

The Jesus Insurrection

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[0 : 00] These days, when we hear the word insurrection, most of us probably think back to the events of January 6th, the attack on the U.S. Capitol, certainly a low point in our country's history, we can probably all agree.

But when we hear the word insurrection, probably most of us don't think of Jesus. At least that's not one of the first thoughts that springs to mind. But in fact, the legal reason that Jesus was crucified is that he was charged with leading an insurrection.

That's how they got him legally. When Jesus made his triumphal entry, what we're celebrating today, when he made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem a few days prior to the events of Mark 15, people in power saw him as a political threat.

They saw him as a man riding into Jerusalem who seemed to be signifying his intention to become king, to become king of the Jews, which meant he would be leading an insurrection against the Roman government.

And the religious leaders recognized this, and they saw this as their best chance to get rid of Jesus. So they hauled Jesus before the Roman governor Pilate, where they accused him of leading an insurrection.

[1 : 24] But Jesus wasn't the only one accused of insurrection that day. There's another man in custody who is also accused of insurrection.

And the gospel writer, Mark, refers to this other man as Barabbas. But Barabbas is not his full name. The early Greek manuscripts actually record his given name, Jesus.

His name, his full name is Jesus Barabbas, which is fascinating because you have to picture the scene here. Pilate brings two men out in front of the crowds.

Both men are named Jesus, right? You have Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus Christ, and then you have Jesus Barabbas. And both men are accused of being a part of an insurrection.

Barabbas is leading a worldly insurrection. Christ came to lead a kingdom insurrection. Same charge, but two completely different kinds of insurrection.

[2 : 33] And the choice is given to the crowds. One of these Jesuses will be set free, turned over to you. You can have that Jesus. The other Jesus is going to be taken away and put to death in a horrible way.

And the question comes out, which Jesus will you choose? And while most of us would never, ever want to be part of an insurrection, at least I don't think so, the deeper question here is actually this. How can we fix all that is broken in the world? What does the world need most? See, people who lead an insurrection do it because things are very wrong with the world as they perceive it.

And they think that by doing this, they can make things right. So what is wrong with the world and what does it take to fix it? Each insurrection has a way of answering that question. Jesus Barabbas has a way of answering that question.

And Jesus Christ has another way. So what we're going to do is look at Mark 15 and we're going to see three of the key differences between these two approaches to fixing what is wrong in the world.

[3 : 38] Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for this morning for Palm Sunday. And we thank you for this, as we enter into this week of walking with Jesus in his passion.

Lord, give us a deep understanding of the meaning of these events for us. Lord, help us to enter into these stories, but also help these stories to enter into us, to change us from the inside out.

Lord, we pray this in your holy name. Amen. Amen. So what are the differences between the kind of insurrection that a Jesus Barabbas would lead and the kind of insurrection that Jesus Christ leads?

Well, number one, they have opposite understandings of power. They have opposite understandings of the purpose of power. Insurrection really is about power.

It's about who has it, who doesn't, who wants it. But how should we use power? And Barabbas represents the worldly view of power.

[4 : 42] This is the default way of thinking, and we see it not only in Barabbas, but in this story we see it in Pilate, and we see it in the religious leaders. And the worldly view of power says this. Power is about building myself up.

Power is about protecting my self-interests. Power is the ability to promote my agenda. In Barabbas' case, it's a kind of perverted form of nationalism.

And this view says that the way to make the world a better place is for me to be in power or for me to get my people into power. And the worldly view of power is what sits behind much of the injustice, the violence, the oppression in the world.

And this is exactly what we see in Mark chapter 15. Barabbas wants power so badly that he's willing to kill for it. And as we look around at all of the conflict that's happening in the world today, if we look at all of the conflict that has happened throughout history, how many lives have been lost?

Because people said, it is worth shedding blood to get myself or my people into power. And Pilate has power and his agenda is that he wants to keep his political power.

[6 : 02] He's clinging to his political power all through this encounter. And what does that do to him? It turns him into a people-pleasing coward.

His investigation is filled with indecision. He practically begs the crowds to tell him what to do. You know, tell me what to do.

What will keep you happy? What will keep me in office? And ultimately, even though he clearly doesn't want to put Jesus Christ to death, he multiple times tries to say, what has he done wrong? Are you sure you don't want me to release him to you? Multiple times he tries to get out of it, but ultimately he caves to moral cowardice, to please the crowds.

