

“THROUGH THE BIBLE”

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LUKE 23:1-56

If your house has an older gas furnace you're familiar with the pilot light. It's a standing flame that acts as a trigger for the bigger burner. The pilot light stays perpetually lit. It's what ignites the furnace when you want to crank up the heat in the house. You can't fire up the furnace without the pilot. And the Jewish hierarchy knew they couldn't kill Jesus with the Pilate. Pontus Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, was the trigger that had to be squeezed for Jesus to be executed. In 19 AD the Romans stripped the Jews of their right to exercise capital punishment. A death sentence could only be handed down by Rome and its agents. Thus, Pilate was the pilot light.

Pontus Pilate is one of the most infamous villains in history. He ruled Judea for a decade - from 26-36 AD. He was the governor of Judea. For 1900 years there was no archaeological proof that Pilate even existed. Until 1961 when the archaeologists who were excavating the amphitheater at Caesarea discovered a limestone tablet engraved with his name. Those of you who've been with me to Caesarea have seen the replica that's on display. The original is tucked away safely in the Israeli museum.

Most of what we know about Pilate is from the Bible, but legends abound. One story says he ended up overcome with guilt and committed suicide. There's another story... When the Caesar in Rome became ill he sent word to Pilate hoping to see Jesus. He had heard of Jesus's miracles. Pilate stalled in answering Tiberius Caesar since he'd already crucified Jesus. A woman named Veronica had followed Jesus to the cross, and wiped His brow with her handkerchief. The cloth held a mysterious representation of the face of Jesus. Veronica went to Rome and presented the cloth to the Emperor. He was miraculously healed, but was furious at the governor. Tiberius had Pilate executed. You could say, he turned off the pilot.

Here's what we know of the truth about Pilate, verse 1, “**Then the whole multitude of them** (the Jews) **arose and led Him** (Jesus) **to Pilate.**” Pontus Pilate was an enigma. He hated the Jews and their customs, but he often appeased the Jewish leaders to keep the peace. Pilate tried Jesus three times - acquitted Him after each query – yet still sentenced Jesus to death to placate the Jews. Pilate was a consummate politician. He was more concerned with posturing than principle. Pilate cared more about the political ramifications than the spiritual consequences.

“**And they** (the Jews) **began to accuse Him, saying, “We found this fellow perverting the nation, and forbidding to pay taxes to Caesar, saying that He Himself is Christ, a King.”** All three accusations violated Roman law. The first two were total fabrications. Jesus never perverted the nation. And He paid tax - once, paying He and Peter's tax with a coin from a fish's mouth. Pilate knows the first two accusations are bogus. But He probes into the third charge. “**Then Pilate asked Him, saying, “Are You the King of the Jews?” He answered him and said, “It is as you say.”** Jesus did claim to be a King. But He never voiced a political or military ambition. Jesus was the King of a spiritual, eternal kingdom. He certainly posed no immediate threat to Pilate. “**So Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowd, “I find no fault in this Man.”**”

Verse 5, “**But they were the more fierce, saying, “He stirs up the people, teaching throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee to this place.”** When Pilate heard of Galilee, he asked if the Man were a Galilean. And as soon as he knew that He belonged to Herod's jurisdiction, he sent Him to Herod, who was also in Jerusalem at that time.”

Pilate acts like a politician – he passes the buck. Herod Antipas was ruler over the region of Galilee. He was in town for the Passover. This was a matter for him to decide. Verse 8, “Now when Herod saw Jesus, he was exceedingly glad; for he had desired for a long time to see Him, because he had heard many things about Him, and he hoped to see some miracle done by Him.” Herod had no desire to follow Jesus. He viewed him as a sideshow – like a spiritual circus. “Then he questioned Him with many words, but He answered him nothing.” Jesus said nothing, but in doing so He spoke loudly. His silence fulfilled a Messianic prophecy. Isaiah 53:7, “He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so He opened not His mouth.”

