

“Away with this man! Release Barabbas to us!”

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[0 : 00] I'm going to read from one of the four gospel accounts. It's interesting that in these four biographies, Matthew and Mark and Luke and John, that each of the writers devotes a significant portion of the life story of Jesus to the final week of his earthly ministry.

That week between Palm Sunday and today, Easter Sunday. When you look at the four accounts, the detail, the pace, everything seems to be focusing our attention on these momentous occasions. Luke is known as the historian of the New Testament, and he captures these key elements at the end of chapter 22 and into chapter 23. I'm going to read these verses for us now from verse 66 of Luke chapter 22.

At daybreak, the council of the elders of the people, both the chief priests and teachers of the law, met together. And Jesus was before them. If you are the Christ, they said, tell us.

Jesus answered, if I tell you, you will not believe me. And if I asked you, you would not answer. But from now on, the Son of Man must be seated at the right hand of the mighty God.

[1 : 16] They all asked, are you then the Son of God? He replied, you are right in saying I am. Then they said, why do we need any more testimony? We have heard it from his own lips.

Then the whole assembly rose and led him off to Pilate. And they began to accuse him, saying, we have found this man subverting our nation. He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar and claims to be Christ a king.

So Pilate asked Jesus, are you the king of the Jews? Yes, it is as you say, Jesus replied. Then Pilate announced to the chief priests and the crowd, I find no basis for a charge against this man.

But they insisted. He stirs up all the people all over Judea by his teaching. He started in Galilee and has come all the way here. On hearing this, Pilate asked if the man was a Galilean.

When he learned Jesus was under Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him to Herod, who was also in Jerusalem at that time. When Herod saw Jesus, he was greatly pleased, because for a long time he had been wanting to see him.

[2 : 28] From what he had heard about him, he hoped to see him perform some miracle. He plied him with many questions, but Jesus gave him no answer.

The chief priests and the teachers of the law were standing there vehemently accusing him. Then Herod and his soldiers ridiculed and mocked him. Dressing him in an elegant robe, they sent him back to Pilate.

That day, Herod and Pilate became friends. Before this, they had been enemies. Pilate called together the chief priests, the rulers, and the people, and said to them, You brought me this man as one who is inciting the people to rebellion.

I have examined him in your presence and have found no basis for your charges against him. Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us. As you can see, he has done nothing to deserve death.

Therefore, I will punish him and then release him. With one voice, they cried out, Away with this man! Release Barabbas to us! Barabbas had been thrown into prison for an insurrection in the city and for murder.

[3 : 38] Wanting to release Jesus, Pilate appealed to them again. But they kept shouting, Crucify him! Crucify him! For the third time, he spoke to them. Why?

What crime has this man committed? I found in him no grounds for the death penalty. Therefore, I will have him punished and then release him. But with loud shouts, they insistently demanded that he be crucified.

And their shouts prevailed. So Pilate decided to grant their demand. He released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, the one they asked for, and surrendered Jesus

to their will.

The events that late on Thursday into Friday were quite crowded. In a short amount of time, there were no less than four trials. Two were religious trials in front of the high priest, and two were civil or criminal trials in front of Pilate and then Herod.

You see, time was of the essence. This was a special day. It was a Friday. The Sabbath began at sunset. It was preparation day for Passover. So if there was to be an execution, it had to be completed before sunset.

[5 : 00] And there were three men scheduled for execution on that day. We don't know much about the other two. We know they were described as robbers. The third we have named here, Barabbas.

He was an insurrectionist. He was convicted of murder. And these three, the two robbers and Barabbas, were scheduled for execution that day. It's interesting.

When you look at eyewitness testimony, no two people ever see the same thing in exactly the same way. In fact, it's one sure sign that there is a lack of honesty.

If two people tell the same story in the same words, you know that they have somehow collaborated to get their story straight. I'll give you an example. 1963, the 22nd of November.

In 11 seconds, President John Kennedy was shot and killed on the streets of Dallas. When the report from that event was published, it took 26 volumes of the Warren Commission to detail what occurred before, during, and after those 11 seconds.

[6 : 14] And no two people saw those events exactly the same way. But people tend to remember the key elements of an event. They remember that on that November day, it was a beautiful sunny day.

It was warm. That the president and his wife were traveling in an open-top car. They looked young. They looked happy. And then everything changed in a moment.

