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# People of the Passion: Pilate

**DAVE BAST**

Have you ever tried to pass the buck? Maybe you tried to shift the blame of a bad outcome or a missed deadline or a wrong decision onto someone else so that the guilt you felt might lessen. Well, during Jesus' journey to the cross, Pilate is the character in the story that plays the blame game; so what can we learn from him today? Stay tuned.

**BOB HEERSPINK**

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Bob Heerspink.

**DAVE BAST**

And I am Dave Bast. Bob, have you ever tried to pass the buck?

**BOB HEERSPINK**

Well, I know my daughter has... yes, I have, too, but you know, I had this experience this winter; I was in Chicago and I got a phone call from my daughter and she was all distraught. She and Mom were coming home and she was driving and she came around a corner too fast, the roads were slippery, and she just barreled into the curb. She threw the wheel out of true, she limped home, and...

**DAVE BAST**

You need a realignment job now.

**BOB HEERSPINK**

I do, I do, and I think I need a new wheel rim as well; but she was explaining to me how this was all Mom's fault; because, after all, Mom had spent too long at the mall; she had to get home; and I said to her, I said: Well, who was driving the car? Well, I was. I said: Well then, I think you are responsible.

**DAVE BAST**

Yes, that sounds a lot like what happens in our family when my wife asks me: Okay, now how is this my fault; when I have done some... because I know you will figure out a way to somehow shift this to me.

**BOB HEERSPINK**

Well, you know, I think of raising our kids, and how they would point the finger at each other and say: It's not my fault; but let's face it, this is what we do all the time.

**DAVE BAST**

It's as old as the human race, right?

**BOB HEERSPINK**

It's as old as Adam and Eve.

**DAVE BAST**

It goes back to the Garden, yes; Adam pointing at Eve and Eve pointing at the serpent.

## **BOB HEERSPINK**

Now, of course, we have a great story in the Lenten story, which deals precisely with passing the buck, and that is Pontius Pilate.

## **DAVE BAST**

Yes, he is a player, and we are looking at the players that surround Jesus' journey to the cross; and we come now to the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. You know, it is interesting, for 2,000 years whenever Christians have confessed their faith in the words of the Apostles' Creed, they have repeated this guy's story in a nutshell. "He was crucified under Pontius Pilate..." \*

## **BOB HEERSPINK**

Yes, there are only two people who are mentioned in the Apostles' Creed, and it is Mary, the mother of Jesus... you can figure that one out; and then it is Pilate; you know, Pilate shows up in this great confession, this short summary of the Christian faith.

## **DAVE BAST**

Well, and I think a big reason for that is to root this whole thing in history. Christians are saying: Look, what we believe about Jesus actually happened, and it happened in a particular time and place, and it happened... it involved this Roman official, and that is why we name his name, to just solidify this whole thing. This is not just some ethereal: Well, our faith is historical; but it also says something about how you want to be remembered.

## **BOB HEERSPINK**

Well, I think it also says something about how Jesus died. I mean, he did not die at the hands of a lynch mob. Pontius Pilate was in charge of Roman justice. He is brought before Pilate and Pilate exemplifies the greatest judicial system of the day, and yet this innocent Man still goes to his death.

## **DAVE BAST**

Well, it is probably a familiar story to many... especially those who have read the Bible or been in church, but let's hear it again.

## **BOB HEERSPINK**

This is from Matthew 27: <sup>11</sup>Meanwhile, Jesus stood before the governor; and the governor asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" "You have said so," Jesus replied. <sup>12</sup>When he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he gave no answer. <sup>13</sup>Then Pilate asked him, "Don't you hear the testimony they are bringing against you?" <sup>14</sup>But Jesus made no reply, not even to a single charge, to the great amazement of the governor. <sup>15</sup>Now, it was the governor's custom at the festival to release a prisoner chosen by the crowd. <sup>16</sup>At that time, they had a well-known prisoner whose name was Jesus Barabbas. <sup>17</sup>So when the crowd had gathered, Pilate asked them, "Which one do you want me to release to you? Jesus Barabbas, or Jesus who is called the Messiah?" <sup>18</sup>For he knew it was out of envy that they had handed Jesus over to him. <sup>19</sup>While Pilate was sitting on the judge's seat, his wife sent to him this message: Don't have anything to do with that innocent Man; for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him. <sup>20</sup>But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus executed. <sup>21</sup>"Which of the two do you want me to release to you?" asked the governor. "Barabbas!" they answered. <sup>22</sup>"What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called the Messiah?" Pilate asked. They all answered, "Crucify him." <sup>23</sup>"Why? What crime has he committed?" asked Pilate. But they shouted all the louder, "Crucify him!" <sup>24</sup>When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. "I am innocent of this Man's blood," he said. "It is your responsibility." <sup>25</sup>All the people answered, "His blood is on us and on our children." <sup>26</sup>Then Pilate released Barabbas to them, but he had Jesus flogged and handed him over to be crucified.