“And the chief priests and scribes stood and vehemently accused Him. Then Herod, with his men of war, treated Him with contempt and mocked Him, arrayed Him in a gorgeous robe, and sent Him back to Pilate.” The Son of God is a political football. Herod punts Him back to Pilate. “That very day Pilate and Herod became friends with each other, for previously they had been at enmity with each other.” Resistance to Jesus creates unlikely alliances. Here it unified two men who were otherwise rivals.

“Then Pilate, when he had called together the chief priests, the rulers, and the people, said to them, “You have brought this Man to me, as one who misleads the people. And indeed, having examined Him in your presence, I have found no fault in this Man concerning those things of which you accuse Him; no, neither did Herod, for I sent you back to him; and indeed nothing deserving of death has been done by Him. I will therefore chastise Him and release Him...” In Pilate’s eyes Jesus had done nothing to deserve death. He tries to pacify the Jews by having Jesus scourged or beaten. It was typical Pilate politics. He ignores the truth and tries to strike a compromise.

Verse 17, (for it was necessary for him to release one to them at the feast).” Apparently, the Roman governors in Judea had started a tradition. Passover was about freedom from bondage, so to celebrate, the governor would set a Jewish prisoner free. Pilate was hoping to use this tradition as a loophole. He could release Jesus without calling the Jewish charges bogus.

“And they all cried out at once, saying, “Away with this Man, and release to us Barabbas” - who had been thrown into prison for a certain rebellion made in the city, and for murder.” I’m sure Pilate couldn’t believe his ears. From all accounts Barabbas was a terrorist – an enemy of both Rome and Jerusalem. Barabbas’ goal was insurrection – upset the Romans by keeping the city on pins and needles. If innocent people died... then so be it. The Jews hated this outlaw as much as the Romans. Pilate thought, surely they’ll never want Barabbas back on their streets. But on this day, none of Pilate’s instincts were right. He underestimated their intense hatred for Jesus.

Verse 20 “Pilate, therefore, wishing to release Jesus, again called out to them. But they shouted, saying, “Crucify Him, crucify Him!” The Jews responsible for railroading Jesus were the chief priests and rulers. This wasn’t the same crowd that hailed Jesus their Messiah the previous Sunday. Most Jews were still waking up after their Thursday night Passover feast. Jesus’ arrest, and phony trials were carried out in the early morning hours.

“Then (Pilate) said to them the third time, “Why, what evil has He done? I have found no reason for death in Him. I will therefore chastise Him and let Him go.” But they were insistent, demanding with loud voices that He be crucified.” Never underestimate the fervor of a religious prejudice. Jesus was a threat to their whole religious system and they wanted Him eliminated. Often Christianity’s fiercest opposition comes from religion not the State.

“And the voices of these men and of the chief priests prevailed.” Sadly, it wasn’t truth and righteousness that prevailed... but the loudest voice. “So Pilate gave sentence that it should be as they requested. And he released to them the one they requested, who for rebellion and murder had been thrown into prison; but he delivered Jesus to their will.” In Matthew’s account, at this point we’re told, “Then he released Barabbas to them; and when he had scourged Jesus, he delivered Him to be crucified.” This scourging was the “chastisement” Pilate had threatened several times before. It was a savage beating. The Romans called it “the halfway death.”

A cat-o-nine-tails with little bits of lead and ivory embedded into the cords was used to churn the victim's back into hamburger. His internal organs ended up exposed. Often a rib or bone would fly off the body during the beating. At the conclusion of the ordeal the victim's body was cut down and hit the pavement in a puddle of his own urine, feces, sweat, and blood. Many victims died during the scourging and never made it to the cross.

Those who were unfortunate to survive the scourging were made to carry their own cross to the place of execution. This was the case with Jesus. Verse 26, "Now as they led Him away, they laid hold of a certain man, Simon a Cyrenian, who was coming from the country, and on him they laid the cross that he might bear it after Jesus." He was recruited from the crowd. Under Roman law a soldier had the legal right to recruit a civilian to carry his armor. The inconvenienced bystander had to bear the burden for one million - or Roman mile - which was a little shorter than our 5280 feet.