Or rather, everything changed in 11 seconds. And the motorcade that was slowly making its way through the streets of Dallas sped quickly to the hospital, but it was too late. When we look at the gospel accounts of these last hours of the life of Jesus, we find that each of the authors, Matthew and Mark and Luke and John, capture something different, something distinct.

But when they capture something similar, it draws our attention to that fact. And I'd like to speak for a moment this evening on this character called Barabbas.

Because strangely, he appears in all four accounts by name. It's a very rare occurrence where an incidental character gets such coverage.

[7 : 30] Where he is included and highlighted by Matthew and by Mark, Luke here, and then John in his gospel account. As a rule, if Matthew, Mark, or Luke capture something, John often doesn't, or vice versa.

But there must be something illustrative about this person called Barabbas. And I'd like to consider a few things. I'd like to consider first that Barabbas tells us something about ourselves.

Something about human beings, human nature. You see, on this strange occasion, the crowd was worked up. They were excited. They were emotional.

There was a lot happening in this short amount of time. Pilate, the governor, he's in a very unenviable situation.

He knows that this particular prisoner called Jesus is innocent. He has no doubt about that. Three times he says so. His desire is to release the innocent man.

[8 : 34] He has the authority. He has the power. He has the knowledge. And yet he doesn't have the will to do the right thing. How often do we find ourselves in that situation?

We know right. We know good. We know what's true. And we find it difficult to do the right thing. Difficult to say the honest thing. Difficult to be, to know, and to do what we deep down know is right. So there's one last roll of the dice. You see, there was a custom. On a big day like this day, the governor often released a prisoner to satisfy the crowd.

You see, the last thing that the Romans wanted was a riot. That's why someone like Barabbas was so dangerous, because he was an insurrectionist. He was convicted of stirring people up and of actually being involved in murder.

So this idea that the governor could release a popular prisoner really appealed to Pilate. This was the last chance that he had to get rid of Jesus.

[9 : 39] He had tried to send him to Herod, but Herod didn't want anything to do with him. He had the authority to free him, but he was worried about the crowd. So he presented Jesus to the crowd,

and the crowd with one voice said, Away with this man.

Release Barabbas to us. It's remarkable that on this occasion, they don't even see Jesus. They don't even give Jesus his name. They said, Away with this man.

But they named Barabbas. Give us Barabbas. It's as if Barabbas is a popular hero. Barabbas was a dangerous man. This morning, I was preaching in Edinburgh prison.

We had Easter services. And there's 900 people in Edinburgh prison, give or take. Most of the people there are men and women who have kind of lost their way in life.

But there are some who are genuinely dangerous. Some who are genuinely unpredictable. And some, you know, if they moved in next door, you'd be very tempted to move out.

[10 : 45] Because you would say, this is not the person I want as a neighbor. This is not a person that I want in my neighborhood. Barabbas was exactly that kind of person. He was dangerous.

He was a threat to others. He was a threat to society, but he was also a threat to people. And the people say, give us Barabbas.

Away with this man. Give us Barabbas. Now, you see, the Bible tells us something interesting about us as people. The good news is that we are made in God's image.

We are made to know God. We are made to worship God. We are made to serve God. We're made to love him and to love one another. And deep down, we know that God exists. And deep down, we kind of know right from wrong.

That's the good news. But the bad news is that we have fallen. There's something wrong with our minds. There's something wrong with our hearts. There's something wrong with us at the very center.

[11 : 41] Where we do the wrong things. We know right and we do wrong. Or we know the right and we avoid the right. The kind words, the gentle actions, the compassion, etc.

So Barabbas kind of shows us something about humanity. Not everybody is like him. But in a sense, everyone is like him. Because we failed.

We've missed the mark. We are kind of guilty as charged. But Barabbas also tells us something about Jesus. Because sometimes when you're trying to understand something or someone, it's kind of good to understand an opposite.

And you know, sometimes when you're learning a language, you often learn opposites. I used to teach English. And in order to improve vocabulary, you would often look at adjectives. Tall and short and heavy and thin.

Good and bad. Well, if Barabbas is illustrative of bad, Jesus illustrates good. Jesus helped people. Jesus healed the sick.

[12 : 45] Jesus gave sight to the blind. Jesus restored hearing to the deaf. Jesus enabled the mute to speak. The people who encountered Jesus were better off for that encounter.