And, you know, how many times, how often do we see leaders or institutions or governments who are so concerned with keeping their power that they're willing to overlook or even sanction injustice in order to stay in power?

[7 : 11] That's Pilate. And then we have the religious leaders who want to keep their social and cultural power. They don't have a lot of political power. They're not Roman officials, but they do have a lot of social and cultural power.

And they want to hold on to it, and they see Jesus Christ as a threat to that. And so they're willing to sacrifice their integrity. They arrest Jesus in the middle of the night.

They condemn him in a kangaroo court of the Sanhedrin. And, you know, the church has faced this temptation all throughout history. The temptation to sacrifice our integrity, the temptation to sacrifice our faithfulness for the sake of power and relevance.

We see this on the right and the left. When vast numbers of evangelicals and church leaders, when you see them not merely voting for Republican candidates because of their policies, but enthusiastically endorsing Donald Trump as God's champion for Christians in our country, that's all about holding on to power.

When you see vast numbers of mainline and progressive churches on the left abandoning historic Christian doctrine in a desperate attempt to stay relevant, that's all about holding on to power.

[8 : 28] So this temptation runs through the church. It always has among traditional and progressive Christians all throughout history. Now look at Jesus Christ.

In this story, there is so much irony when it comes to power. Barabbas wants power. Pilate and the religious leaders are desperate to keep power.

Jesus is the only one who has any real power at all. And what does Jesus do with it? He lays it down. Everybody around him is clinging for power.

He has it. And he willingly lays it down. And this begins to show us something very important. The kingdom of God turns our view of power upside down.

Jesus shows us that the greatness of our lives is measured by our degree of lowly service. Jesus shows us that you have to die in order to be able to truly live.

[9 : 31] Jesus shows us that the first will be last and the last will be first. Jesus teaches that the meek, not the powerful, are the ones who will inherit the earth.

It's a completely upside down view of power. The world and worldly insurrection says power is about building myself up. But Jesus shows us that power is about lifting other people up.

That power is about lifting other people up. All power comes from God. And God gives us power so that we can use it in ways that reflect his character and his purposes.

And we say, what does that mean? Seek justice. Help the poor and the vulnerable. Seek the common good. Work together to build a society that reflects God's vision for human flourishing. The world says the way to make things better, the way to make the world a better place, is for me to be in power or for me to get my people into power.

[10 : 39] That's Barabbas' insurrection. But the kingdom says the way to make the world a better place is for the people who have power, whether it's social power or economic power or political power, to follow Jesus' example.

Don't use your power to keep others down. Use your power to lift others up. Use your power sacrificially. Be willing to lay down your power if necessary.

Use your power to serve. Don't seek to be served. It's an upside-down view of power. That's the first difference.

Number two, the second way that these two visions of insurrection are opposite from one another is this. They have opposite ways of advancing their interests. They have opposite ways of advancing their interests.

Barabbas, as we said earlier, is willing to kill for his insurrection. The worldly view says if we want change, we have to fight for it.

[11 : 45] One way of fighting is through physical violence, but there are a lot of people who these days do combat in public discourse or online. You know, people don't actually murder each other.

They just murder one another's reputation. They demonize their opponents. They dehumanize their opponents. The crowds in Mark 15 really want an end to the subjugation that they experience under Roman rule, and they want their own land, and they want respect, and they want someone to lead them in a violent uprising.

Right? And these are all justifiable things for them to desire. But they are furious that Jesus doesn't do this for them. They're furious that Jesus isn't who they want him to be, Jesus of Nazareth.

And it's in the text. It's sort of behind, if you read between the lines, there's this question. Maybe one of the reasons they chose Barabbas is because they knew Barabbas was an insurrectionary who had already murdered.

He had already shown that he's willing to do whatever necessary. So it's very possible that the crowds are looking at Jesus Christ and looking at Jesus Barabbas, and they're saying, well, Barabbas has the kind of grit, the kind of real-world grit that we need to get the job done.

[13 : 08] If we really want to get rid of Rome, he's the kind of person that we need to lead us to accomplish that goal. But again, the kingdom of God turns things completely upside down.

On the previous night when Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, his disciples are prepared to fight and defend him. They draw their swords. One of them cuts off Malchus' ear, one of the soldiers who comes to arrest him.

And in all of the accounts where this happened, Jesus rebukes them. And Jesus says, no, put your swords away. In Matthew's account, he says this, put your sword back in its place.