This Simon was from Cyrene in North Africa. He may've had black skin. He had made the Passover pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Perhaps, Simon was on his way to the Temple that morning when suddenly he stumbled across this awful procession. He stopped on the curb to observe the entourage when the point of a Roman spear pressed him in the back, and called him into duty. Ironically, Simon had journeyed to Jerusalem to draw closer to God. Who could've imagined he would draw this close - to carry the Savior's cross?

There's evidence that suggests Simon became a believer. In Mark's Gospel, which was directed to the Romans, Simon of Cyrene is further identified as the father of Rufus and Alexander. Apparently, these were men known to the church at Rome. When Paul writes to the Romans, in Romans 16:13, he greets Rufus and his mother as members of the church. Its likely this was the same Rufus - the son of Simon - who was now a Christian. Put the pieces together and we can assume Simon was converted, went home, led his family to Christ, and then later relocated to the city of Rome! Its interesting that there was another Simon who just a few hours earlier had boasted, "Lord, I am ready to go with you, both to prison and to death." But now when he's needed, he's nowhere to be found. This Simon fills in.

Verse 27 "And a great multitude of the people followed Him, and women who also mourned and lamented Him. But Jesus, turning to them, said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for Me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For indeed the days are coming in which they will say, 'Blessed are the barren, wombs that never bore, and breasts which never nursed!' These were not the women who followed Jesus from Galilee. These gals were "daughters of Jerusalem." They felt it their duty to weep and wail - stage a display of grief - whenever the Romans crucified a Jew. Jesus sensed their eyes were full of crocodile tears. They should've been crying for themselves and their countrymen. Again Jesus sees into Jerusalem's future. In 70 AD the Romans will crack down on the city with a vengeance. They'll be brutal and merciless. Jesus is saying, "If they do this to a man they know is innocent - what do you think they'll do to you when you revolt and engage in true insurrection!"

"Then they will begin 'to say to the mountains, "Fall on us!" and to the hills, "Cover us!" In Revelation 6 this is what Jews will say during the tumultuous time of Great Tribulation. At the end of the age God will rock this planet with cataclysmic upheaval, and the daughters of Jerusalem will wail again. In the midst of His crucifixion Jesus was thinking of His second coming. "For if they do these things in the green wood, what will be done in the dry?" As history tramps along men's hearts grow harder. Jesus points out that His day was relatively early in history. The world is still fresh and new. You'd expect this kind of rejection of God at the end of the age - when civilizations are dry and combustible and ready to be burned in the fires of judgment.

Verse 32 "There were also two others, criminals, led with Him to be put to death." Three crucifixions were on the Roman docket that day. This was fulfilled in Isaiah 53:12. Messiah "would be numbered with the transgressors."

"And when they had come to the place called Calvary..." "Calvary" is the English derivative of the Greek word "kranion," from which we get another word, "cranium." "Calvary" was the name given to an outcropping of rock just outside the north wall of Jerusalem. The locals called the site, "Skull Hill." In building the Temple, King Herod used the upper portion of Mount Moriah as a stone quarry. The result

was a rock formation that looked like a skull. You can still see Skull Hill today. Erosion has diminished the resemblance, but the eyes and nose are still discernable. Usually, crucifixions were carried out by a roadway where as many local citizens as possible would witness the consequences of rebelling against Rome. It was a stern deterrent. A main thoroughfare from Jerusalem to Damascus ran by Skull Hill. Jesus was crucified beside this road - either on top or at the bottom of Calvary.

And "there they crucified Him..." In one short sentence Luke sums up the most torturous form of execution ever devised, "they crucified him." Lethal injection - the electric chair - even the firing squad, or guillotine, or hangman's noose - were designed to make execution as quick and painless as possible. Crucifixion on the other hand was barbaric and inhumane. Seven inch iron spikes were driven into His hands and feet. The victim was hoisted into the air on a beam. His bodyweight pressed down on the wounds. Every breath caused excruciating pain to ricochet throughout His body. Most victims suffered for days before they finally died. Often vultures would arrive before death - to start nibbling, and feeding on the victim's flesh. The dignified Roman, Cicero, said, "The idea of the cross should never pass through the thoughts, eyes, or ears of Roman citizens." Roman citizens deserving of capital punishment were beheaded, not crucified. Crucifixion was for non-Romans - for slaves and savages on the outskirts of the empire.

