

Barabbas
Mark 15:6-15
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Before His crucifixion on Friday, 2,000 years ago, our Lord was arraigned at six different hearings, or trials. There were, first of all, three Jewish trials. The first began after He was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, a preliminary hearing in the home of Annas, across the courtyard from Caiaphas, the high priest. Then, there was the second Jewish trial, when some quorum of the Sanhedrin gathered in the home of Caiaphas in the middle of the night. And then, the third Jewish trial happened at the break of dawn that Friday morning on the Temple Mount. That initiated then as they came to the conclusion about Jesus' guilt, three Roman trials as the Sanhedrin handed Jesus over to Pilate. As we prepare for communion this morning, I want us to consider part of the third Roman trial—the final Roman trial before Jesus was delivered to be crucified. It happened before Pilate. It's recorded in Mark chapter 15 beginning in verse 6 in the passage we read just a moment ago. I invite you to take your copy of God's Word, turn back with me to Mark 15. This part of the story unfolds in three great scenes.

The first scene is in verses 6 through 8, and I've called it "A Gracious Custom: A Picture of Passover's Story," because this paragraph introduces us to a scene that takes us really back to the time of Moses, back to God's redemption of His people from the land of Egypt. We're introduced to it in verse 6 by learning about "Pilate's Custom." Notice verse 6, "Now at the feast he used to release for them any one prisoner whom they requested." The verb tenses in Greek as they are in English, show that this was his customary practice. This is what Pilate did during the time he ruled over Palestine. Josephus records similar instances of the Romans freeing a prisoner as a good will gesture, and here we learn this was Pilate's custom—to release a prisoner in conjunction with the annual celebration of the Jewish Passover. It had been a custom even before Pilate, however. John chapter 18 verse 39, "You have a custom," Pilate says, "that I release someone for you at the Passover." So, this was an annual tradition. Some prisoner would be released, and it makes perfect sense when you think about it because it was really a great picture of what God had done at the first Passover in Egypt. He released His people from their bondage in Egypt. He redeemed them, and so it made perfect sense for some prisoner to be released as a sort of visible expression of what had happened so long ago—a picture of that first Passover. In

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this case, the people got to choose who was released. Now, when you look at that word *release* in verse 6, you need to understand that that is not merely to let them out of jail. The word *release* is a legal word that means “to grant acquittal or to pardon.” That’s what would happen in this custom, that was the Jewish custom and Pilate’s custom.

Now verse 7 introduces us to Pilate’s prisoner. The man named Barabbas had been imprisoned with the insurrectionists who had committed murder in the insurrection. This man’s surname was Barabbas. *Barabbas* means “the son of Abba or son of the father.” Early manuscripts, not of Mark’s gospel, but of Matthew’s gospel record that this man’s given name was Jesus. We can’t be sure of that, but it seems likely because of the early manuscripts that we have. *Jesus* is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew name *Joshua*, and it was very common in the first century. So, think about this, this plays into the story that this man, who really existed, was named Jesus Barabbas. Jesus, son of the father. But the gospel writers are clear that this man was not a spiritual man. In fact, he was a different kind of man altogether. Matthew 27 verse 16, says he was “a notorious prisoner.” Notorious in the extent and the horrific nature of his crimes. John 18:40 says, he “was a robber.” Now, when you hear that word, you think of somebody who holds someone up for their belongings, but Josephus uses that same word for anti-Roman insurrectionists. That’s what this man was. He was an armed revolutionary, a guerrilla; he was a first-century terrorist. Notice, in our text, verse 7, “The man named Barabbas, had been imprisoned with the insurrectionists who had committed murder in the insurrection.” Here we’re told that he was involved in the event that was simply called “the insurrection.” Between 6 A.D. and 70 A.D., Jewish zealots led many armed revolts against the Roman occupying army. Here we’re told that this man Barabbas had been part of one of those, and the fact that he’s singled out in the way he is, likely means that he was their leader. He was spearheading this insurrection. And verse 7 tells us that during the armed revolt led by Barabbas, he “had committed murder.” Probably not a single murder but a number of murders. Probably against well-placed Romans who were there with the occupying force or even against Jewish sympathizers with Rome, perhaps like the tax collectors. Verse 7 tells us that Barabbas had been captured by the Romans along with several of his followers, and all of them had been convicted of murder and of insurrection. And all of them were awaiting execution; some of them on this very day in our text. That’s Pilate’s prisoner.