**DAVE BAST**

Boy, there is a lot in that story; all kinds of things jump out. One thing that struck me as you were reading it is this incredible choice: Jesus Barabbas or Jesus Christ that the crowd is given; Jesus of course being a common name – Joshua – Yeshua – in the First Century, and that is a pretty stark alternative right there.

**BOB HEERSPINK**

Yes; there are actually two by the name of Jesus who stand before Pilate: What is it going to be? Which Jesus is he going to go with?

**DAVE BAST**

And then there is this whole hand-washing thing; that has become proverbial, hasn't it, for shifting blame, evading responsibility: I wash my hands of it...

**BOB HEERSPINK**

I wash my hands of it.

**DAVE BAST**

Yes, and that comes right from Pilate on his judgment seat. So, yes, let's dig into that and sort of ask the question, maybe, why did Pilate do this?

**BOB HEERSPINK**

What was he like? What was really in his head as Jesus stood before him? We will talk about that after we come back from a short break.

*Segment 2*

**DAVE BAST**

Welcome back; this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives; and Bob, you just read for us the story of the trial of Jesus before Pontius Pilate, and we noted that he is one of only two names that Christians repeat when they recite the Creed that summarizes our faith: Mary, the mother of Jesus, that is good; Pilate, the man...

**BOB HEERSPINK**

Pontius Pilate.

**DAVE BAST**

Yes, the man who crucified Jesus; that is bad; and how and why did he do it? Well, what do we know about him? We do have some historical background.

**BOB HEERSPINK**

We do. We actually have found a stone block in Palestine now that has his name on it, so we know he was a real person.

**DAVE BAST**

Yes; which is great, because the point that I made earlier was that this is rooting the events of Jesus' death, crucifixion, burial and resurrection in real history. The Christian faith is not about ideas; it is about facts – it is about things that actually happened. Without those facts, we have nothing.

**BOB HEERSPINK**

Right; and then we go to the historians of the day, Philo and Josephus, and we actually find that they tell us some interesting stuff about Pilate. He governed for ten years, which was actually a pretty significant length of time. There are a lot of people who kind of dismiss Pilate as some kind of an incompetent because of what happens here in the Gospels, but ten years shows he had his act together as governor; but he had problems

because the Jewish people were just miserable people to govern.

**DAVE BAST**

It would sort of be like trying to be the American commander in Afghanistan, let's say, or the NATO commander, or in Iraq. You are dealing with a fractious people with violent segments that want to engage in armed rebellion. You are also dealing with people who are religiously very sensitive. They have a hair trigger about anything that they see as defiling their holy places in Jerusalem. Pilate's headquarters was actually in Caesarea, which was the capital of the province, kind of near where Tel Aviv is today; but he had, of course, kept a place in Jerusalem because that was the center – that was the hub – of action; and so, he is there in Jerusalem because it is Passover.

**BOB HEERSPINK**

It is Passover, and he has to be close to the action; but the real heart problem, I think, for Pilate, was trying to figure out the religion of these Jewish folks, because throughout the empire there were people who were willing to worship the Roman gods, the Greek gods. They would offer a pinch of incense to the emperor. They would go all over the place and do what they had to do in their religious world; but the Jews said there is only one God and it is the God Yahweh, and you make no images of him; and when the Romans came to the Jewish people and said: Sacrifice to the emperor, they refused to do it, and they actually... the Romans gave the Jews a pass because they knew they would have to kill them all if they actually enforced this.

