

Seeking God – Pilate

A Bible Discussion by Robert Jackson

This is probably the most provocative Bible Discussion I've led, and it appeals especially to Christians because of the new perspective it gives on a familiar story. The point of the discussion is that we need to seek God with all our hearts. Pilate is studied as an example of someone who sought the truth *intensely*, but, in the end, not with his whole heart. We need to give up everything in order to seek God. I got the idea for this study from chapter 6 of "Jesus among other gods" by Ravi Zacharias.

Introduction

Opening Question: What's something you've gone after with all your heart, and what was the result?

Say: Open your Bibles to John 18. Today we are going to read about a man named Pilate, who eagerly searched for the truth about God. At this time, Jesus had just been arrested (for treason against Rome), and is being put on trial before the governor.

Part One

Ask someone to read John 18:28–40. [Every one of these Discussions will follow the same format, whereby a few paragraphs will be set for a complete read-through, and then you will pick through it verse by verse, asking questions all the time. Make sure you actually reread each verse as you go through.]

Reread verse 28a. Say: It says here that Pilate was the governor. His actual role was as a Proconsul to Rome. Does anyone know what a Proconsul did? [You may as well as ask – you'd be surprised how much people know! A Proconsul was a powerful and respected Roman ruler who was assigned to what would often be a politically volatile territory. He would often have to take on the role of preventing revolutionary action. In the 1st Century, there were Proconsuls in various trouble spots such as Cyprus, and, in this case, Judea. If people seem really interested, you may as well and tell them that the Middle East was actually ruled by King Herod from Caesarea, the capital of Israel. Pilate was a Proconsul stationed in south Israel, and ruled from Jerusalem, a city with only religious, not political, significance in the 1st Century. Pilate was, in this sense, under Herod's authority.]

Can anyone think of why they needed a Proconsul in Jerusalem? [This is an easy one! Anyone could guess the answer. It was because there were *heaps* of uprisings in Jerusalem by Zealots who hated the Roman rule. You could even mention that within 40 years of this event, there was a full-scale revolt across Israel, culminating in Jerusalem being blockaded and the Temple being destroyed in AD 70.]

Reread v29–30: Pilate asks them a straightforward question, but they avoid giving any answer.

Reread v31: Why did Pilate want the Jewish leaders to judge Jesus themselves? [Pilate didn't want anything to do with their religious quarrel. However, be open to different people's opinions on this one.]

Why did the Jews want Pilate to try Jesus? [There are many elements to this: 1. They had found Him guilty of blasphemy. 2. Blasphemy is a capital offence under the Jewish Law. (Maybe you could read out a passage from the Torah about this...) 3. They wanted Jesus executed, but did not have authority from Rome to carry out executions. Do your best to make these points clear – there should be at least a couple of Disciples who know enough to answer this question.]

Optional: Reread v32: Does anyone know what this refers to? [Jesus had spoken a number of times about his coming crucifixion, such as in John 3:14. Jews would never crucify someone, but the Romans always had crucifixions (although it was invented by the Persians centuries earlier – but I digress). Therefore, it was necessary for Jesus to be tried by Rome for Him to be crucified, unlike Stephen, who was *stoned* by Jewish leaders! Like I say, this one's optional!]

Reread v33: Why did Pilate ask this question? [This is *crucial*. **Ensure** that someone figures out the right answer, don't just tell them... Jesus was on trial for treason. Treason is when you deny the authority of Rome, specifically, Caesar. By calling yourself a King, you deny the authority of Rome. Pilate is trying to see if Jesus is guilty of treason.]

Reread v34: Why does Jesus evade the question? [Don't worry about asking this question! It's exactly the kind of question which John *wants* us to ask. There is no right answer, just see what people think. My opinion is that Jesus can tell that Pilate is interested in more than points of law – Pilate is genuinely interested in whom Jesus really is, and Jesus wants to make him self-aware of that.]