But notice in verse 8, the crowds' request. The crowd went up and began asking Pilate "to do as he had been accustomed to do for them." Now, where is this taking place? Well, John tells us. John 18:28 tells us that these events, this third Roman trial, this unfolded at a place called the Praetorium. It was the palace; the governor's official residence that Herod the Great had built on the upper west side of the city of Jerusalem. It was up high on the west side so that where all the rich lived, they could get the afternoon breezes off the Mediterranean. During Passover, Pilate, who normally stayed on the coast at Caesarea, would travel inland to Jerusalem. And he stayed in one of the twin palaces, and Herod stayed on the other end of those twin palaces. There's a model that you can visit in Jerusalem today that was built actually from Josephus's descriptions of these twin palaces, and that's what you're seeing on the screen behind me. The Jewish leaders didn't go into the Praetorium itself; in fact, we're told they stayed just outside the Praetorium. John 19:13 says Pilate "brought Jesus out, and sat down on the judgment seat at a place called The Pavement." The Pavement was a large agora, or open market, that was paved with stone just outside of Herod's palace. And in that market was a raised platform on which sat Pilate's judgment seat, or his bema seat is what the Romans called it. It was there, just outside the palace courtyard on The Pavement, that large market, that a group approached Pilate and asked him to do what he normally did at Passover—to pardon a criminal. So, here in Pilate's custom, in this paragraph, we learn that this custom was in fact a beautiful picture of the Jewish Passover—a story of redemption from bondage. And, instead of the redemption of the nation from Egypt, it was a living picture of the release and redemption of a single prisoner from the fate that he deserved.

Now the second scene picks up in verse 9 (Mark 15). Let's call it "A Graphic Choice: A Picture of Man's Sin." Pilate, the consummate politician, saw in this request an opportunity to get out of the dilemma he found himself in that morning: an opportunity to release Jesus, a man he already had determined was innocent. In fact, Acts 3 says that Pilate had already decided to release Jesus because he knew that He, in fact, was innocent of the crimes He was accused of. But what Pilate does next shows us just the kind of man he really was because he treated Jesus, whom he knew to be innocent, the same as a condemned murderer and terrorist. And he presented the people with a graphic choice. Look at verse 9: "Pilate answered them, saying, 'Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?'" Now Matthew tells us that Pilate actually offered a choice between two alternatives. This is Matthew 27:17: "Whom do you want me to release for

you? Barabbas, or Jesus who is called the Messiah?” It was a graphic choice. It was a choice between a King and a rebel; between justice and injustice; between a godly man and the worst of sinners. It was a choice between the Prince of Life and a murderer; between a respecter of authority and an insurrectionist; between a keeper of the law and a convicted felon; between a man who claimed to be God and a man who rejected God and all of his laws. Still, for all of his weakness shown in this story, Pilate obviously hoped this would work out well. He hoped this ploy would allow him to free Jesus, and the reason he wanted to do that is because of verse 10 (Mark 15): “For (because) he was aware (he knew) that the chief priests had handed Jesus over because of envy.” Now, the chief priests, when you see that expression in the New Testament, particularly in the gospel records, the chief priests are the current high priest along with all who have served as high priest that are still living. Just like we talk about the presidents; it’s the current one and those who are still living often. The same thing with the chief priests. In this case, the current high priest was Caiaphas. In addition to him, still living, men who had been in that role were Annas, Caiaphas’ father-in-law, and three other men: Ishmael, Eleazar, and Simon. These five powerful men and their families, they controlled the high priesthood, they controlled the temple, and they controlled all of the commercial enterprises connected to it: the money changing, the selling of animals, all of that controlled by these five men. They were really the godfathers of ancient Israel. And Pilate knew that these men, these five men and their powerful families hated Jesus. And they hated him (notice what it says) because of envy. They resented His popularity with the people, His ability to teach with authority, they resented His miracles, and they really resented His recent attacks on them. He had spoken against them on Tuesday of the Passion week on the temple grounds. He called them a bunch of snakes. But they also resented the fact that two months before, just three miles from Jerusalem, Jesus had raised his friend Lazarus from the dead. And Lazarus was still around and living. That presented a real problem because the high priests, these families, were all Sadducees, which meant they rejected the very idea of resurrection. Seeing Lazarus around was a little awkward if that was your theological position. They hated Jesus. Pilate knew they were actually using him to do their dirty work. But before the people could respond to Pilate’s offer, Pilate was suddenly interrupted. Matthew tells us in Matthew 27:19 “While he was sitting on the (bema seat), the judgment seat, his wife sent him a message saying, ‘Have nothing to do with that righteous Man, for last night I suffered greatly in a dream because of Him.’” Now, while Pilate is dealing with this note from