And also crucified along with Jesus were "the criminals, one on the right hand and the other on the left." Reminds me of the old pastor who was in the hospital on his death bed. He only had a few days left to live. He kept crying out to the nurse, "Please, call my Congressman and my Senator. I want to die in peace." The nurse thought it a strange request, but she complied. When the two politicians entered the room the pastor told one of them to stand on either side of his bed. He told the nurse, "Now I can die in peace." The nurse just had to ask, "Pastor, what does having your Congressman and Senator by your side have to do with you dying in peace?" The old pastor answered, "Nurse, now I can die like my Lord Jesus - between two thieves." Actually we know from Romans 6:6 the identity of one of the thieves. It was the Apostle Paul's dad. Paul writes, "my old man was crucified with Christ."

On the cross, Jesus made seven statements... Luke mentions just three. Jesus said to the repentant thief, "Today, you will be with Me in paradise." He turned over the care of His mother to the Apostle John, "Woman, behold your son! (And then He said to John) behold your mother!" Then the sky went black for three hours. During which Jesus cried out in anguish to His Father, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?"

His final three statements come at the end - and come in a flurry... His first statement was preparation for the last two. When He cried "I thirst" it caused the soldiers to moisten His lips so He could utter His grand finale. Then He makes the momentous statement, "It is finished!" Finally, in a last gasp, He breathes, "Father, into Your hands I commend My spirit."

But the first statement Jesus makes from the cross is in verse 34, "Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do." And this is truly amazing grace... Jesus shows compassion on the people who are spitting in His face, and pounding nails into His flesh, and screaming at the top of their lungs, "Crucify Him." Here is the heart of God. From the Garden of Eden man has rebelled against His Creator, yet God keeps loving, and reaching, and wooing, and longing for us to return. If these people had known God's heart. If they could see what made Jesus tick, it would've never come to this... They would've fallen on their faces in appreciation, praise, and surrender. Instead they were blinded by ignorance.

"And they divided His garments and cast lots." Apparently, Jesus wore an outer, single-piece tunic. It was of some value, so rather than tear it into equal shares, the Romans soldiers attending His crucifixion, gambled it away. Think of the irony... This is God - and they shoot craps for His coat. This was another fulfillment of prophecy - Psalm 22:18. "And the people stood looking on. But even the rulers with them sneered, saying, "He saved others; let Him save Himself if He is the Christ, the chosen of God." The soldiers also mocked Him, coming and offering Him sour wine, and saying, "If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself." What a sinister day! All the world's evil has rallied together against God. Angry taunts come from both religious Jews and secular Romans.

What no one understood - and wouldn't - until after the resurrection was that God had deliberately chosen the way of weakness. Power is a two-edged sword. It ends suffering for some folks, yet usually at the expense of others. But love absorbs everyone's pain... What no one realized was that God had deliberately renounced power in order to demonstrate true love. As an old priest put it, "The only ultimate way to conquer evil is to let it be smothered within a willing, living human being. When it is absorbed there like blood in a sponge or a spear into one's heart, it loses its power and goes no further." Jesus was the ultimate shock absorber! He refused to save Himself. Instead, He absorbed the world's evil, and extinguished it with His love.

Verse 38, "And an inscription also was written over Him in letters of Greek, Latin, and Hebrew: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS." A wooden plaque listing the prisoner's crime or crimes was nailed to the cross above His head. The accusation against Jesus was written in the three main languages of the first century - Greek, the language of culture... Latin, the language of government... Hebrew, the language of religion... everyone read the sign.

"Then one of the criminals who were hanged blasphemed Him, saying, "If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us." He joined the jeers of the crowd. "But the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, "Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong." To Pilate and the thief it was obvious Jesus was a righteous man. But this man goes further than Pilate. He acts on the truth He knows. He puts faith in Jesus. He trusts Jesus with His eternal destiny. "Then he said to Jesus, "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom." And Jesus said to him, "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise."

