

Which Savior Do You Serve?

Mark 15:6–14
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Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, tried to release Jesus several times after nothing in him worthy of death. Even Herod found the same. That should have been the end of it for Jesus. But it wasn't. Why not?

Part of the answer is that the Jews had a tradition of expecting Pilate to release a criminal at passover. Pilate himself said, *But ye have a custom, that I should release unto you one at the passover: will ye therefore that I release unto you the King of the Jews?* (John 18:39). This tradition allowed the Jews to pick who would be released. Our text says, *Now at that feast he released unto them one prisoner, whomsoever they desired.* So, Pilate gave them a choice: Jesus or Barabbas. Of course, Jesus didn't have to be one of the choices. Why didn't Pilate let them choose between the two men who were crucified with Jesus? Or why not one of Barabbas' affiliates mentioned in verse 7 of our text? If he had given them a different choice, he could have set Jesus free.

But we know the outcome. The Jews demanded that Pilate free a hardened criminal and send Jesus to his death. What's this all about?

Barabbas

Barabbas is an interesting character in Jesus' trial. The only information we have about him comes from the four gospels. Mark wrote that he was involved in an insurrection, during which he also murdered someone. Luke said basically the same thing. Mark's account also makes it clear that Barabbas had already been tried for his crimes and found guilty. Matthew called Barabbas *a notable prisoner*, which probably means that he was a ringleader or spokesman for a group of insurrectionists (Matt. 27:16). And John described him simply as *a robber* (John 18:40), a word that could also mean insurrectionist. Putting all of this together, it's like that Barabbas was a member of a political organization called the Zealots whose mission was to cast off the yoke of Roman oppression.

The New Testament mentions several Zealots. In Acts 5, Gamaliel, a prominent Jewish rabbi, referred to two of them: one named Theudas and another named Judas (vv. 36–37). In fact, Jesus even called a man who had once been a Zealot to be one of his apostles. His name was Simon — not to be confused with Simon Peter (Luke 6:15; Acts 1:15). The insurrection Barabbas participated in was

so well known that Mark simply called it *the insurrection* at the end of verse 7. It was so much in everyone's mind that he didn't have to say anything more about it.

Barabbas wasn't an ordinary criminal — a purse snatcher or even a bank robber. He was a really bad dude, the kind of guy you wouldn't want to mess with.

Even Barabbas' name tells us something about what's going on in our text. It means 'son of the father,' and given his ideology and lifestyle, it's easy to guess who his father was. His father was the devil, just as Jesus told the unbelieving Jews of his day: *Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him* (John 8:44). So, when Pilate allowed the Jews to pick Barabbas or Jesus, he was really letting them choose between the son of the devil and the Son of God. Their choice of Barabbas shows where their hearts were.

Interestingly, though, Barabbas wasn't this man's first name. It was more like a surname. You might remember that Peter had a similar surname. Jesus called him *Simon Barjona* or Simon the son of Jonah (Matt. 16:17). And because Joseph was Jesus' legal father, though not his biological father, it's likely that some identified him as Jesus Bar-Joseph. In fact, that's sort of what Luke did in Luke 3:23, which says, *And Jesus himself began to be about thirty years of age, being (as was supposed) the son of Joseph.*

But if Barabbas wasn't this man's first name, what was it? The best answer is that we don't know because the Bible, our only source of information about him, doesn't say. The only possible clue comes from Matthew 27:16, where a handful of manuscripts, including some in the Byzantine tradition, identify him as 'Jesus Barabbas.' Jesus was a common name in the first century, being the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew name Joshua, both of which mean 'Jehovah saves.' Now, it's unlikely that Matthew actually wrote this, but it shows that someone in the early church recognized the tremendous contrast between the real Jesus and the imposter. One claimed to be a savior. Perhaps the Jews who stood before Pilate in today's text even thought of him as one. He, no doubt, believed this about himself. But the other person was God's Savior, having come into the world to deliver his people from their sins. He did this not by resisting lawful, God-appointed authority, but by submitting himself to its injustices, even to the point of death. This is how Jesus satisfied God's perfect justice for everyone who believes in him.

Providentially, Pilate himself highlighted this contrast when he spoke to the Jews. According to Matthew, he didn't just say, 'Whom shall I release unto you? Barabbas, or Jesus?' but, *Whom will ye that I release unto you? Barabbas, or Jesus which is called Christ?* (Matt. 27:17). Pilate identified Jesus as the God-anointed and God-appointed Redeemer, who was sent to bruise the serpent's head and secure our victory.

This is the choice Pilate gave the people. He wanted them to choose Jesus because he knew he was innocent and because it was better for him politically. He hoped they would follow his lead. I suspect, though, that he knew they wouldn't. Why? Because verse 10 of our text says, *For he knew that the chief priests had delivered him for envy.*

The Jews

When interpreting Scripture, it's sometimes appropriate to look at it from different points of view. For example, when John wrote that Jesus wept at Lazarus' grave, we obviously need to consider it from Jesus' point of view, viz., what he felt as a man when he faced the death of a very close friend and considered what he would do about it. We can also look at our Lord's weeping from Lazarus' perspective or the perspective of his sisters. But the most helpful perspective is that of God the Father. Jesus' tears revealed the Father's great love for his elect — a love so great that he willingly afflicted his only begotten Son both for Lazarus and us.

