

“Passing Over Barabbas”

John 18:38–40

³⁸Pilate said to Him, “What is truth?”

And when he had said this, he went out again to the Jews and said to them, “I find no guilt in Him. ³⁹But you have a custom that I release someone for you at the Passover; do you wish then that I release for you the King of the Jews?” ⁴⁰So they cried out again, saying, “Not this Man, but Barabbas.” Now Barabbas was a robber. [NASB]

HOPE
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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I. Barabbas

Gig’s up. Barabbas was history. Insurrection. Murder. Robber, says John. Stole authority... stole life. But he’s been nailed. Caught. Thrown in the dungeon. Dead man walking. Execution is his end. And nobody knows it like Barabbas knows it.

But it’s not just what he did. It’s what he was. Barabbas was a notorious prisoner.^{Mt27.16} He was a robber. And in Acts he is called a murderer.^{Ac13.14} Guilty *and* wicked. And nobody knows it like Barabbas knows it. Whether he admitted to himself the wicked part or not, we don’t know. But he knew it inside. Barabbas was history, and he knew it.

Satan was history, but he didn’t yet know it. Those, including many of the Jewish leaders who had committed themselves to the father of lies as their father, were history, but they didn’t yet know it. Pilate was history, though he still thought he might could weasel out of it somehow.

They had had their chances to look forward through the telescopes of history. They had seen the lamb sacrifice of Abel which had pleased the Lord. They had seen the sacrifices of Enoch as he walked with the Lord. They had seen the sacrifices of Noah through which God sealed His covenant promises. They had seen the animal sacrifices of Abraham between which the smoking oven and flaming torch (think pillar of smoke and pillar of fire) passed in Abraham’s place.

They had seen the ram caught in the thicket, the lamb which God Himself provided in place of Abraham’s son Isaac upon the altar of Moriah. They had seen the innumerable blood sacrifices under the Mosaic administration, by which the people gained access to meet with God in the Tabernacle and Temple.

And they had heard John the Baptist cry out, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world,” while pointing to Jesus. Some of them had caught wind of Jesus saying things that suggested He would die and arise from the dead. But none of them, not a one of them, had ever seen as clear a portrayal of the way God sees things, as they were about to see. And Barabbas would know it best of all.

Barabbas was history and he knew it. No future and no hope. Dead man walking... as far as his chains in his dungeon permitted him to walk, that is.

II. Pilate

Pilate was history. We saw and heard him take his fatal step last week, the step that plunged him over the precipice... without a parachute. “What is truth?” he had said. When Pilate said “What is truth?” he was flat contradicting the One by Whom, through Whom, and for Whom all things were created.^{Ro11.36; Col1.16} That One, namely Jesus Christ, Son of God, had just said,³⁷ “For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice.”

In effect, Pilate had just repeated what his father had said thousands of years before in the Garden of Eden: “Indeed, has God said...?” That’s the same thing as saying, “What is truth?” Truth is reality according to how God sees things. Truth is the way things are as God sees them. To say “What is truth” is to claim either that God doesn’t see, or that God doesn’t see things rightly. God is not terribly impressed with either claim. And the problem with making such a claim, is that it may mean God has already purposed to keep you from seeing things the way He sees them. Such was the case with Pilate.

How do I know that? God tells us that’s the way He sees it. Listen to Peter as he preaches at the so-called portico of Solomon in the Temple in Jerusalem. ^{Act3.13}“The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified His servant Jesus, the one whom you delivered and disowned in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release Him. ¹⁴But you disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, ¹⁵but put to death the Prince of life, the one whom God raised from the dead, a fact to which we are witnesses.”

Now put that together with Peter’s declaration in a previous sermon. ^{Act2.22}“Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know—²³this Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death.”

Pilate himself chose to plunge over the precipice without a parachute. Had he chosen to humble himself before the King of the Jews—who is also the King of kings such as Pilate, he would have been saved right then and there by the only One given among men by which we must be saved. But God had planned it all along. God had planned all along to use Pilate’s decision to plunge... to bring about the death of His own Son and through His death, the salvation of all those God planned to save. Yes, God had planned Pilate’s very decision from all eternity.

