exhaustion and hang him on cross:

**Isa. 52:13-15**

Behold, my servant shall act wisely;  
he shall be high and lifted up,  
and shall be exalted.

<sup>14</sup> As many were astonished at you—  
his appearance was so marred, beyond human  
semblance,  
and his form beyond that of the children of

mankind—

<sup>15</sup> so shall he sprinkle many nations;  
kings shall shut their mouths because of him;  
for that which has not been told them they see,  
and that which they have not heard they  
understand.

The dark irony of the words of every person in this passage, culminating with the charge placarded on the cross above Jesus's head—King of the Jews—tell us that while at the human level all appears lost in this unfathomable tragedy, on another level—a supernatural level of God's orchestration of history toward his redeeming purposes—on this level something different is being accomplished: God in Christ is victorious over sin and death.

This is where the story has been going all along, in Matthew 20:18-19, Jesus himself predicted:

<sup>18</sup> “See, we are going up to Jerusalem. And the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will **condemn** him to death<sup>19</sup> and **deliver** him over to the Gentiles to be **mocked** and **flogged** and **crucified**, and he will be raised on the third day.”

Matthew is telling us in a story what Paul says in Colossians 2:14-15:

[God] cancel[led] the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the

cross. <sup>15</sup> He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in [Christ].

It is this reality that CS Lewis points to in *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*. The Lion Aslan takes the traitor Edmund's place and is humiliated and sacrificed by the White Witch. Lucy and Susan who witness it are in a miserable daze overnight, but in the morning they hear a deafening crack and Aslan's body has disappeared. Lucy asks Susan if this is more magic, and a voice appears behind them, Aslan the Lion. This is what he says:

*"...though the Witch knew the Deep Magic, there is a magic deeper still which she did not know. Her knowledge goes back only to the dawn of time. But if she could have looked a little further back, into the stillness and the darkness before Time dawned, she would have read there a different incantation. She would have known that when a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in a traitor's stead, the Table would crack and Death itself would start working backwards."*

That's Lewis's way of saying that the story of the world comes to its climax in the words 'Ibis in crucem' – you will mount the cross – the pronouncement of Rome to the convicted which Matthew puts in his own words "Pilate handed him over to be crucified."

Third, through Pilate, Matthew tells us that:

## The crucifixion of Jesus requires a response of faith.

This is the only appropriate response to Jesus, Matthew shows this by telling us three ways Pilate responds to Jesus:

**First**, notice how Matthew portrays Pilate's response to Jesus. In v. 14 he says:

*But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly **amazed**.*

Matthew uses this word "amazed" 7 times, and 6 of those times it is clearly positive. The way he uses it, "amazed" is more than just not knowing what to do with Jesus, it has a positive connotation—an inclination toward Jesus.

I wonder if this might be a warning to some of us. We find Jesus captivating, we are "amazed" by him. But, amazement is not enough, thinking Jesus was interesting, captivating—its not the same as repentance and faith. Amazed is how Pilate felt, but he didn't repent, he didn't send the accusers away, he didn't throw out the charges! Faith probably includes "amazement," but they aren't the same thing. Matthew warns us not to only be amazed...

**Second**, Matthew tells us that knowing **about** Jesus, having all the facts, is not the same as faith.

In v. 18 we see that Pilate:

*“**knew** that it was out of envy that they had delivered him up.”*

And in v. 23, Pilate asks what evil Jesus had done...

He **knew** that Jesus was innocent.

In v. 19, Matthew adds that Pilate’s wife said to him:

*Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered much because of him today in a dream.*

We are probably supposed to take that as a dream given by God, like Joseph’s dream in 1:19. If that is true, then Pilate had **heard** a word from God...

Again isn’t that a warning to us, we can know a lot of information about Jesus without actually putting our faith in him. Turning to Christ and admitting our need of him...

**Third**, Matthew tells us in v. 24:

*“when Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, “I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves.”*

**Fear of man** is the enemy of faith. Standing before Jesus, amazed by him, sure of his innocence, we find out that what finally motivated Pilate was fear. He was afraid of what the crowds would do, so he absolved himself. But no decision is

the same as a decision against, and he handed him over to be crucified.

Again, a warning to us... **fear of man** is the enemy of faith. We mustn't put Jesus off, we can't put Jesus off—like Pilate we either repent in faith and cling to him in the midst of our fear, or our fear chokes out any hope of faith.

Later in the chapter, after it is finished, and Christ has given up his Spirit, Matthew tells us in v. 54:

*<sup>54</sup> When the centurion and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe and said, “**Truly this was the Son of God!**”*

This isn't just a statement of intellectual assent—this is faith. An awe struck confession of something that Pilate never understood: that Jesus really is who he said he was—the Son of God, the King, the Savior from Sin—and the centurion needed Jesus to be all of those things for him. You and I need Jesus to be that for us. Don't just be amazed, don't just know about Jesus, don't fear man—but repent, confess with your whole heart—this is the Son of God.

What audacious grace! The centurion who over the last several hours had participated in the execution of God's own Son, probably spitting on him, and beating him, and mocking

him along with the rest—something changes in his heart and he is “filled with awe” and he believes.

That’s Grace. No matter where you’re coming from, no matter what you’ve done, God is holding out grace to you. He doesn’t ask you to get better first, or to show you deserve it—because you don’t deserve it, and you can’t earn it. He asks only that we repent and believe. In the words of Paul in Romans 10:13:

*Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved!*

And it isn’t just the grace you need to come to faith and believe in Jesus as Lord, Savior, and Treasure. This grace is for us in every stage and circumstance of our lives.

Pilate is in the creed, he’s in the Gospel of Matthew so that

When I look at my life, and my circumstance, and I begin to think God is somewhere far away, unconcerned or unaware of my needs. I know that the crucifixion of Jesus was a real historical event involving real human lives. That God is not far off—but God has come near.

Likewise, when I look around and I see the injustice in the world, and when I recognize my part in it, I might despair. But Pilate in the creed and in the Gospel reminds me that the crucifixion of Jesus is how the story of the world comes to its climax. That in the cross sin and death did their worst, but were defeated by the Son of God.



And likewise, when settle for weak substitutes for faith, or when I fear man—The crucifixion of Jesus calls me back to cling to my confession:

I believe in Jesus Christ...who suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried.

Amen.