

Text: Matthew 27:1-2, 11-26

Title: Jesus for Barabbas

Truth: As unjust as it was, the substitution of Jesus for Barabbas illustrates a key truth of salvation.

Date/Location: Wednesday December 21, 2022 at FBC

Introduction

The chapter opens with the “morning after” the sham trials by the chief priests and elders. They continued plotting to kill Him.

Before the monarchy (David, Solomon, etc.) the priests had power of judgement and to even pronounce execution (Deut. 17:8-13). And later in Israelite history, so did the kings (1 Kings 2:26, where Solomon said he could have had Abiathar the priest executed for his treasonous behavior). They did not think of government as divided up into three branches like we do. But in first century Israel there was divided power, with the Romans holding the highest level of authority. The priests had to appeal to Pontius Pilate to do their dirty work for them. So, they took Him away to Pontius Pilate the governor and asked him to kill Jesus.

I. A Prisoner of Few Words, v. 11-14

We studied previously the regret of Judas and how he killed himself. We jump down to verse 11.

- A. Simple question by Pilate: “Are you the king of the Jews?” Evidently various information had gotten to Pilate, such as the claims of the crowd at the Triumphal Entry, and the charges of the priests and elders along with the words of Jesus claiming to be the one in whom would be invested kingdom authority by the Father in fulfillment of Daniel 7:13-14 (see Matt. 26:64).
- B. Direct answer by Jesus: “It is as you say.” The Greek is terse: “You say.” It is not a denial, but rather an affirmation of what Pilate was asking.
- C. The chief priests and elders laid their charges before Pilate. But Jesus did not reply, even when goaded to do so by Pilate. Jesus knew that this was how He would be crucified and die as a sacrifice

for sinners. So, He could not prove Himself right, or innocent, or show that the priests and elders were falsely accusing Him.

- D. John 18:28-19:12 gives a much more extensive report of the interaction between Jesus and Pilate. There were two “sessions” and more dialogue between the two, probably after the accusers were gone, in a more semi-private interview format. The accusations brought by the accusers were at first vague (an evildoer, 18:30), and then evidently that He claimed to be a king. Then Pilate learned that they accused Him of saying that He is the Son of God. This troubled Pilate.

II. Negotiation with the Hostile Crowd, 15-25

- A. There had developed over the years a tradition that the governor would pardon one criminal who was incarcerated. This was not really a just tradition, because it freed someone who in many cases was probably guilty. It was somewhat merciful to the offender, but nothing more than mere placation for the crowds. It was a rare “carrot” in the midst of a lot of Roman “sticks” applied to the populace.
- B Pilate gave the crowd two choices: Jesus or Barabbas. Those were probably the most “famous” criminals he had in custody at the time.
- C. The text of Scripture tells us that the motivation of the Jewish leaders was well-known to at least some, including Pilate himself: it was envy. They were jealous of Jesus’s authority, power, sway over the crowds, following, etc. They were not doing what they were doing for spiritually pure and righteous reasons. What Pilate should have done was confronted them about their envy, let Jesus go, and forbade them from bothering Him again. But what “should” have happened and what God planned to have happen are two different things.
- D. Something about all this troubled Pilate’s wife because she had a bad dream about it, 27:19. Pilate did not fully follow his wife’s instinct or intuition in this event. That was a big mistake.
- E. The chief priests and elders used whatever ways they could to sway the crowd then in attendance to ask for Barabbas. This may have

been a big part of their plotting—knowing that they could get Jesus into custody with Pilate and then get out another fellow instead. It likely did not matter *who* they got out, but if it was someone who had harmed the Romans, all the better in their wicked minds. As long as Jesus got trapped by the scheme, that is all they cared.

- F. When Pilate repeated the question to confirm their desire, they did as the religious leaders instructed them. Only God knows what misinformation they were fed to come to that conclusion, or what bribes they were offered. They had underlying sinful motivations as well. Perhaps the charges of treason against Caesar and blasphemy against God were the extent of it—but of course these were charges that were self-defeating to the ones who made and agreed with them because it was *their Messiah* that they were crucifying; their deliverance from sin and from all oppression; their savior that they were killing.
- G. It became clear that the unified answer was Barabbas. Then Pilate asked what he should do with Jesus. The crowd—at the behest of the Jewish leaders—wanted Jesus to be crucified.
- H. What evil had Jesus done? Nothing. The crowd and the Jewish leaders were the ones doing the evil. They insisted on the death penalty, presumably on the basis of blasphemy.
- I. In a totally gutless move and to pacify the crowd so it would not turn into mob violence, Pilate did a ceremonial handwashing to say that “my hands are clean of the blood of this man.” He turned the matter over to them, which is a round-about way of saying that he made the decision, but with a façade or thin veneer that he would use on his own psyche to try to make himself feel better about it. At the same time, he might claim that he followed his wife’s advice by “washing his hands” of the matter (27:24), but he was still fully responsible for what happened.
- J. The crowd made a seemingly prophetic pronouncement that they themselves did not fully understand. They cried out that the blood of this man would be on their own heads. They probably figured this whole incident would be forgotten and life would go on without any consequences being felt. The words may well have

been empty for them. Or, their words may have been serious, but they just did not care. “Lay the blame on us.” If that is what you want. In fact, his blood is on them and on their children.

Sometimes the children—later generations of the Jewish people—complain when they are blamed for killing the Lord. But that curse was put upon them by their forefathers, and sadly, some of them would willingly do the same thing today. I hasten to add the same thing for all the “Romans” out there. The Gentiles too share a kind of collective guilt because of sin in general and the sin of killing Jesus. Many of them would do the same thing today if push came to shove. How do we know this is true? Many tens of thousands of Christians are killed every year (I recently read 200,000 each year) around the globe. The same hatred that killed Jesus exists today.

Conclusion

In another sense, our Lord’s blood is upon them and their children for good. They can be cleansed from all sin if they appeal to His blood to cover them. He died for our sins so that we could be freed from sin.

The gospel records in verse 26 that Pilate did in fact release Barabbas to the crowd. He ordered Jesus to be scourged, and delivered him to the crucifixion team of soldiers.

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