The people that encountered Barabbas were worse off for that encounter. You see, there's kind of two ways here. In the late 1960s, Frank Sinatra was about to retire as a singer.

He felt that nobody was interested in his music, that his career had come to an end. But then the story goes that Paul Anker wrote a song for him that became his signature tune. And his career experienced a comeback.

That tune, of course, was my way. And in a sense, that tune, written 19 and a half centuries after the time of Barabbas, kind of captures this man who was appearing before us.

Barabbas did things his way. What he wanted to do, he did. Jesus, on the other hand, did things God's way. He did things the right way.

[13 : 52] He did things that were kind and compassionate, caring and thoughtful. Whereas it seems, all that we know about Barabbas is what he wanted to do, he did, regardless of the consequences.

So we have the way of Jesus, that which is good and right and pure. We have the way of Barabbas, which is dangerous and hostile and deadly.

But when it came down to it, the people said, we prefer Barabbas. We kind of like Barabbas to be released. And Pilate was at a loss. What do you want me to do with Jesus?

What shall I do with Jesus? And the answer was crucify, crucify. He asked the crowd, and he enabled the crowd to make the decision that was his to make.

So he found himself in this unenviable position of looking for the crowd to answer Jesus. When they answered Barabbas, he was completely flummoxed.

[14:52] So Pilate decided to grant their demand. He knew what was right, and he did what was wrong. This was the verdict that day. You see, the charge against Jesus, the charges against Jesus were twofold.

For the religious people, he claimed to be God. And that, of course, must be blasphemous. Because nobody can be God, can they, and still be a human being. The second charge, and this was the one that concerned Pilate, was the charge of treason, because Jesus claimed to be a king. And, of course, there's only one king, and that king was called Caesar. And Pilate was Caesar's man. So the two charges were both capital charges. And, yes, there were still now three prisoners on death row.

But instead of Barabbas and two robbers, it was Jesus and two robbers. And they were taken to the cross. There were three crosses that were prepared, and three crosses that were used on that day. And these three men were crucified. And if you're familiar with the account, you'll know that something happened in that trio. I'll just read a few verses ahead in Luke's Gospel.

[15:59] Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. When they came to a place called the Skull, there they crucified him along with the criminals, one on his right, the other on his left.

Jesus said, Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing. And they divided up his clothes by casting lots. The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him.

They said, He saved others. Let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, the chosen one. The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar and said, If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.

There was a written notice above him which read, This is the king of the Jews. One of the criminals, Anonymous, we don't know his name, who hung there hurled insults at him.

Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us. But the other criminal rebuked him. Don't you fear God, he said, since you are under the same sentence. We are punished justly.

[17:01] For we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong. The second man to say that on that day, isn't it? It was Pilate who first said, This man has done nothing that's worthy of the death penalty.

I find no basis for a charge against him. But somehow on that last moment, this crucified criminal next to Jesus has this insight that he actually is.

Without sin. He's without guilt. He has done nothing wrong. And we, he said to his criminal pal, we are getting what our deeds deserve.

Then he said, Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. Jesus answered him, I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.

So on the cross, one criminal on one side, one criminal on another, both at one point were ridiculing Jesus, mocking Jesus.

[18:02] One then had a change of heart, a change of mind. Turn to Jesus. Remember me when you come into your kingdom today, says Jesus. You will be with me in paradise.

I want to suggest that Barabbas tells us one other significant lesson. He tells us something about humanity. He tells us something about Jesus by contrast. And he tells us something about the gospel itself.

You see, the message of Jesus is counter-cultural. It's counter-intuitive. You would never figure it out. Somehow that thief on the cross figured it out.

Somehow he knew that this man, Jesus, had the key to the kingdom. Had the key to eternal life. Had the key to paradise. And in that last moment, he turned to Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.

Somehow he knew that the sign above the cross, this is the king of the Jews, was actually true. That this king was being crucified. This king was paying a price.

[19:07] But what about Barabbas? You see, the guilty man goes free. And the innocent man gets punished. That's the strange, unexpected message of Jesus.

Jesus, the good, the right, the pure, the perfect. He is crucified. In the place, literally, of Barabbas. The guilty man.

Guilty of murder. Guilty of insurrection. Guilty of robbery. The guilty man is set free. Pilate released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, the one they asked for, and surrendered Jesus to their will.

