

Jesus, Son of the Father

Matthew 27:11-26

Have you ever listened to a story that was told so well, that you felt your heart resonate with the characters in that story? You could almost see yourself responding the way the character does, feeling what he feels, understanding his pain. More often than not, I find that when I am captivated by a good story I place myself in the shoes of the characters and wonder what I would do if I was facing the very same circumstances they are.

But what if a story is told in such a way that it is undeniably revealing to you that you *are* the character of the story in a very real and frightful way. This evening I want to bring our attention to such a story. The story of Jesus, son of the father, whom you may know better by a different name - Barabbas. This story is found in all four accounts of the gospel and it cannot be overlooked or forgotten.

In this story, as small as it may be, we see a physical picture of what is to happen spiritually to every believer who calls on the name of the Lord. This story stands out in all the Gospels as a drama or Shakespearean play where the audience sees a story unfold before them that points to a greater and glorious reality. Tonight, let us travel back in time and place ourselves in Jerusalem the day that Christ our Lord died.

Matthew 27:11-26 (ESV)

Jesus Before Pilate

11 Now Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus said, "You have said so." 12 But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he gave no answer. 13 Then Pilate said to him, "Do you not hear how many things they testify against you?" 14 But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed.

The Crowd Chooses Barabbas

15 Now at the feast the governor was accustomed to release for the crowd any one prisoner whom they wanted. 16 And they had then a notorious prisoner called Jesus¹ Barabbas. 17 So when they had gathered, Pilate said to them, "Whom do you want me to release for you: Jesus Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?" 18 For he knew that it was out of envy that they had delivered him up. 19 Besides, while he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, "Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered much because of him today in a dream." 20 Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus. 21 The governor again said to them, "Which of the two do you want me to release for you?" And they said, "Barabbas." 22 Pilate said to them, "Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" They all said, "Let him be crucified!" 23 And he said, "Why? What evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Let him be crucified!"

¹ The Holy Bible: (The New English Translation). P. 1863 tc. 15 and 16 – The NET translator notes give sufficient evidence to believe that the name *Jesus* should be supplied before Barabbas. In essence, it argues that having *Jesus* supplied before Barabbas actually completes the author's train of thought and provides context to our understanding that Matthew was making a distinction/comparison between Jesus Barabbas and Jesus Christ.

Pilate Delivers Jesus to Be Crucified

24 So when Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's righteous blood; see to it yourselves." 25 And all the people answered, "His blood be on us and on our children!" 26 Then he released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, delivered him to be crucified.

Jesus stands before Pilate and is accused by the chief priests and elders. Pilate is amazed at Jesus' behavior. He does not answer the accusations. He does not respond with hate and anger. He simply remains silent. Surely Pilate knows all too well that not a week before the people were crying out *Hosanna* to this man and paying homage to him. What changed that made them so angry? This sense of uneasiness begins to brew in Pilate's heart. "Could this man truly be innocent?"

Now it says "at the feast" the governor was accustomed to set a prisoner free. What feast was this? It has to be speaking of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. This feast was instituted by God long ago when He had rescued His children from the whips of Egypt. God commanded the Israelites to commemorate this feast at every Passover and to continue it for seven days. The Israelite were not allowed to eat any leaven or even have any leaven in their home. They were to be completely rid of it for those seven days. It was a symbol of God's grace in setting His children apart from the rest of the world to be a pure people, a holy nation; a kingdom of priests that would point the world to the true God in heaven. This day, the feast will be celebrating the death of the author of life. The One Whom the feast was to point to.

It is interesting to note here that there is no other documentation outside of the four Gospels that speaks of Pilate setting a prisoner free at Passover.² Had he birthed a new tradition amongst the people of Jerusalem as a way to show the people that he was a merciful governor who could earn their trust and respect?³ It is not clear. Yet, it is evident in Scripture that Pilate indeed set a captive free every Passover Feast as was his tradition.