In today's text, Mark confronted us with several points of view. So far, we've considered Pilate's perspective and God's, but we should also consider the people's. What were they thinking? How did their choice affect them? Why did they choose Barabbas over Jesus?

Let's begin by asking what they really wanted when they demanded Barabbas' release and Jesus' crucifixion. It wasn't just that they chose a violent felon instead of a meek law-keeper. That would have been bad enough. Nor had they just preferred an insurrectionist to the rightful King of the Jews. Interestingly, Pilate used this title twice in our text — once in verse 9 and again in verse 12. This, of course, is even worse because the title 'King of the Jews' takes us back to David and God's promise to give his son an everlasting kingdom. It shows that the Jews rejected their Messiah. But there's more. By choosing Barabbas over Jesus, they were positioning themselves against God and his Son in the war between the seed. They were actively continuing the war against the God who had covenanted to be the God of Abraham's seed.

We see this in our text in several ways.

First, verse 10 identifies the motivation of the chief priests. They were jealous because Jesus had greater success and popularity than they did. When he preached, thousands listened. People came from all over to hear him and to witness his miracles. The priests' envy was exacerbated by the fact that Jesus was only a peasant, a mere carpenter, while they imagined themselves as God's representatives on earth. They had a right to men's attention; Jesus didn't.

Second, verse 11 explains how the chief priest's motives affected their actions. They *moved the people, that [Pilate] should rather release Barabbas unto them.* But how did they do this? Maybe they

threatened them with excommunication, like the man born blind in John 9, or promised them something. Perhaps they threatened to call down God’s judgment on them or reminded them of Pilate’s countless atrocities against them. And when did they influence the crowd? Was it when Pilate, having received a message from his wife about a dream she had, inquired about what it meant? Matthew wrote, *When he was set down on the judgment seat, his wife sent unto him, saying, Have thou nothing to do with that just man: for I have suffered many things this day in a dream because of him* (Matt. 27:19). Did the chief priests use this opportunity to convince the people that they really needed Barabbas as their savior instead of the one sent by God? It wouldn’t have been extraordinary if they did. The hatred of unbelievers toward God the Father and his Son has no limits.

And third, the last three verses of today’s text report the conclusion of the matter. Pilate asked the people what he should do with Jesus, the King of the Jews. He could have released Barabbas, as the Jews requested, and still punished Jesus by flogging him or throwing him into jail for a while, even though he knew that Jesus had done nothing wrong. But the Jews wouldn’t have this. Their animosity was so intense that only Jesus’ death would satisfy them. Verse 13 says, *And they cried out again, Crucify him*. Pilate responded, this time reminding them that both he and Herod had declared Jesus innocent. This was the third time. He even tried to excuse his complicity by washing his hands. But this only aroused the Jews that much more. The end of verse 14 says, *They cried out the more exceedingly, Crucify him*.

The Jews knew exactly what they were doing. We know they did because they said so. Matthew ended his account of this incident with these words: *Then answered all the people, and said, His blood be on us, and on our children* (Matt. 27:25).

Can you imagine anyone calling God’s wrath upon himself, let alone his children? Yet, they did. They did exactly the opposite of Abraham their father. Abraham delighted in God’s covenant, in which he promised to be a God to both Abraham and his descendants. God’s promise included tremendous blessing to everyone who followed in Abraham’s faith. Psalm 112:2 says, *His seed shall be mighty upon earth: the generation of the upright shall be blessed*. These blessings belong to everyone who believes in Jesus Christ, who embraces him as God’s Messiah — the prophet, priest and king of his people.

The Jews rejected the one God sent to be their Savior. John 1:11 says, *He came unto his own, and his own received him not*. This resulted in God removing them from his favor. As Paul wrote in Romans 11, the Lord cut off the natural branches of the olive tree and replaced them with wild branches, viz., the Gentiles.

We have been given so much. We have Jesus and all his benefits. But we also have a great responsibility to go with it. We can't cry out against Jesus, as the chief priests did. Instead, we must proclaim his praises. Peter wrote, *But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light* (1 Pet. 2:9). Our declaration of his praise begins with those closest to us. Deuteronomy 6:2 says, *That thou mightest fear the LORD thy God, to keep all his statutes and his commandments, which I command thee, thou, and thy son, and thy son's son, all the days of thy life; and that thy days may be prolonged.* Perhaps the one passage that stresses this more than any other is Psalm 78. Verses 3 and 4 say, *Which we have heard and known, and our fathers have told us. We will not hide them from their children, shewing to the generation to come the praises of the LORD, and his strength, and his wonderful works that he hath done.*

Yet, even this is just the beginning. You see, the Lord called Abraham not just for his sake or for the sake of his biological or spiritual children, but for the world — that all the nations of the earth might be blessed in Abraham's true seed, the Lord Jesus Christ. And Jesus himself commanded us to go out into the world and compel sinners to come to him. He told us not just to say the right words but to make disciples, baptizing them and teaching them everything in the gospel.

Without the gospel, unbelievers can only demand Jesus' death. Their single greatest desire is to end his reign. But the Lord uses the simple preaching of his Word to draw people in and change their hearts, bringing them into submission to the one who is truly the King of all kings. The church's mission is to do this. But is it your mission, too? Amen.