

Who was Pontius Pilate? That's a surprisingly difficult question to answer. Most people today would call him a villain. Right up there with Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, and Osama bin Ladin.

He's the man who sentenced Jesus to death, after all. And before that, the man who had Jesus whipped and beaten and crowned with thorns. And before that, the man who had done countless cruel acts to the Jewish people. Including things like taking blood from executed criminals and mixing it with the Temple sacrifices. Essentially forcing the Jews to make human sacrifices to the Lord.

Pilate was not a good man. He hated the Jews. He hated Judaism as a religion. And he had no qualms about showing contempt and cruelty toward the people he governed. For that, we label him as evil. And that's probably accurate.

But it's not the whole story. Because there's a lot more to Pilate than just his acts of violence and cruelty. For one thing, Pilate was an unusual figure in Roman politics because he was not an aristocrat.

You see, ancient Roman society was highly stratified. At the bottom you had the slaves and former-slaves. Just above them were the lowest caste, the plebians. Above them, occupying the middle-class, were the equestrians, the people who were literally wealthy enough to own a horse. And finally, at the top of the pile, were the patricians. The ruling class, who were allowed to be Senators and other elected officials.

Where did Pilate fit into all this? Well, we know from sources outside the Bible that the Pontius family started out as plebians, the lowest class above slaves and freedmen. However, one of Pilate's ancestors had managed to move them into the equestrian class – the middle-class – which was already a tremendous feat in Roman society.

Pilate took the family even further, though. As a young man, he joined the army. And, according to tradition, while he was deployed he met a young woman named Claudia Procula. Claudia was the granddaughter of the Emperor Augustus and a patrician. The two got married. And suddenly, Pilate wasn't just an obscure middle-class soldier anymore. He was married to nobility.

But he wasn't really a patrician either. No, he still had some work to do for that title. And so Pilate worked the system. Maneuvered Roman politics. Clawed his way up the social ladder. And finally managed to get himself appointed as the governor of Judea.

It was not a desirable posting. Judea was known for being troublesome and the Emperor Tiberias was both short on patience and more than a little paranoid about rebellions. Judea was a tough assignment on the edge of the Empire. But if Pilate succeeded, he would be one step closer to the upper class privileges that he coveted.

And so you can imagine the knot in the stomach of this ambitious politician, as an advisor woke him up early Friday morning to the news that the Jews were making trouble yet again. Pilate had already put down several riots and rebellions. The Emperor was growing less and less patient with him. He needed this to go away.

And yet, the man that the Jewish leaders brought forward to him was hardly a threat. They couldn't tell Pilate the truth about Jesus, of course, because Pilate wouldn't care then. Blasphemy may be a capital offense in Jewish law, but for the Roman governor it wasn't a crime at all.

So, instead, they called Jesus a revolutionary. An insurrectionist. A political adversary trying to make himself king. A military leader trying to conquer a Roman territory. These were accusations that Pilate would listen to. These were crimes against the Roman emperor.

But when Pilate questioned Jesus, he didn't see any of those things. No, the man Pilate met in his palace was a theologian. A philosopher. A man who talked about otherworldly kingdoms. Who engaged Pilate in a discussion about the nature of truth. This man was no threat to Rome or Pilate or the Emperor.

But the Jewish leaders didn't like Jesus. They wanted him punished. So Pilate punished him. After years of political scheming and backstabbing, he hardened heart one more time to appease the Jewish authority. He had Jesus flogged and mocked. Dressed up in a ridiculous robe and a painful crown of thorns.

And then, when Jesus was covered head to toe in bloody whip marks and black and blue with bruises, Pilate said to the Jews, “*See, I am bringing him out to you that you may know that I find no guilt in him.*” Essentially, Pilate told them, “I don't think he's guilty, but I gave him a good beating anyway. Just to make you happy.”

But it still wasn't enough. So Pilate hardened his heart yet again. He told them that they could go and crucify Jesus themselves if they wanted his dead so badly. But it still wasn't enough.

So Pilate took a different angle. Maybe, just maybe, Jesus was from a Roman province or a Roman colony. If he was, he would be a Roman citizen. He would be owed a fair trial and not this kangaroo court that the Jews had put together. But Jesus wouldn't tell Pilate where he was from.

Finally, the Jews said something Pilate couldn't ignore. They accused Pilate of not being a friend of Caesar's. The Emperor Tiberias, as I said, had grown increasingly paranoid. If they could contact Rome, leak even a hint to Tiberias that Pilate wasn't completely trustworthy. That he was conspiring with an insurrectionist against the Emperor. Well that would mean political ruin for Pilate. An end to every one of his ambitions.

And so Pilate hardened the last little fragment of his heart that was still alive. He handed Jesus over to be crucified. He condemned to death a man he knew to be innocent. All because Pilate's ambition was worth more than Jesus' life.

Who was Pontius Pilate? Pontius Pilate was a sinner. He was a man who hardened his heart and let sin decide his actions. Let ambition rule his thoughts. Let pride and greed and power consume whatever moral compass he had until he was able to murder an innocent man to appease an unruly crowd.

And in that, Pontius Pilate is a warning to us. Because you and I are not Pontius Pilate. But we could be. The slippery slope that Pilate descended is not as long as we'd like to think. It's not as easy to avoid as we want to believe.

And I have no doubt that there are people in this room who have hardened their hearts to a sin in their life. Who have thought a greedy thought and then found an excuse for their greed. Who have done a lustful deed and then have pretended like it never even happened. Who have said a hateful thing and then let the hate fester inside them.

Each of those thoughts, words, and deeds accumulate over time. They turn our hearts to stone. They turn us, as Jesus once said, into white washed tombs, pure and white on the outside, full of death and decay on the inside.

What exactly do you do with a heart like that? Well, you do what Ezekiel tells us. You turn away from the detestable things you have done. All the abominations you have placed in your life.

And you remember that God has already given you a new heart and new spirit. In holy baptism, he has removed that heart of stone and replaced it with a heart of flesh. A heart that beats with the blood of Christ and pumps new life through our veins. A heart that seeks to walk in God's statutes and keep God's rules and obey God's Laws.

Because no matter what you have done and no matter how hard your heart becomes, you are God's people, and he is your God. And if you continue to seek after detestable things and abominations, yes he will eventually bring your deeds down on your heads. But until that day, he is always ready to forgive.

Always ready to let his light shine into the darkness of whatever you are doing. That you may know the truth, and the truth will set you free. That you may hear the truth that is Jesus Christ, and Christ's blood may free you from all your sins.

Who was Pontius Pilate? He was a sinner. A sinner with a heart of stone. Who are you? You are a sinner. But by God's grace, your heart is not stone. It is flesh and blood. Bought with the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ. It is something new and alive and filled by God's spirit. It led you to God's Word this evening. And by God's grace, it will always lead you to his forgiveness. Amen.