Nonetheless, Pilate did not yet realize that he did not have a parachute. We shall see Pilate in the coming verses reaching back frantically to find his ripcord. Frantically... and in vain. C-130 rollin’ down the strip; Airborne Daddy’s gonna take a little trip. Bummer when you can’t find the ripcord... especially when you can’t find it because there isn’t one. Pilate was history.

One of his attempts to grab the ripcord was to assume the people would be righteous and just when Pilate himself was not man enough to be. Pilate is persuaded that Jesus is innocent. Pilate cannot find a single piece of evidence against Jesus. So Pilate does what some parents do to help their children make a predetermined decision: he gives the people an either-or choice. As Matthew has it, ^{Mt27.15}“Now at the feast the governor was accustomed to release for the people any one prisoner whom they wanted. ¹⁶At that time they were holding a notorious prisoner, called Barabbas. ¹⁷So when the people gathered together, Pilate said to them, ‘Whom do you want me to release for you? Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?’”

I suspect Pilate thought the choice he was giving them was something akin to offering them liver and onions or, Mocha Chip ice cream. According to the other gospels, Pilate knew the Jews had handed over Jesus because they were envious of Jesus’ popularity. Hey, just days before, Jesus had ridden into town and the crowds went wild over Him. They loved Him! Everybody came out to hail Him... and many laid down their cloaks before his path as a sign of their submission to Him. They wanted *Him* as king; they had had enough of the Jewish Sanhedrin governing them, let alone the Romans. So the Sanhedrin were full of envy.

Okay, maybe some people like MooseTrax more than Mocha Chip, and get a little envious when Mocha Chip begins filling the freezer in the place of MooseTrax. But *really!* Who in the world would even remotely ponder the possibility of choosing liver and onions over Mocha Chip or MooseTrax! Pilate thought he was pretty smart. He was quite sure the people would recoil in horror at receiving a plate of liver and onions... that is, at the idea of receiving this horrid, beastly, wicked murderer Barabbas.

Pilate was probably already wiping the corners of his lips and starting to fold his napkin. He had no idea the people would immediately shout for the liver and onions, and tell him to wash

the Mocha Chip down the drain. The people shouted for Barabbas. Pilate forgot about folding his napkin. Pilate was history and he began to panic.

III. People

It was Passover. It was the people’s Passover. It was *their* tradition, not Pilate’s. “*You* have a custom,” Pilate said. I guess the Roman governors found this to be one way to appease the Jews and keep them happy. Passover was that great feast held every year remembering a pivot-point in Israel’s history. It was the tenth and final plague God brought upon Pharaoh and all Egypt after Egypt had treated the Israelites to hard-labor slavery for 400 years. On this fateful and fitful night, God told the Israelites to sacrifice a lamb for each household and brush the lamb’s blood on the doorposts. ^{Exo12.12}“For I will go through the land of Egypt on that night, and will strike down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments—I am the LORD. ¹³The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live; and when I see the blood I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt. ¹⁴Now this day will be a memorial to you, and you shall celebrate it as a feast to the LORD; throughout your generations you are to celebrate it as a permanent ordinance.”

It was Passover. It was the people’s Passover. It was *their* tradition, not Pilate’s. But this way they can rejoice over their deliverance, through the deliverance of a prisoner. Let the people be happy, thought Pilate, but let me channel their happiness my way. Pilate did not know, and the people did not remember, that ^{Pro21.1}“The king’s heart is like channels of water in the hand of the LORD; He turns it wherever He wishes.”

For all their willfulness, Pilate did not know, and the people did not remember that ^{Pro16.33}“The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.” It was the people’s Passover, and of these two, Jesus or Barabbas, God Himself would choose over whom to pass and upon Whom to pour the cup of judgment.

It was the people’s Passover, and according to God’s plan, they chose to paint the blood of the lamb upon the worst of sinners imprisoned that day.

IV. Jesus

“Not this Man!” they cried. He whom the king rightly judged innocent was the one they wrongly wanted to murder. He whom the king rightly judged a murderer was the one they wanted to be called innocent. Right there before the eyes of Jerusalem, God unveiled the clearest proclamation of the Gospel He had promised for thousands of years; the clearest, that is, before the Lamb of God arose from the dead, ascended to heaven, and poured out His Holy Spirit.