his wife, the leaders are canvassing the crowd. Notice verse 11 (Mark 15): “The chief priests stirred up the crowd to ask Pilate to release Barabbas for them instead.” Now, we aren’t told the arguments they used. Perhaps they told the people that Jesus had blasphemed. They were up to false accusations, and they had done this before. Maybe they praised the courage of Barabbas as someone willing to stand against the Romans and to step up. Maybe they tried intimidation as they often had done before. But regardless of the tact they took, it worked. Because Matthew 27:21 says the governor said, “‘Which of the two do you want me to release?’ And they said, ‘Barabbas.’” Now, in this scene, Pilate, and ultimately God Himself, present the people there that day with a graphic choice. And the choice they made is a profound picture of human depravity. Because both the leaders and the people chose sin over righteousness, and it shows our capacity and our commitment as human beings to sin and to self.

Now, in their case, why did they make this choice? Why would they choose Barabbas over Jesus? Well, they each had differing motives. The motive of the people simply appears to be spiritual indifference, selfishness. That maybe they thought that by going along they would earn themselves points with the leaders and gain some advantage. The motive of the religious leaders, in verse 10 (Mark 15), was envy. Two months before, John chapter 11 tells us after the resurrection of Lazarus, Caiaphas had called together a secret meeting of the Sanhedrin, and in that meeting he said this: “If we don’t deal with Jesus, we’re going to lose our position and our nation.” Pilate, verse 15 (Mark 15) makes it clear, was driven by the fear of man, by self-promotion, and personal advancement. But don’t miss the larger picture. The crowd’s decision that day paints a dark portrait of their sin and ours. You know, we sing a song that says, “Ashamed, I hear my mocking voice call out among the scoffers.” That’s the point here. I mean, think about it, can you imagine, personally, you being given a choice between Barabbas and his execution or the execution of Jesus of Nazareth and you choosing for Jesus to die? Couldn’t you imagine that? And my response is, “Yes, you can, and so can I” because before we came to Christ, how often did we choose our sin over Jesus?

Verse 12 introduces us to the third and final scene in this drama and that is “The Great Exchange: A Picture of Jesus’ Substitution.” Look at verse 12: “Answering again, Pilate said to them, ‘Then what shall I do with Him whom you call the King of the Jews?’” I think Pilate fully expected for the people to ask for Jesus. But when they didn’t, he then asked them what he should do with

Jesus. It's possible, I think even likely, that he was giving them an opportunity to ask for Jesus to be spared as well. I think a request that he would have granted. I mean after all, he could come out like smelling like roses; you know "I am being especially generous this year. I'm giving you two instead of one." But, in response, verse 13 says, "They shouted back, 'Crucify Him!'" The Greek word *shouted* means "to cry out in a loud voice, even to scream." Who are these people? Well, the crowd gathered in that agora, in that market place, there on The Pavement that Friday morning between six and seven a.m. consisted primarily of three groups. There was the Sanhedrin, the seventy leaders of Israel, along with their entourage. There were those who had come to that market perhaps to buy or sell early that morning, and there was a group that had come to seek the release of a prisoner in keeping with the custom. Maybe among that group there were even some friends of Barabbas. And they all cried out for Jesus' death. Verse 14: "But Pilate said to them, 'Why, what evil has He done?' But they shouted all the more, 'Crucify Him!'" Pilate seems shocked at their response to Jesus. But the crowd screams, notice, *all the more*. The Greek word means "beyond measure, with an exceptionally high degree of intensity." William Hendriksen writes:

Over and over again, these terrible words are yelled until they become a monotonous refrain, an eerie ominous chant, "Let Him be crucified! Let Him be crucified!" (He goes on) The crowd has become a riotous mob, an emotion-charged screaming rabble.