Now, let's take a moment to consider Pilate's attempt to gain victory. In the other three Gospels, it appears as if the crowds choose Barabbas amongst all the other criminals. But here in Matthew we have a different point of view. It seems as if Matthew is trying to say that Pilate cleverly selected Barabbas to be a nominee along with Jesus so that the crowd would be forced into making a decision – who would they free? Pilate is clearly feeling uneasy about the whole situation. At the judicial hearing, the accused man, Jesus the Christ, did not answer the accusations of the chief priests and elders. He simply remained silent and this astonished the governor, Pilate. In verse 18, Matthew states that Pilate knew the chief priests and elders were delivering this man up out of envy. They brought up accusations that accused Jesus of threatening the crown of Caesar. Pilate knew very well that the chief priests and elders could

² The Biblical Illustrator, vol. 11 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1978) p. 643. "Releasing prisoners: - No trace of this custom is found in the Talmud. But the release of prisoners was usual at certain festivals at Rome, and at Athens during the Panathenaic festival prisoners enjoyed temporary liberty."

³ Barnes on the New Testament, *Matthew and Mark* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1954) p. 304. "It was probably adopted to secure popularity among the Jews, and to render the government of the Romans less odious. Any little indulgence granted to the Jews during the heavy oppression of the Romans would serve to conciliate their favour, and to keep the nation from sedition. It might happen often that when persons were arraigned before the Romans on charge of sedition, some peculiar favourite of the people, or some leader, might be among the number. It is evident that if they had the privilege of recovering such a person, it would serve much to allay their feelings, and make tolerable the yoke under which they groaned."

care less about any threat to Caesar. They would threaten Caesar themselves if they had the power. No, they simply wanted Jesus the Christ delivered unto death.

To add to Pilate's dilemma, Pilate's wife approaches him while he is on his judgment seat and implores Pilate to have nothing to do with that "righteous" man. This small piece of information in Matthew's story simply astonishes me. Here we have the chief priests and elders bringing accusation upon accusation of this man's guilt, yet Pilate's wife walks through the door resolute and convinced that this man, even in the face of all the testimonies against Him, is indeed a "righteous" man. He is guiltless. This truth being revealed to her in a dream the night before, has tormented her all day until she can finally hold her tongue no longer – she must tell Pilate.⁴ Pilate is now facing not only the counsel of his own conscience but also that of his wife's conscience, both imploring him to release Jesus the Christ, an innocent man.

So what does Pilate do? According to Matthew, it seems Pilate comes up with a plan.⁵ He is going to make the crowd choose who to set free. If he brings out a prisoner that has done little more than a small crime, then the people will undoubtedly choose the criminal. But in bringing out one of the notorious criminals, maybe the crowds will free this man Jesus the Christ and everyone can go home happy. His plan seemed good. As a governor, he would appease the mob while also setting an innocent man free. So he orders the guards to bring out the worst criminal possible. Undoubtedly, one whom the Jewish people hated, convicted and found guilty of a number of crimes. Surely the Jews would not set one whom they hated free in order to condemn this Christ?⁶ So the guards bring the most suitable candidate to the governor's court – Barabbas.

Matthew inserts verse 16 to inform his readers that not just any prisoner was selected, but the notorious prisoner Barabbas was brought up to the platform. Matthew's account says *notorious*, meaning one of well known reputation and influence for being evil. Both of the Gospels of Mark and Luke call him an *insurrectionist* and a *murderer*. The common translation for *insurrection* would be a "rebellion instigator or leader." He is also called a murderer. One can only imagine that if he is labeled a murderer, then he must be guilty of shedding innocent blood.⁷ The Gospel of John gives Barabbas the title of *robber* or *thief*.⁸ No matter how you look at it from all perspectives, this man is guilty of his crimes and deserves his due punishment – death.

⁴ It is impossible to know any level of detail regarding Pilate's wife's dream. There just isn't enough information. Whatever the case may be, she believed this man to be innocent of the accusations that were brought against Him. It is of interest to note that she calls Him a "Righteous Man." Did she believe He was more than just *innocent* – that He was God? See also Mark 10:18 and Luke 18:19.

⁵ The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976) p. 472. "Pilate offered the crowd the option between Jesus and Barabbas in the expectation that Jesus would be released. The chief priests could readily influence the vote of the people because the sight of Jesus as a helpless and unresisting prisoner deeply outraged their Messianic expectations concerning Him. Their vote was motivated not by popular esteem for Barabbas, but by aroused antipathy to Jesus because of disappointed hopes."