**DAVE BAST**

Yes, it is interesting when you know a little bit of the history, especially of the intertestamental period – the time between the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Jews pretty well demonstrated their willingness to die for their faith, and their stubbornness. The key thing for them was images. There is a story from history about a Greek conqueror, before the Romans came, who put up an image in the Temple, and all hell broke loose, you know; and when the Romans finally came, one of them went into the Holy of Holies and saw that it was empty, and he came out just shaking his head because for everyone else, you had a statue of your god; that is what you worshipped. So finally they gave up and said: All right, let them be; as long as we don't impose... but Pilate kind of pushed the envelope on that image issue.

**BOB HEERSPINK**

Well, Pilate doesn't even know he is pushing the envelope. Just a few months before this episode where Jesus stands before Pilate, he brought into Jerusalem some gold shields, and they didn't even have an image on them. They were just an honor to Tiberius the Emperor. There was an inscription, and he finds that the people are going crazy about this. I mean, these shields are up at his Jerusalem headquarters. They are not even in the Temple...

**DAVE BAST**

But they are close.

**BOB HEERSPINK**

They are close.

**DAVE BAST**

And so, they go ballistic.

**BOB HEERSPINK**

They are going ballistic; and Pilate says: I have had enough of this; they stay. And what did those Jews do? The Jewish leaders write back to the emperor and they say: Pilate is giving us trouble; and Tiberius writes back to Pilate and says: Take the shields down. Knock it off. I want peace out there. Just take down the shields and don't give me any more headaches. Now, that happens only a few months before the episode that you find here in Matthew.

**DAVE BAST**

So that is really important, I think, to understand the dynamics of Jesus' trial. Pilate suddenly is given this case that he wants nothing to do with, but it is forced upon him by the Jewish leaders. He examines Jesus, and Jesus, for some reason, isn't willing to defend himself, and Pilate... that sort of staggers him. What's the matter with you? He says in one of the Gospels: Don't you know I can crucify you? I mean, do you realize what is going on here? And Jesus just maintains this majestic calm in front of Pilate. So Pilate tries to shift responsibility; he tries to pass the buck.

**BOB HEERSPINK**

Well, I think we have to recognize that Pilate is a scared guy. I mean, we read the story and we think: Oh, the guy is so tough and he is so big; but actually, he is totally put on the spot. The Sanhedrin know they have him because they bring Jesus to him and they say that this guy is seeking to be a king. This is treason to the Empire. So here sits Pilate, and he says: You know, if I let this guy off the hook, there is going to be another letter going out to Tiberius saying, okay, now Pilate is letting false kings run through your territory. And he really is struggling with the fact that he wants to save his own skin: Do I do the right thing or do I save myself? I mean, if that isn't the kind of thing that we face all the time, I don't know what is.

**DAVE BAST**

It is a classic bind, because Pilate clearly knows that Jesus is innocent.

**BOB HEERSPINK**

Yes.

**DAVE BAST**

He understands that from the outset, and he is sworn to uphold justice. I mean, the Romans did have, at least in theory, the ideal of justice – the rule of law; and if he didn't know, his wife's message to him ought to have been enough, because she has this dream, which the Romans were very sensitive to that kind of thing – portents and dreams – and she says: He is innocent. Have nothing to do with him. So he is caught in a classic bind. It is my career or it is truth and justice and integrity, which is it going to be?

**BOB HEERSPINK**

Right; it is the guy sitting in the office at work saying: Things are happening in this company that are wrong, they are illegal, but if I report it I am going to get fired; and what is it going to be? It is going to be my career or is it going to be truth? And, boy, it is tough at that point to say: Okay, I lay it all on the line for the sake of doing the right thing.

**DAVE BAST**

Or an even smaller, everyday example; we all face this. You have an expense report, and do you fudge it? And then the question is: Well, how much is your integrity worth? Is it worth a hundred bucks? Is it worth a million bucks? What is your price for compromising and doing what you know is wrong? That is the question that Pilate faces; and he tries to do anything he can to get out of it, because first he shifts Jesus over to the Herod: We'll let him...

**BOB HEERSPINK**

That's the blame game. It is exactly what we do.