Reread v35: Why is Pilate so shocked? [He is frustrated about the entire affair, and wants to be rid of it. He doesn't want to play games, he just wants the truth. He didn't even want Jesus on trial, it was the Jews who brought Him in.]

Reread v36: What does Jesus mean by a Kingdom? [This should generate some good answers. We should know the answer: Jesus' Kingdom is the eternal, spiritual body of His followers.]

Does this answer Pilate's question in verse 33? [Absolutely, Jesus is admitting to be a King. However, Jesus' Kingdom is not a country; it's a body of believers, so this is still not the answer Pilate was hoping for.]

Reread v37: Why is Pilate so excited? [He thinks has found a reason to condemn Jesus.]

Reread v38a: Pilate asks a perfectly legitimate question – a question we hear being asked constantly today! I'm sure that Jesus would have had no hesitation in giving an answer. In fact, the gospel of John continually emphasises' Jesus' teaching on truth. (Maybe you could read out a few examples.) But what does Pilate do as soon as he asks the question? [He just leaves.]

Did he even care about the answer? [No, he was being dismissive. He's just like so many people today who reject any notion of there being absolute truth. Pilate asked the right questions, but didn't listen to the answers! Seeking the truth has to start from a conviction that the truth is out there!]

Reread v38b–39: So what does Pilate do here? [Tries to have Jesus released.]

Why? [Who knows? Perhaps he's impressed by Jesus, and suspects that He is innocent.]

Part Two

Have a different person read John 19:1–16. Here we see more attempts by Pilate to have Jesus released.

Summarise v1–3: Pilate here has Jesus flogged (whipped) in the Praetorium. The soldiers take the liberty of beating and mocking Him as well. No need for any gory details!

Reread v4–5: Pilate had just tried to release Jesus, so why did he have Jesus tortured? [Because he wanted Jesus released! He hoped that by having Jesus whipped, the crowd would be placated and give their assent to Jesus' release.]

Reread v6a: Did Pilate's plan work? [No. They still wanted Him dead.]

Reread v6b–7: This is Pilate's 3rd attempt. Why didn't it work? [Because he'd already tried it before! He again pleads for the Jews to deal with it themselves, but they refuse to.]

Reread v8: Why was Pilate afraid? [This is *crucial*. He is afraid because he thinks he's going to be forced to do something unjust: to kill an innocent man. Ensure that someone figures this out!]

Optional: Reread v9: Why does Pilate ask this? [He is trying to establish whether Jesus is under his authority – which He isn't: Jesus is from North Israel (Galilee); He is not a Judean.]

Reread v10–11: Who is it that is guilty of a greater sin? [The Jewish leaders – they were the ones desperate for Jesus' death.]

Does this mean Pilate had done nothing wrong? [Not exactly – he had still ordered Jesus to be beaten! However, at this point Pilate has been fighting to save Jesus' life, and that is a noble thing. Pilate is on a knife edge, and could still choose to do what is right.]

Reread v12: Pilate here has to make an extremely difficult decision. If he does what is right and lets Jesus go, what could be the cost? [Everything. He has a revolt on his hands. If Pilate does what is right, the Jews will revolt and he will probably lose his job, his title, his home, his family, his honour – everything.]

Reread v13–15: Pilate knows the truth: that Jesus is innocent. But he would have to give up everything in order to follow the truth.

Reread v16: What decision does Pilate make? [To crucify Jesus. He makes the wrong choice. He's not willing to make every sacrifice in order to do what is right.]

What can be the cost of seeking God today? [Let people open up about their lives.]

Conclusion

We are all called to make a decision, just like Pilate was. Are we going to follow the truth, even if it turns out whole world upside down, or will we take the easy option, and shun Jesus in our lives? Pilate desperately sought the truth – and that's an incredible and powerful story, I think. But, once he found the truth, Pilate would have lost everything if he followed it. *He* wasn't willing to pay the price – are *you* willing to seek God with all your heart?