
Jesus And Barabbas

*“But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to ask him to release Barabbas for them instead [of Jesus]”
(Mark 15:11).*

*“But they cried out all together, saying, ‘Away with this man, and release for us Barabbas!’”
(Luke 23:18).*

When Herod sent Jesus back to Pilate without any suggestion about what to do with Him, Pilate found himself caught between two opposing forces which were vying stringently for absolute dominance. On one side, there was Pilate’s own *accusing conscience*. From his investigation, he had found Jesus to be innocent. Because of his knowledge of justice, his conscience was crying out that Jesus should be acquitted (John 18:38). On the other side, there was the *angry crowd*. This multitude of Jews glared up at him, adamantly refusing to settle for anything less than a crucifixion. They were ready to burst into a riotous frenzy. Torn by the piercing cries from each side, Pilate’s mind was spinning with the question of what to do next.

As Pilate weighed his options, Jews yelled at him, demanding that their ancient custom be kept (see Mark 15:8). “We have a custom,” they said, “that says that you are to release a prisoner during the Passover time. Who is it going to be?” This appeal must have prompted an idea to flash through Pilate’s mind. “Their request could possibly be a solution to my dilemma,” he seems to have said to himself. He immediately attached his personal agenda to the Passover custom. “I will stand Jesus up beside our most notorious criminal, one of the worst we have, and ask the Jews to name one of the two to be released. Surely, they will ask for Jesus,” he thought. In setting up this scenario, Pilate sought to accomplish two objectives. First, putting Jesus beside “a notorious prisoner” (Matthew 27:16) would show

the Jews that he was acknowledging Him as a criminal and might satisfy them. Second, when Jesus was released, even in this contrived circumstance, justice would be served to some degree; then Pilate’s troubled conscience would be assuaged. It was a risky ruse, but Pilate was hoping it would deliver him from his dilemma. He was walking the line between appeasing the Jews and keeping himself in the good graces of his superiors.

He chose as the criminal a man named Barabbas, a leader in an uprising against Rome, who was being held in prison with other insurrectionists. He had led a violent coup, resulting in the killing of some people. Therefore, he had been convicted not only as an insurrectionist, but also as a murderer. Mark said of him, “The man named Barabbas had been imprisoned with the insurrectionists who had committed murder in the insurrection” (Mark 15:7). His name apparently meant “son of a father.” He must have been the worst of the criminals that were being held in Pilate’s prison at the time.

Apparently, the chief priests and elders had left The Pavement in front of Pilate’s judgment hall and had gone to a place where they could continue to scheme and connive regarding the conviction of Jesus. Pilate sent word for them to come to him so that they could make the choice of the criminal to be released. When they arrived, he posed to them an either/or question that had profound significance: “Whom do you want me to release for you? Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?” (Matthew 27:17). They

cried, “Barabbas” (Matthew 27:20b). Now Pilate was back where he had started. Their cry for Barabbas shocked him and left him in an even greater quandary. As he sat on his judgment seat, pondering the escalating situation, his wife sent him a message that she had been disturbed by an unusual dream about this Jesus. According to Matthew, she said, “Have nothing to do with that righteous Man; for last night I suffered greatly in a dream because of Him” (Matthew 27:19). Her words only increased Pilate’s turmoil of heart.

Perhaps anticipating that Pilate would repeat the question of which criminal to release, the chief priests filtered among the crowd and urged everyone to cry out for Barabbas. Mark said, “But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to ask him to release Barabbas for them . . .” (Mark 15:11). When Pilate asked a second time, he asked for an even more pointed response. Mark quoted him as saying, “Then what shall I do with Him whom you call the King of the Jews?” They shouted back, “Crucify Him!” (Mark 15:12, 13). Pilate had slowly walked into the jaws of a situation that he did not have the backbone to handle. Therefore, he gave one final, whimpering retort: “Why, what evil has He done?” His question was drowned out as the crowd shouted in unison, “Crucify Him!” (Mark 15:14). Then we find the saddest of all commentaries on Pilate. Mark wrote, “Wishing to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas for them, and after having Jesus scourged, he handed Him over to be crucified” (Mark 15:15).

Every aspect of our Lord’s trials and suffering provides additional insight into His death and its meaning concerning our redemption. Even Pilate’s attempt to acquit Him by putting Him beside Barabbas and asking for a choice to be made has profound implications for us.

First, it is clear that—from beginning to end—Jesus’ death was a substitutionary death for others. Barabbas realized that Jesus would die on the cross where he should have died. Three crosses had been prepared for three criminals; and Barabbas was possibly the worst of them. He was headed for that cross. He was destined to experience one of the most horrid deaths our minds can imagine; but Jesus, because of a

custom of the Jews, experienced that death instead of Barabbas.

Second, in harmony with divine prophecy, Jesus was “numbered with the transgressors” (Isaiah 53:12b). Long before New Testament days, Isaiah had revealed in his prophetic “servant” passages that this suffering servant would die among wicked men. In a remarkable fulfillment of this prophecy, Jesus died in such a way, between two criminals. He was handed over from standing beside an insurrectionist to a death between thieves. Barabbas did not know it, and the two thieves who died with Jesus did not know it, but they were combining to complete the prophecies made by the Spirit concerning Jesus’ death.

Third, Jesus was continually pronounced innocent throughout His life, His trials, and His crucifixion. He was truly the innocent Son of God. Pilate stated three times to the chief priests that he had not found any fault in Jesus. Herod sent Jesus back to Pilate without any condemnation attached to Him. During His life and ministry, no one was able to find any sin in Him. During these unjust, fabricated trials, Jesus remained free from the stain of guilt. He was the innocent Lamb of God and was being led to the slaughter by wicked men. Barabbas, a violent, sinful man, was acquitted; Jesus, the perfect, sinless Son of God, was condemned.

Fourth, Jesus’ death offers the free gifts of forgiveness and life to all who will accept them. Barabbas stood beside Jesus and was chosen to be the one to go free. Jesus was taken to the cross. He not only took Barabbas’ place in a physical death, but He also died for him, as well as for all others, to provide abundant life here and eternal life in heaven. Anyone who chooses to come under His blood can be forever free from sin’s guilt, grip, and grave (Romans 6).

Jesus yielded Himself to corrupt officials of the law so that those for whom He died might be freed from the law of sin and death. Barabbas had been condemned by Roman law to die for his crimes. Jesus was condemned by Roman law and crucified in order that Barabbas could be free from the condemnation of law and live. After his release, Barabbas would never be tried again for the crime for which he had been condemned. He was free from the condemnation of that crime. On a much higher

level, Jesus died for all sinful people condemned by the law of sin and death. Through Christ's death, any penitent soul who will obey the gospel can be freed from condemnation and live in the freedom of the grace that is found in Christ.

Eddie Cloer



Barabbas and Jesus changed places. The murderer's bonds, curse, disgrace, and mortal agony were borne by righteous Jesus. The liberty, inno-

cence, safety, and well-being of the perfect Nazarene became, at least in opportunity, the lot of the murderer. Barabbas was granted the open door to receive all the rights and privileges of Jesus Christ. Jesus entered upon all the horrors of the rebel's position. The delinquent's crime and cross became the lot of the Just One, and all the civil rights and immunities that should have belonged to Jesus became the property of the delinquent. In a similar way, Jesus took our place. Paul said, "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf" (2 Corinthians 5:21a).