**DAVE BAST**

Then he says: Well, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus Christ? And the crowd chooses Barabbas – kind of mind-blowing. They had just acclaimed Jesus the Sunday before, you know, but now? No, let's have Barabbas; and finally he has Jesus scourged – this terrible beating and whipping – and he brings out Jesus and presents him to the crowd and says: Here, you want his blood? Is this enough? Maybe a little bit of blood? Can I let him

go now?

**BOB HEERSPINK**

Yes, we're done now; right, yes.

**DAVE BAST**

Right; and they say: Crucify him.

**BOB HEERSPINK**

Crucify him. So, the question still comes back: Who is responsible for Jesus' death? We've got some possibilities in this story, and we should explore that right after we take a break.

*Segment 3*

**BOB HEERSPINK**

Welcome back to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. Dave, right before the break, we were talking about responsibility for Jesus' death, and how Pilate just doesn't have the guts – he doesn't have the courage to do the right thing.

**DAVE BAST**

His integrity is what is being tested at this point because he knows Jesus is innocent, but he is afraid of losing his job if there is trouble with the population of Jerusalem, and the Jewish leaders are determined to stir up the people; and so he tries all these different things to get Jesus off, and none of them works; and finally they start shouting: Crucify him! Crucify him! And there is a very telling point at that moment, where Pilate says: Shall I crucify your King? And they say: Caesar is our King, and if you don't crucify Jesus, you are not Caesar's friend.

**BOB HEERSPINK**

You know, I have heard that there was actually a club in Rome. It was the Friend of Caesar's Club; and that those friends of Caesar actually had a ring on their finger that marked them as part of that club.

**DAVE BAST**

So, you are going to lose your membership in that club, Pilate.

**BOB HEERSPINK**

Yes, it is very interesting to think of the fact that Pilate is fingering that ring on his finger, saying: It's gone if I come through and do the right thing here.

**DAVE BAST**

What a test; you know, it is the same test that every one of us faces, and it has been that way for 2,000 years. You can be Caesar's friend or Jesus' friend, but you cannot be both.

**BOB HEERSPINK**

Right.

**DAVE BAST**

You can only have one best friend, and who do you choose? And Pilate chooses Caesar. So he passes sentence on what he knows to be an innocent man.

**BOB HEERSPINK**

But, if you look at the passage, then the question comes: Okay, who is responsible? It is interesting how the Jewish crowd volunteers to take responsibility for all of this.

**DAVE BAST**

Yes, that is a terrible thing. They say: His blood be upon us and on our children; and we can no longer talk about that verse without reference to the holocaust and to the long history of anti-Semitism that this has been used to justify. It is a terrible thing, and until and unless today we acknowledge that history and the heinous sin of the Church through the centuries against the Jewish people, then we cannot talk about the story at all. So, we have to deal with that first...

**BOB HEERSPINK**

Yes.

**DAVE BAST**

And address it head-on, I think.

**BOB HEERSPINK**

Well, the crowd could claim responsibility for this, not just for themselves, but for their children; but that is another thing for God actually to lay the responsibility on the Jewish people for all eternity; and if you go to the Old Testament, there is that verse in which the parents have eaten sour grapes, the children's teeth are set on edge; in other words, the parents did wrong, the kids pay for it; but in that passage, which is from Jeremiah, Jeremiah goes on to say: No, it doesn't work that way. Those who are responsible for their own sin pay for their own sin.

**DAVE BAST**

Right.

**BOB HEERSPINK**

So, this is really, I think, a request of the Jewish people that God says: I am not going to grant it.

**DAVE BAST**

Well, you ask who is responsible for Jesus' crucifixion and the answer could be the crowd; they shouted to crucify him; the Jewish leadership certainly, who engineered the whole plot; Pilate, who passed sentence on him; Judas, who betrayed him; Peter, who denied him; and you ask who is responsible out of those? The answer is, yes...

**BOB HEERSPINK**

Well, they all are.

**DAVE BAST**

Yes.

**BOB HEERSPINK**

And that is where we get to the issue of how do we approach passages like this. This isn't just history of the First Century. These are Gospel stories; and in these stories God invites us to live into the story, like we've been doing as we think about Pilate, and to say: Okay, how do we align with Pilate, with Judas; and suddenly the responsibility isn't just to people in the First Century. Jesus didn't go to the cross just because there were bad people in the First Century. He went to the cross for you and me.