For all who take the sword will perish by the sword. He's showing us that Barabbas' way of insurrection, do whatever's necessary, the path of violence, it only leads to more violence.

He says, do you think that I cannot appeal to my father and he will at once send more than 12 legions of angels? But how then should the scriptures be fulfilled that it must be so?

[14 : 16] He's saying, that road leads to death. Violence only begets violence which begets more violence. The scriptures must be fulfilled. I've come to offer another way.

Pilate practically begs Jesus to defend himself. He's like, aren't you going to say something? You know, he's like, it's almost like he's saying, I'm going to ask you one more time and you should say no.

You know, are you the king of the Jews? And Jesus is like, you say that I am. And he's like, oh, you know, he just can't. He's like, you don't get how this works, do you? He wants to let him go.

And it says that he's amazed that Jesus does nothing to defend himself. Like, it's natural that if you know that your neck is on the line, you will try to save it. Jesus doesn't.

And the question arises, why doesn't Jesus defend himself? And the answer is because the kind of insurrection that Jesus leads is not political. It's not military. It's not even a religious insurrection.

[15:18] Jesus advances his interests, the interests of the kingdom, in a way that is completely foreign to our most basic instincts.

Jesus didn't come to shed blood. Jesus came in order to allow his own blood to be shed. Right? To suffer ultimate violence, to bring an end to all violence.

When you wield the sword against someone else, that is guaranteeing that down the road there will be more and more and more of the same. But Jesus allows the sword to be turned on him.

He suffers the ultimate violence to bring an end to all violence. It's an upside down agenda. And what we see here is that the kingdom of God does not advance through military might, through political prowess.

The kingdom of God advances through people who are willing to love their enemies. The kingdom of God advances through people who are willing to suffer for the sake of the world. Through people who are willing to suffer for the sake of the people who hate them.

[16:22] The kingdom of God advances through people who give their lives away for the sake of the world. The kingdom of God advances through people who recognize that our battle is not against flesh and blood.

Our battle is against the spiritual forces that hold sway in this world. Right? And the kingdom of God advances through people who recognize that our weapons are not the weapons of the world.

Our weapons are truth and righteousness and prayer and the word of God and suffering. One of the great things that Christians are called to do is to participate in the sufferings of Christ as we seek together the redemption of the world.

To suffer for the sake of the world. To suffer for the sake of those who most disagree with us, most hate us. To absorb that as Jesus suffered for us.

Right? So when there are people we perceive to be our enemies, whether in our personal lives, among our family, friends, in the church, in our workplaces, or in the culture, our kind of cultural enemies, or in politics, our political opponents, there's always the temptation to demonize them.

[17:43] There's always the temptation to dehumanize them. There's always the temptation to reduce a three-dimensional person down to a one-dimensional cardboard cutout and project all of our worst assumptions onto them.

There's always the temptation to be.

It's important for Christians to be speaking in public conversations. I'm not saying don't engage. We need Christians engaging in the public square. We need more Christians engaging in the public, more thoughtful Christians engaging in the public square.

But when we do that, we don't belittle the people that we're arguing with. We don't oversimplify their arguments or turn them into straw men that we can demolish. We treat our opponents with dignity and respect.

We make sure that we're able to articulate the strongest arguments against us better than our opponents can do themselves. We treat them with dignity and respect.

[19:02] We treat their arguments with dignity and respect, even if they fail to do so with us. In those ways, the kingdom of God is advanced the way Christ shows us. Now, doing this almost guarantees that we will suffer more if we do these kinds of things.

But that, my friends, is the call of Christ. So that's the second difference. So they're opposite in how they view power. They're opposite in how they advance their interests.

The third difference between the insurrection of Jesus Barabbas and the insurrection of Jesus Christ is that they have completely opposite definitions of victory. The worldly definition of victory is conquest.

We need to displace those in power. We need to get into power, wash, rinse, repeat. And what happens throughout history? In the words of Albert Camus, every revolutionary ends by becoming either an oppressor or a heretic.

Most worldly insurrections start out with the best of intentions, but in time, those revolutionaries, they either lose their way, they forget the original ideals that motivated the insurrection, or they become tyrants who then need to be displaced by yet more insurrectionists.

[20:19] And this is the problem in the world. It's the source of everything that's wrong. The reason this is true, the reason that you can almost be guaranteed that today's revolutionary will become tomorrow's tyrant, is that the core problem in the world isn't political, and it isn't cultural, and it isn't social.

