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# The Washbasin

*“When Pilate saw that he was accomplishing nothing, but rather that a riot was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd, saying, ‘I am innocent of this Man’s blood; see to that yourselves.’ And all the people said, ‘His blood shall be on us and on our children!’”*  
(Matthew 27:24, 25).

During his first examination of Jesus, Pilate had concluded that He was innocent of the charges made against Him. Matthew reported that Pilate went out to the chief priests and the crowds and said, “I find no guilt in this man” (Luke 23:4). In addition, following Jesus’ return from Herod, Pilate had summoned once more the chief priests, the rulers, and the people, and said to them,

You brought this man to me as one who incites the people to rebellion, and behold, having examined Him before you, I have found no guilt in this man regarding the charges which you make against Him. No, nor has Herod, for he sent Him back to us; and behold, nothing deserving death has been done by Him (Luke 23:14, 15).

Nothing that Pilate could say or do had satisfied the Jews. Even his offer to free a prisoner, according to their Passover custom, had not helped the situation. Having chosen Barabbas, they cried out frantically regarding Jesus, “Crucify Him!” (Matthew 27:22).

The situation was escalating into a frenzied and uncontrollable period of turbulence, envy, and anger. Pilate had reached a crossroads with his conscience. Finally, in silent desperation and hidden fear, he acquiesced to the will of the people. Without convincing him of the rightness of their plea and without proving the guilt of the man they had set before him, the Jews had pressured Pilate into giving them what they wanted. He either had to order his soldiers to disperse the crowd with considerable bloodshed or give in to their wishes. Weak

of will and fearful of the view that Rome might take of what had happened, he chose the latter. Matthew wrote, “When Pilate saw that he was accomplishing nothing, but rather that a riot was starting, . . . he handed Him over to be crucified” (Matthew 27:24–26).

In one last gesture to state his position and to declare his own innocence regarding the crucifixion that was about to take place, Pilate called for a washbasin to be brought to him. In an act of public, symbolic cleansing to soothe his conscience, he had water poured over his hands and said, “I am innocent of this Man’s blood” (Matthew 27:24). His dramatic illustration of excusing himself from any responsibility in this death was greeted with an insistent and insensitive cry from the people: “His blood shall be on us and on our children!” (Matthew 27:25).

Although this episode in Jesus’ trial seems far removed from us, we may learn several truths from it.

*In his last act before handing Jesus over to the wishes of the bloodthirsty crowd, Pilate testified to the moral and sinless perfection of Jesus.* Pilate said, “I am innocent of this Man’s blood” (Matthew 27:24). Three times he had stated during the trial that he had not found any fault in Jesus. The crowd had wrestled from Pilate the crucifixion that they wanted; but, with all their underhanded persuasion, they had been unable to get him to convict Jesus. Pilate had managed to keep his moral discernment in place and to stand beside honest judgment until the end. He would not release Jesus to them without making

one final declaration of His innocence.

Any survey of the life and conduct of Jesus voices the same conclusion as Pilate's. During this farce of a trial, no sin, mistake of action, or misguided word is seen in His life. It is clear that, in order to have Jesus crucified, His enemies had to get Him sentenced on some basis other than guilt.

*In this act, we see reflected man's failure to manifest moral courage on behalf of the innocent.* Without hesitation, we say, "As a governor, Pilate should have said, 'This Man is not guilty, and I hereby acquit Him.'" Instead of defending the righteous One, Pilate released Him to a vicious, murderous crowd. Because of what he did, public opinion has judged him severely. History has given him the title "the man without a backbone." We remember him as the governor who did not have the courage to side with the truth when a tumultuous circumstance demanded it. To this day, no father names his little boy "Pilate." We cringe at the thought of our being in any way similar to him, for he washed his hands when he should have used them. He shunned responsibility when he should have shouldered it.

We cannot easily dismiss what he did from our minds. Our consciences may ask, "Is Pilate the only one who has acted in a cowardly way when innocent people have needed justice?" In truth, he represents a stripe that runs throughout mankind in general. Do we not all have to plead guilty to this crime? When the moment comes for us to stand up and speak up in defense of the innocent, how successful are we in doing so? Do we gravitate to the side of convenience or to the side of courage? Let us never simply give the crowd what it wants when we should boldly demand action for what is right.

A few years ago, my family and I visited the National Civil Rights Museum at Memphis, Tennessee, which commemorates the life, achievements, and assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. When we viewed the section that highlighted the civil unrest at Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957, my son, who then was in his early twenties, asked me, "Dad, did you know about this?" I said, "Yes." Then I mumbled, "But I was young then. I had just heard a little bit about it." He shot

an arrow into my soul as he asked, "Why didn't you do something about it?" The eternal Judge who condemns Pilate also turns an accusing finger at most of us. It judges us because we are silent when we should be speaking out in behalf of the innocent.

*Also, in graphic depiction, this episode reminds us that no one can really be innocent of Jesus' blood.* Does saying that you are innocent of His blood make it so? When one is in the position of a governor and must give his judgment sentence before a man can be executed, how can he absolve himself of this responsibility by simply washing his hands? He has been charged to make the decision and to relinquish that right to no one else. He has the obligation in his hands, and no water can wash it away.

Pilate could not truly excuse himself from being involved in this horrid affair, but neither can we. The Jews were guilty of His blood. They asked for the guilt of His blood to be upon them, and that is what happened. However, like Pilate, we are also guilty. Our sins nailed Him to the cross. In fact, unless we acknowledge that we are guilty of His blood, we cannot be saved (1 John 1:8, 10).

Jesus had the power to end this trial at any time, but He let it continue for our benefit. No charge that was brought against Jesus was valid. In order for the crowd to crucify Him, they had to use underhanded, exorbitant pressure and false accusations. Jesus stood before this inadequate, spineless governor and before this unjust, contrived trial so that He might die for us. It was His decision, not man's. Before we were born, Jesus saw our need and chose to die for us. The chief priests, the Jews, the crowd, Annas, Caiaphas, Pilate, Herod, and you and I put Christ on the cross.

Eddie Cloer



*This washbasin, though silent as an ornate bowl can be, speaks loudly to those who will listen. It says that responsibility cannot be dodged with a symbolic gesture, that no one can really be innocent of Jesus' blood, and that Jesus chose to stand before Pilate because He had made up His mind to die for us at Gethsemane. Pilate intended to speak to the crowd through his ceremony with the washbasin,*

*but he declared far more with it than he intended. He spoke of his character and ours. Let us listen to this washbasin so that we will never use it as Pilate did.*

*For those who seek repentance before God, Jesus offers a different kind of washbasin—not a quick rinse for a hurting conscience, but a God-*

*ordained means of true cleansing. This is a washing that purges the conscience and sets the soul free from its guilt. Peter spoke of it: “Corresponding to that, baptism now saves you—not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience—through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 3:21).*