Now in reporting the inner weaving of the lives of Barabbas and Jesus in this record, the gospel writers go out of their way to show a contrast—two contrasts actually. The first contrast is between "The Guilt of Barabbas versus the Innocence of Jesus." Notice what the gospel writers say about Barabbas's guilt. Matthew 27: He was "a notorious prisoner." Luke 23: "He had been thrown into prison for an insurrection made in the city, and for murder." John 18: He "was a robber." And in our text: He was an "insurrectionist." He was a terrorist and a murderer. This was not a good man. He was the worst of men. He was guilty as charged.

But contrast that with Jesus' innocence. Turn with me to Luke chapter 23. Luke 23 and look at verse 13:

Pilate summoned the chief priests and the rulers and the people, and he said to them, "You brought this man to me (Now watch this. Let me go back and tell you

that at the Jewish trials and particularly at the third one that morning, they found Jesus guilty of blasphemy. That was the charge in the Jewish trial. But when they brought Him to Pilate, they knew Pilate was not going to kill Him for blasphemy, and so they changed the charge. Look at it here.) “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.”

In other words, He’s not guilty of insurrection. Verse 15: “No, nor has Herod, for he sent Him back (across the courtyard) to us; and behold, nothing deserving death has been done by Him.” That is Pilate’s summary of the first two Roman trials. He found Jesus not guilty; Herod found Jesus not guilty. Now, in the third Roman trial, the same thing happened. Matthew 27:19, you remember, Pilate’s wife said this is a “righteous Man.” In Mark 15:14, Pilate said, “What evil has He done?” In John 19:4, Pilate, at the end of that third trial, said, “I find no guilt in Him.” In fact, think about this. Acting in his official capacity as the Roman prefect, Pilate publicly declared Jesus’ innocent five times that morning. He’s innocent. He’s innocent. He’s innocent. He’s innocent. He’s innocent. Five times! But the key point in what’s unfolding here is this. Barabbas had been condemned for the same crime of which Jesus was found innocent: insurrection. So, there’s a deliberate contrast between Jesus’ innocence and Barabbas’s guilt.

But there’s another contrast in our text, and that is “The Pardon of the Guilty versus the Condemnation of the Righteous.” Look at verse 15: “Wishing to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas for them, and after having Jesus scourged, He handed Him over to be crucified.” In an unthinkable act of injustice, Pilate sacrificed an innocent life on the altar of his own personal ambition. Now, he wanted to release Him. What changed his mind? Well, John tells us, John 19:12 and 13:

Pilate made efforts to release Him. (That’s what he wanted to do.) But the Jews cried out, saying, “If you release this Man, you are no friend of Caesar; everyone who makes himself out to be a king opposes Caesar.” Therefore, when Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus out, (and the crucifixion followed).

You see, implied in their words that morning to Pilate was a threat: If you let Jesus go, we’re going to file yet another complaint with Caesar against you that you condone treason against

Rome. Pilate, if you know history at all, you know he was already on shaky ground with Caesar. He couldn't afford another problem. He had spent years working up through the ranks of the army, and he wasn't about to let one little life, even the life of a righteous Man, get in the way of his career. When it became obvious that he couldn't spare Jesus' life without that cost to himself, you remember what he did. He symbolically washed his hands. Matthew chapter 27 verse 24:

When Pilate saw 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!"

The truth is, according to the New Testament, they were all guilty. You can't wash your hands with water and get rid of that blood stain. Then Pilate committed the greatest travesty of justice in the history of the world. Look at verse 15 again (Mark 15), and let the reality of what's said here sear into your soul. Verse 15: "Wishing to satisfy the crowd, he released Barabbas for them." Pilate pardoned Barabbas, and he released him. "And after having Jesus scourged, he handed Him over to be crucified." I think you understand that there is unimaginable suffering contained in that one word *scourged*. It was a horrific punishment, never practiced on Roman citizens. It was preserved for slaves and for provincials who had received the death penalty. It was inflicted with the flagrum, a short, wooden handle usually wrapped in leather with three attached leather straps or more. Woven into the straps were lead balls or sharp pieces of bone. The victim was stripped to his waist, bent over a short pillar, and either tied or held in place. Usually, two men inflicted the punishment of scourging, lashing the victim from one side and then the other. The first few blows softened and lacerated the back like a meat mallet does to a piece of meat. The next blows cut into the flesh, leaving it in ribbons. Eusebius, the church historian, writes, "Those who are torn by scourges down to deep-seated veins and arteries, so that the hidden contents of the recesses of their bodies, their entrails and organs, were exposed to sight." It was incredible physical suffering, but Jesus' scourging had a spiritual significance.