⁶ Barnes on the New Testament, *Matthew and Mark* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1954) p. 304. "He [Pilate] therefore attempted in this manner to rescue Him [Jesus Christ] from the hands of the priests, and expected that the people would prefer Him to an odious and infamous robber and murderer."

⁷ If Barabbas is called a murderer, then we must not think that his act of killing consisted only of Roman guards or soldiers. By the very definition of murder, he must have taken innocent life and is guilty of not only treason to the crown of Caesar but also of the innocent bloodshed of his own people. It seems to fit the context here since the *Jews* are the ones who are calling him a murderer.

⁸ Beware, it is easy at times to think that being called a thief isn't so bad when placed in comparison to the violent act of murder. However, during that time period it was not safe to travel alone and unprotected. In many cases, thieves would be out waiting for sojourners to pass along the way in order that they may kill them and take their goods – much like the traveler in the parable of the "Good Samaritan" who was left for dead. It may be more appropriate to think of thievery and murder as synonymous here.

- **Barabbas' Reputation** - I wanted to take just a moment to study Barabbas' relationship to the people just a little further. Wouldn't it seem to you that if Barabbas was indeed an insurrectionist that he would be deemed a hero by the people? Think about it. Who would he be rebelling against? Rome! The Jews hated the Roman oppression. They were tired of the taxes and the soldiers and the laws. The Jews longed to be freed from the foreign oppressors. This is why they were so excited to hear of the Messiah coming to town a week earlier. They cried out "Hosanna, Hosanna in the highest!" So if you're following my train of thought, then the question to be asked is "Why then were the Jews so upset with Barabbas?" Pilate wouldn't have brought out a hero that the people loved. He would have brought out a prisoner he knew they despised.⁹ There is a lot of speculation here that cannot be answered with certainty. Maybe the rebellion he started brought severe persecution and punishment to the people. Maybe Barabbas was seeking to establish himself as the new ruler for his own personal gain and so he killed both Jew and Roman alike? Whatever the circumstance was, the context of this story seems to indicate that the Jews hated him. This makes their decision to free Barabbas at the expense of Christ all the more abominable.
- **Barabbas' Name** – The meaning of his name is something that I believe is often overlooked due to some discrepancies in the original manuscripts. In the original text, he is called Jesus Barabbas. It seems some scholars believed this to be a scribal addition when they translated the Bible over the course of many years. As a result of such studies, they have removed "Jesus" from the text. However, further study seems to indicate that "Jesus" should be included in the text in order to understand Matthew's point in comparing the two. Even more ironic is the meaning of his name. Barabbas stands for *bar-abba* which literally means "son of the father." Matthew is trying to draw out a comparison in Pilate's proposal to the mob. "Whom do you want me to release for you: Jesus, son of the father or Jesus, the anointed One?" It seems that Matthew saw this comparison of names as a significant point of interest. Jesus, the anointed One, truly is the Son of the Father as He had made known to His disciples. But, I think a greater reality was being demonstrated that those whom Jesus dies for will be named sons and daughters of God.¹⁰

When Pilate rose to ask the mob which one he should release, Matthew inserts a piece of information in verse 20 that tells us a little bit more about the crowd. The chief priests and elders walked among the people and entreated them to ask for Jesus Barabbas to be set free in order that Jesus Christ might be condemned. Here is just another indicator that points to the bad reputation of Barabbas. It seems that the crowd needs to be persuaded a little to choose Barabbas. How quickly the flock is led astray by a few evil leaders with ill counsel. The people would rather please the men of influence, the priest and elders, than to set an innocent man free. And so the crowds follow their blind leaders and put the author of life to death.

⁹ Calvin's Commentaries, Vol. 7 (Grand Rapids, MI: Associated Publishers and Authors Inc., 1958) p. 539 "There can be no doubt that Pilate, in order to prevail upon them through shame, selected a very wicked man, by contrast with whom Christ might be set free; and the very atrocity of the crime of which Barabbas was guilty ought justly to have made the resentment of the people to fall on him, that by comparison with him, at least, Christ might be released."