**DAVE BAST**

Well, the first thing I think we have to say when you raised the question how do we align with Pilate; and what strikes me is the first thing we have to say is we cannot wash our hands like Pilate tried to do. That doesn't work.

**BOB HEERSPINK**

Right; we cannot wash our hands of our responsibility in the way we mess up in our ordinary lives, or in our responsibility for the cross of Christ.

**DAVE BAST**

Hand washing does not get rid of guilt or responsibility. You know that famous scene in...

**BOB HEERSPINK**

Yes, Macbeth.

**DAVE BAST**

Yes, Macbeth, right.

**BOB HEERSPINK**

Yes, where Lady Macbeth is wandering through the palace and she is just... in her sleep...

**DAVE BAST**

By the way, before you get to that, for some of us who may not remember the whole story, Lady Macbeth has egged her husband on to murder the king and take the crown for himself; so they are both guilty as sin, and now they are starting to feel it.

**BOB HEERSPINK**

Right; and so, Lady Macbeth is wandering the palace at night in her sleep, and she is continually washing her hands; and she is saying: Out, out, damned spot. You know, there is this blood that is on her hands and she knows it is literally damning her soul to hell, but she cannot get rid of it. She cannot wash it away. And you have this same thing with Pilate. Some people have said, and I think it is just tradition, but that he spent the rest of his life trying to get rid of the stains – compulsively hand washing – because he couldn't get rid of the guilt. You don't get rid of guilt... I don't get rid of guilt and you don't get rid of guilt simply by saying it doesn't exist.

**DAVE BAST**

The other thing is, it doesn't work. You know, Pilate wanted to have Caesar as his friend and so he delivers Jesus over to be condemned, but in the end he lost Caesar's friendship, too. What we do know from history is that Pilate ultimately ended life a suicide, for whatever reasons that might have entailed; and the truth is, I think of something C. S. Lewis wrote in one of his classics. He said: If you aim for heaven, you get the earth thrown in, too, just as a bonus; but if you aim for earth... if you choose the world, you lose both. In the end, you don't even get to keep the world because Satan never keeps his end of the bargain. We trade our souls for what we think we need; our career or money or fame or whatever it is, and in the end we lose that, too. That is Pilate's story.

**BOB HEERSPINK**

But you know, the irony is, Dave, that you don't wash away your guilt with water. What washes away guilt is the blood of Christ.

**DAVE BAST**

Ha; can I quote a poem – lines from John Donne? Or wash thee in Christ's blood, which hath this might that being red it dyes black souls to white.

**BOB HEERSPINK**

And those of us who don't Donne might think of the song which says: There is a fountain filled with blood...



**DAVE BAST**

William Cooper.

**BOB HEERSPINK**

Drawn from Immanuel's veins, and sinners plunged beneath that flood lose all their guilty stains. That really is the heart of the Gospel, and the great truth of the Good News is that what Pilate could not wash away, the blood of Christ, the blood that was shed at Calvary, covers all of our sins.

**DAVE BAST**

You know, we talk about who is responsible and who is not able to shift the blame for Christ's death, and all the actors in the story, but there is one more, and that is us. We have to put ourselves into it, too. When you ask: Why did Christ have to die? I have to say, because of me. I am ultimately the one. If it weren't for my sin, he wouldn't have had to die. So, who is responsible? Who is the guilty one? Well, we all are.

**BOB HEERSPINK**

And when we stop playing the blame game, that is when we truly can experience the forgiveness of Jesus Christ.

**DAVE BAST**

Thanks, Bob; and thanks to you, too, for joining our *Groundwork* conversation. Please don't forget, it is listeners like you asking questions or participating, making suggestions, that will keep our topics relevant to your life. So tell us what you think about what you are hearing and offer some topics or passages you would like to hear on future *Groundwork* programs. Just visit us online at our address, [groundworkonline.com](https://groundworkonline.com), and join the conversation.

**\*Note:** What Dave says is a paraphrase of the line in the Apostles' Creed. The actual wording is: "he suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified..."

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