The Greek word translated, "criminal," meant "one who uses violence to rob openly." Which means this man wasn't being crucified for credit card theft. He was an armed robber. He was guilty of murder and mayhem. On earth he undoubtedly deserved death, but in eternity he's given Paradise. And why? It had nothing to do with the works of his hands - they were nailed to a piece of wood... Nor did it have anything to do with the places he went to spread God's kindness - his feet were also nailed to that wood... And it wasn't because he joined a church - nailed to a cross, he couldn't go to church. There was only one thing this man could do - that was have faith, and look to Jesus for salvation. This was all he could do, but it was all he had to do! We all come to God the same way - by grace through faith.

I often think of this boy's poor parents. They went to bed that night and every night thereafter thinking their son was frying on the grill in hell... But you never really know what happens in a man's heart during his final seconds. There is such a thing as a death bed conversion. I've heard it put, "God included one death bed conversion in the Bible to give us hope, but only one not create false hope." You may die an instant death and not get a final chance. It's certainly not guaranteed. That's why if you don't know Jesus, come to Him tonight. It may be your last opportunity.

Verse 44, "Now it was about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over all the earth until the ninth hour." From the sixth hour to the ninth hour was from noon until 3:00 PM. Darkness covered the earth. Nature knew that something's wrong. The lights went out. Amazingly, it was midnight at midday. In Egypt, Israel experienced three days of darkness prior to the Passover and their Exodus. On Calvary the world experienced three hours of darkness as our Passover lamb was slain and His blood shed to set us free.

"Then the sun was darkened, and the veil of the temple was torn in two." In his book, "Sketches of Jewish Social Life in the Days of Christ," Hebrew scholar, Alfred Edershiem, gleans an insight from the Jewish rabbis. He quotes the Talmud... It says that forty years before the Temple was destroy - the very year Jesus was crucified - the Temple doors opened of their own accord. It's interesting that a Jewish source affirms the Gospel accounts. Just as Luke records, the veil in the Temple was torn in two - the door opened. But the Talmud interpreted the breach as a sign of judgment... The Gospels treats it as a sign of grace. Access to God was now available. Through the work of Jesus the door opened for us to enter God's presence.

“And when Jesus had cried out with a loud voice, He said, “Father, ‘into Your hands I commit My spirit.’” Having said this, He breathed His last.” Jesus is quoting Psalm 31:5 - it was a bedtime prayer for Jewish children. It’s amazing, despite the searing pain Jesus experienced, He died a peaceful death. He died as a little child curling up in His Father’s arms to go to sleep. Peace and composure didn’t escape Him even in the throes of death.

Verse 47 “So when the centurion saw what had happened, he glorified God, saying, “Certainly this was a righteous Man!” The Roman centurion was the backbone of the Roman legion. An equivalent rank would be sergeant. Here was a man who knew men. Sizing up and training men was his job. And it didn’t take him long to draw a bead on Jesus. Here was a man among men. “Certainly this was a righteous Man!” Matthew puts more words in his mouth. “Truly, this was the Son of God.” I’m sure the Sarge said both.

“And the whole crowd who came together to that sight, seeing what had been done, beat their breasts and returned.” The darkened sky and the convulsions of nature had silenced the mocking, and ridicule, and scoffing. Those who stayed to the end realized something serious had happened. “But all His acquaintances, and the women who followed Him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.” There were a few who stuck with Jesus to the end. Among them were the women who embraced Jesus among the miracles in Galilee, and followed Him through the horrors of the cross. But where were Peter? And the other disciples? They were AWOL...

Verse 50, “Now behold, there was a man named Joseph, a council member, a good and just man.” Joseph served on the Jewish Sanhedrin – the same body of men who condemned Jesus to death earlier that morning... But apparently, they did so without Joseph’s approval. Luke writes, “He had not consented to their decision and deed. He was from Arimathea, a city of the Jews, who himself was also waiting for the kingdom of God.” Mark 14:64 reports the Sanhedrin’s verdict on the fate of Jesus, “They ALL condemned him to be worthy of death.” The verdict was unanimous – and since Luke tells us Joseph had not consented - we assume he must’ve been absent. Perhaps he and Nicodemus were deliberately snubbed that day.