¹⁰ The Holy Bible: (English Standard Version). John 1:12-13 "But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God." Also, 2 Corinthians 6:17-18 "Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you, and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty."

Pilate makes a couple more feeble attempts to alter the crowd's mind. I wonder if the crowd's decision to free the notorious criminal, Jesus Barabbas, simply astonished him so greatly that he had little left to say. The last action Pilate takes is he washes his hands¹¹ publically and gives Jesus over to be crucified. The criminal, Jesus Barabbas, is set free and the innocent One, Jesus Christ, is condemned to a violent death.¹² Now, with a better understanding of this man Jesus Barabbas, let us place ourselves in his shoes and identify with him in the events of this horrific yet glorious day.

I, Barabbas, had no hope! The people hated me, the Roman guards hated me, and the priests hated me too. I was sentenced to death and would never again be free because of my sin and crimes. The dark dungeon I sit in would be my home until the end and I would never again taste forgiveness and mercy. As I sat in these chains in the cool, dark cell I began to hear commotion. The other inmates began to arouse themselves and they carried smiles on their faces. "What could they be smiling about?" I thought to myself. "What could possibly bring them joy in a place like this?" Then I heard a few faint whispers from the others in the cell and all I could make out was one word - *Passover*. "Oh yes!" I thought. "It is Passover. The day has come where the governor will set one of the prisoners free! Oh what hope! What joy! When all that lingers here is agony and sorrow. I have not tasted hope in so long." Yet, all at once, in a moment my hope faded away like a soft whisper. I *had* no hope. "Who among the crowd would ever choose me? I was the least likely to be picked because of my crimes." I shrunk back down and wept in agony. "Who would ever want to free me?" Outside, voices began to arouse. Soldiers approached the prison cells. Their footsteps grow louder and louder until they stop. My gate opens and a loud voice pierces the darkness, "Barabbas! Come out!"¹³ I am lifted up and I can barely walk. My legs have not been in use and my arms lack all strength. I am taken outside to the governor's court. The light blinds my eyes as I have been living in darkness for so long. "How is this happening? How is this possible? Will I be set free?" There they laid me before a mob. A man bound in chains stands beside me. "Who is this man that I would be placed here with him? What crime could he have done to be compared with me?" The governor now arises and entreats the crowd, "Which of the two do you want me to release for you?" he says. My heart stops, and every second passes as an hour. The crowd begins to shout my name. Barabbas! Barabbas!

¹¹ I find this "washing of hands" to be an astonishing act taken by Pilate. Here it seems that he is trying to demonstrate that he is free of the mob's wrongful decision and retains no guilt for this man's death. This of course is far from the truth. Although the washing of his hands may free his conscience of any inward guilt, the wrath of God yet remains to be poured out on those who forsook His Son. Note the interesting comparison of Pilate's actions with Deuteronomy 21:6-9.

¹² Note Luke's account in chapter 23 verse 25, "He released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, for whom they asked, by he delivered Jesus over to their will."

¹³ In this picture, Barabbas is being called out of the prison cell to be set free. How fitting a picture that Christ too called Lazarus out of his prison cell to be set free. Jesus Christ has power over sin and death. John 11:43-44 "And when he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out.' The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go.'"

*“O Father in heaven, what grace is this?
What hope has come to me?
This man who stands now in my place
Has surely set me free.*

*Out of the dungeons, Out of the dark
A voice has called my name.
The righteous man accused of wrongs
Has washed away my shame.*

*What gift of grace such as this
Has fallen from above?
That God would send this man to die
To demonstrate His love.*

*I have hope! Yes I have hope!
Because of Jesus Christ.
God the Father has sent His Son
To pay the ransom price”*

Works Cited

1. The Holy Bible: (English Standard Version)
2. The Holy Bible: (The New English Translation).
3. The Biblical Illustrator, vol. 11 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1978)
4. Barnes on the New Testament, *Matthew and Mark* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1954)
5. The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976)
6. Calvin's Commentaries, Vol. 7 (Grand Rapids, MI: Associated Publishers and Authors Inc., 1958)