It's spiritual. The core problem in the world is spiritual. So it cannot be solved politically. It can't be solved culturally. It can't be solved socially. It can't be solved through education or policy. Those things are very important. But if we want to get down to the root of what's really wrong with the world, the core problem is spiritual. It's sin. It's idolatry. It's the fact that people have rejected God in order to live as we please, and so we end up worshiping anything and everything except the God who is worthy of our worship.

But God's response to all of this is not conquest. God doesn't look at the world and say, well, they have massively screwed up, and now I'm going to conquer them.

I'm going to take them over. I'm going to demolish them. God doesn't respond that way. It's not conquest. God's response is not to give us what we deserve. God's response is to give us Jesus Christ.

[21 : 37] Jesus did not come to lead another uprising. When people today try to reframe Jesus as just another social revolutionary or enlightened teacher, what they're ultimately trying to do is they're trying to fit Jesus into the same category as someone like Barabbas.

They're trying to force Jesus into the same person like Barabbas. They're trying to force Jesus into the same category of human leaders and human revolutionaries. But Jesus came to do something radically different. Jesus came to do what no one else on earth could possibly do, and we see it right here in this passage.

Here we see a preview of the real reason that Jesus came. Jesus, right, these two men out on the stage, Barabbas and Christ, Jesus who is utterly innocent, who's committed no sin, he is sent to die as a common criminal on the cross, while this murderer, this criminal, is set free.

And right here, as Barabbas walks off that platform into the crowd, a free man, right here we see the ultimate reason why Jesus came and the key to Jesus' insurrection.

The kingdom turns everything upside down. In every way, this looks like defeat. It looks as though Jesus Christ's insurrection is ended for good. He's going to the cross. But this is actually the key to Jesus' victory.

[23 : 09] Because through this death, Jesus removes everything that stands in the way of our relationship with God. It removes every excuse, every reason keeping us from being completely and utterly restored to God.

And what this does is it allows God to extend grace unconditionally to everyone. From the most noble idealist to the most heinous murderer.

And so when we see Barabbas walking off that platform, free to go, and everything in us wants to cry out, that is not fair, that is unjust, how could such a thing happen?

It begins to make sense when we recognize, who are we in the story? Well, we typically think of ourselves as the crowds, but really we're Barabbas. We're the ones, we're the ones, unexpectedly at the last moment, set free.

Even though we know where we deserve to go. And we say, well, it's not fair. Well, it's not fair.

Grace is, there's nothing fair about grace. But this is how we know that the kingdom insurrection will ultimately be victorious in the way that a worldly insurrection can never be victorious.

[24 : 22] Because the greatest victory has already been achieved on the cross. And what we believe is that because that victory has been achieved, all the rest of history is just the outworking of that victory.

So the victory has already been secured. So the, how does this apply to us? Simply this.

May we in our own hearts, in our lives, in our church, may we always make sure we are choosing the true Jesus. In all that we do.

Right, in all of our ministry, in all the way we live our lives, in all the way we engage politically or socially or culturally. May we make sure that we are choosing the true Jesus and the kingdom insurrection and not some worldly form of insurrection.

Let us resist the temptation to co-op the true Jesus into our worldly insurrection. Let us instead become a part of the kingdom insurrection. And this is the invitation of the gospel.

[25 : 24] Every tribe, tongue, and nation is invited to join in the kingdom insurrection, to come and accept the free grace of Jesus Christ. To be reconciled to God.

And then to allow our hearts to be transformed by that grace. And that begins to turn everything upside down. It transforms the way we use our power. Not to build ourselves up, but to lift others up.

Right, not to be served, but to serve. And it transforms the way we engage the world. We love our enemies. We pray for them. And we give our lives away for the love of the world. Let's pray. Our Father, we thank you for your word. And we thank you that not only do you offer us a new way, a new vision of how to make this world whole again, how to make us whole again. You not only offer that, but you've accomplished it. Lord, your finished work on the cross guarantees how the story will end. I pray that in this in-between time, you would give us a vision of what that means for us, that you would empower us to courageously take up the call of the kingdom insurrection.

[26 : 43] That you would give us a willingness to suffer, to lay down our lives, to forgive those who would be our enemies. Lord, to pray for those who would come against us.

That you would make us into the kind of community where the greatest are those who embrace lowly service. I pray that you would, through our community, in some way put on display the upside-down vision of kingdom insurrection.

And we pray that as this is changing us now, so it would continue to change the world. Lord, we pray this in your son's holy name. Amen.