Up until to this point Joseph was a covert Christian - a secret saint. John 19:38 describes him as “a disciple of Jesus, but secretly, for fear of the Jews.” It’s interesting that the crisis of the cross sent the disciples who had been open about their faith underground – while it brought the underground disciples out into the open. As the twelve hide for their lives - thinking they might be next - Joseph realizes its time to come out of the closet! Hey, coming out of the closet has become fashionable in today’s world. Every pervert and weird-o seems to feel the liberty to come out of the closet, and celebrate their sickness. If you’re an undercover Christian don’t you think its time you came out of the closet too? What are you waiting on? Be bold about your faith - stop hiding your light under a basket - its time to shine! The world will never need what you’ve got more than it needs it now!

“This man (Joseph) went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus.” There’s a ancient legend that’s preserves the dialogue between Pilate and Joseph. When Joseph asked for the body, Pilate said, “Do you realize this will be costly? Have you priced tombs lately? You’ll lose a brand new tomb?” Joseph replied, “Aw, not really, Jesus only needs it for the weekend!”

Verse 53, “Then he took (the body) down, wrapped it in linen, and laid it in a tomb...” The Jews buried their corpses under mounds of spices – up to 100 pounds - then they wrapped the body tightly in a linen shroud. Finally, they laid it in a tomb.

And Luke describes the tomb “that was hewn out of the rock, where no one had ever lain before.” Often tombs were double and triple occupancy. The Garden Tomb north of Skull Hill - believed by many to be this very tomb - the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea. It was actually cut out for four people. And it was a new tomb. You can see where the chiseling was never finished. The tomb that housed the body of Jesus had never been occupied. It was empty when the body of Jesus arrived, and empty when He departed. Jesus came into the world through a virgin’s womb and left through a virgin tomb.

Verse 54, “That day was the Preparation, and the Sabbath drew near.”

Jesus died shortly after 3 PM. The Jewish day ended at sundown. Thus, the Sabbath started at 6 PM – leaving very little time to complete His burial. According to John 19:31 the next day was a special Sabbath.

“And the women who had come with Him from Galilee followed after...” These women weren't the “daughters of Jerusalem” - the fair weather mourners we met earlier on the streets of the city - these were His devoted followers from Galilee who had been with Jesus through most of His ministry. “And they observed the tomb and how His body was laid.” Notice, “they observed the tomb.” They didn't get caught up in the hysteria of the moment and forget where Jesus was buried. Some skeptics explain away the resurrection of Jesus as nothing more than a case of a mistaken tomb. But that doesn't fit the facts. These women very careful to note exactly where He was buried. They would return on Sunday, and finish the burial.

“Then they returned and prepared spices and fragrant oils. And they rested on the Sabbath according to the commandment.” Within a hundred years of Jesus at least 15 Jews claimed to be the Messiah – each one flamed, then fizzled, and was eventually snuffed out. The women and Joseph went home thinking that another flame had just been extinguished. They had no idea that in a few hours the whole course of human history would be forever altered. As the poet, John Donne, wrote, “Death, be not proud.” At the moment death seemed victorious, but a new fire is about to rise from cold ashes! It's Friday, but Sunday is a'coming...

Let me close with a question that needs to be asked... Who was it that killed Jesus? Was it Pilate... Or Herod... Or the soldiers... Or the Jews? They all were accomplices - but when we search for the smoking gun in this murder case we have to look deeper. It was my sin and your sin that nailed Jesus to the tree. I killed Him. You killed Him. We can't pass the buck. We're all guilty of killing the Son of God. Jesus died because of our sin. And He did it willingly. Our responsibility is to make sure He didn't die in vain. We do that by humbling ourselves, and opening our hearts, and surrendering our lives to Jesus... Let Him forgive you and set you free! Then tells a friend the good news!