Isaiah chapter 53 verse 5: "He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being (for our peace, our Shalom) fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are spiritually healed." But don't miss the great exchange that takes place in these verses because by God's design, it is intended to be a picture of Jesus' substitution. It

portrays the condemnation of the Righteous One is the place of the guilty and condemned. Think with me. Remember, Barabbas had been imprisoned, condemned, and ordered executed along with his followers. In fact, the Greek word *robber* that John uses to describe Barabbas in his gospel occurs here. Look at Mark chapter 15 and down in verse 27: “They crucified two robbers (two insurrectionists) with Him, one on His right and one on His left.” You see, do you understand what was happening that day? Not only was Barabbas pardoned and released and Jesus condemned, but Jesus physically died in Barabbas’s place. He died on the very cross meant for Barabbas between two of Barabbas’s accomplices. And, friends, that was by divine design. God intended to picture the divine reason behind the cross, and that reason was substitution. Jesus physically died in the place of a guilty and condemned sinner Barabbas. And that was to picture that He was also doing that for us.

You see, the great events in this paragraph were happening on two different levels. On the human level, the Jews and the Romans conspired to condemn Jesus of Nazareth in the place of Jesus Barabbas: Jesus, the son of the father; to condemn one found innocent of insurrection in the place of one already found guilty of insurrection. On the divine level something far greater was happening. God was condemning His own Son in the place of guilty sinners. You see, Jesus is and was perfectly righteous. We, on the other hand, are guilty and condemned before God and His law. But through the gospel lived out that morning, God planned a great exchange. The Righteous One is condemned and executed for the sins of the guilty, and the guilty are completely pardoned. Barabbas is a perfect picture of Jesus’ substitution for you. You see, you and I have already been found guilty for our sins, but God knows that Jesus is innocent. He condemned Jesus for your sins. Jesus died on the cross meant for you. He suffered the divine wrath that should have been yours. You see, the point of this story is that your name is Barabbas. My name is Barabbas.

If you’re here this morning and you don’t know the Lord Jesus Christ, this is the gospel offered to you. This is the truth. You deserve; you have sinned against God. You deserve to die for those sins and to suffer eternally for those sins. And if nothing changes, you will. But God in His love, sent His own Son into the world. He took on human flesh. He became like us—still God but became perfect Man as well. And He lived a perfect life where He committed no sin. He didn’t commit your sins. But if you’re willing to trust in Him, then God the Father will see Christ dying

on the cross as dying for your sins. So that just like Pilate pardoned Barabbas, a Righteous Judge, God Himself, can pardon you. That's the gospel, and that's my prayer for you today. You know, we aren't told if Barabbas ever came to faith in Christ. But I can promise you this, regardless, every day that he woke up, he was reminded that someone innocent of the crimes that he committed died in his place.

Christians, you and I should remind ourselves of that every day as well. First Peter 2:24: "He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross." May the Lord help us to wake up every day remembering this great exchange. The One who was completely innocent of your sins died in your place, suffering for your sins, so that a just and righteous God could pardon you forever. That's what we remember in the Lord's Table, this great exchange. Take a moment and prepare your heart as the men come.

Our Father, we thank You for this ultra, high-definition picture in the life of Barabbas of what Jesus was doing on our behalf. Thank You for the reminder of the heart of the cross: that the very One who was innocent of our sins, suffered for our sins so that You could pardon us. Lord, I pray for those here this morning who don't know You. Lord, open their hearts to hear and understand the gospel. Lord, I pray that You'd grant them repentance as a gift, that You'd grant them faith to believe. May they cry out to You to forgive them, to pardon their sins, to make them right with You. Lord, may that happen even this morning. Lord, for the rest of us as we prepare to take the Lord's Table, fill our hearts with gratitude, with love for the Savior that He would do this for us, for You Father that You would offer Your only Son in order to pardon criminals, guilty ones. And Father, I pray that for those of us in Christ, You'd help us to, from our hearts, open our hearts to You and confess our sins as You bring them to mind. Right now, Lord, may we hold nothing back. May we freely confess the sins that You bring to our minds, even this moment, seeking Your forgiveness, and resolving by Your grace and the work of Your Spirit to walk on the path of righteousness, so that we can come and remember what Jesus did for us in a way that honors Him. Lord, receive our worship that we bring to You now, in the way that You designed for us to bring it in the Lord's Table. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.