I find no clearer portrayal of the hope of salvation in all the Hebrew scriptures. It is one message. It is one Truth. It is one reality according to the way God sees things. But before now the hope was portrayed with animals—the blood of bulls and goats which can never take away the sins of humans. Sin has its reward—and that reward is blood... Death. That’s the way God sees things, Who gave us blood by which to *live* the abundant life He gave us, and against Whom all our sin mounts its murderous insurrection.

Now, however, it is not an animal who goes to the slaughter that God’s wrath might pass over the sinner. Now it is a Man. A Man for a man. A righteous, holy, true, and faithful man, for a

guilty, wicked, murderous leech who would suck lifeblood out of others to satisfy his own insatiable hunger. An innocent Man allowed Himself to be painted with the death-bound blood of a guilty man, who of himself would be mere history in the annals of life, while adorning his father Satan’s house with the trophies of deceitful lust.

This innocent Man is Jesus. No charges would ever be found against Him... except for those charges that belonged to you and to me. But once the charges against you and against me are painted upon Him, there are none—not a single one—left upon us. But if our sins go upon this One who alone, being the Son of God, can bear their infinite burden... where goes His righteousness? Where goes His purity? Where goes His obedience? Would it be right for God to reward Him the curse for our sins, and forget to reward the life for His sinlessness? God is not so unjust. As justice is served for our sins, so justice is served for His sinlessness.

God sent His Son for this purpose: that you might see the way things are... as God sees them. And the way God sees things is this:

The Son of God dies, and Barabbas lives.

V. Barabbas

Who are we? We are Barabbas. “Not this Man, but Barabbas!” they cry. Oh people, if you would have life, then that must be your cry too! “Not this Man, but Barabbas!” For you see, it must be one or the other. The cross must have one or the other. This Man, or Barabbas. This Man, or you. This Man, or me. Will you cry, “Not this Man, but Barabbas!”? Will you cry to God, “Release not this Man, but ME!”? Without such a cry, you have no hope.

Do not fault the Jews for this. They were doing God’s business regardless of their willful ignorance. Irony of ironies: they, too, have no hope without the cry, “Not this Man, but Barabbas!” And God will use that very cry of the Jews to graft in again His own special nation, the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, through whom He laid the lifeline from the first man Adam to the last Adam, Christ.

Rather, fault ourselves our unwillingness to cry “Not this Man, but Barabbas!” Do you think Barabbas berated himself when the messenger—that quintessential evangelist, as FW Krummacher points out—came to tell him he was free to leave his cell? Do you think Barabbas said “They should not have called for my release; I have no right to go”?

Do you think Barabbas should have stayed in his cell when his shackles were unlocked and loosed? Do you think Barabbas should have remained to pay off his debts to justice when they had already been fully paid? Fully paid? Fully paid? Should *you*? Should *you* stay in your prison cell of self-pity and despair now that your debts to God’s justice are fully paid? Fully paid? Fully paid?

Or... do you think Barabbas should have gone back to his former business of murder and insurrection, now that no charges could be levied against him? Should *you*? Should *you* go back to your former lusts now that no charges can be levied against you?

Do you see that it was not the Jews, but God Himself who directed the cries of “Not this Man, but Barabbas!”? Do you see that God Himself directed the cries of “Not this Man, but you and me!”? Do you see that God Himself sent His Son to take on the form of Man, so that God Himself could cry, “Not this Man, but you... but me!”? *This was the Son’s Father who cried for your Passover. God Himself cried, “Not this Man, but you... but me.”*

This was the Son of God who cried for your Passover. This is the Spirit of God who dwells in you now as a guarantee and unchangeable assurance to you of the glorious cry, “Not this Man, but Barabbas!”

Barabbas was a dead man. Then, before he even knew it, and on account of absolutely NOTHING he did, he was alive. Barabbas was history... now he was free.

The Son of God dies and Barabbas lives.

Who is Barabbas? Barabbas is you... and Barabbas is me.