There was a preacher in the United States a generation or two ago. He was preaching in Philadelphia. His name was Donald Gray Barnhouse. And he used Barabbas as an illustration. He said, Barabbas was the only man in the world who could say that Jesus Christ took his physical place. There was a substitution. One in the place of the other.

[20 : 11] There was a third cross on that day, but that third cross was prepared for Barabbas. He was the famous criminal. He was the famous execution of the day. But the cross that was meant for Barabbas was used for Jesus.

So Barnhouse said, Jesus Christ took the physical place of Barabbas, but I can say that Jesus Christ took my spiritual place. For it was I who deserved to die.

It was I who deserved that the wrath of God should be poured on me. I deserved the eternal punishment of the lake of fire. He was delivered up for my offenses. He was handed over to judgment because of my sins.

Christ was my substitute. He was satisfying the debt of divine justice and holiness. That is why I say that Christianity can be expressed in the three phrases, I deserved hell.

Jesus took my hell. There is now nothing left for me, but his heaven. So the story of Barabbas may have been included because it illustrates so perfectly the substitution, the good in the place of the bad, the bad in the place of the good.

[21 : 19] Jesus should have been set free. He was innocent, but he was punished. Barabbas should have been punished, but he was set free. I was saying earlier that Friday was a busy morning.

A lot was happening on Friday, but by Sunday it was quite quiet. None of the famous people were present in the account that Luke gives. Herod wasn't there.

Pilate wasn't there. Chief priest wasn't there. None of the famous were there. But at the very beginning of Luke 24, we read this. On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb.

These were the women that cared for Jesus. These were the women that were there at the crucifixion. These were the women that were there when Jesus was buried. And these were the women that wanted to show this last, final expression of love and affection.

And they went to the tomb very early in the morning. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb. But when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus.

[22 : 28] While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. In their fright, the women bowed down with their faces to the ground.

But the men said to them, Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here. He is risen. Remember how he told you while he was still with you in Galilee.

The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, be crucified, and on the third day be raised again. Then they remembered his words.

So somehow Barabbas fit into this big picture, fit into this complex tapestry. The guilty man set free, so the innocent man was punished. But on that Sunday morning, the first witnesses of the resurrection were these women.

They went to the tomb to anoint the dead body of Jesus, but they found that the tomb was empty. Luke is quite a remarkable historian because he captures in bookend the most unlikely of witnesses.

[23 : 34] At Christmas time, we often have a nativity and readings, and inevitably, the children will play the part of the shepherds. There'll be the sheep and the shepherds who are watching their flock at night.

And they were the first witnesses in Luke, the first outside witnesses of the birth of Jesus, the arrival of Jesus. At the very end of the story, we see that these women who went to the tomb, they were the first witnesses of the empty tomb, of the resurrection.

Quite remarkable. In the ancient world, shepherds were not allowed to give testimony. They were considered to be unreliable. So their testimony would not hold up in court.

In the ancient world, in order to give testimony in court, you had to be a man. So the women's testimony here would not be allowed in court. And isn't it interesting how God so often takes the ordinary, puts the ordinary people at the center of the story to have the extraordinary testimony, the extraordinary testimony of the birth of Jesus, the extraordinary testimony of the empty tomb.

The famous people aren't there. The ordinary people are there. And maybe you and I are in that category of the ordinary. Ordinary people, with ordinary problems, with ordinary hopes, with ordinary fears.

[24 : 57] But when we encounter Jesus Christ, when we encounter his birth, when we encounter his life, when we encounter his death, when we encounter his resurrection, we have had an extraordinary experience.

But the question is, how do you respond to such an experience? These women understood what had happened. They remembered what he said.

And were told that when they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the eleven and to all the others. But they did not believe the women because their words seemed to them like nonsense.

It didn't make sense. You see, ancient people are not stupid people. In the ancient world, dead people had a tendency to stay dead, as they do now. Two thousand years have passed and that tendency continues.

But the Bible is unashamed in its presentation that on that first day of the week, the tomb was empty, the stone had been rolled away, there were messengers in the tomb to tell the women that you're looking for the living among the dead.

[26 : 02] He is not here. He is risen. And just as the four gospel writers tell us that Barabbas was part of the Friday story, not one of them mentions Barabbas again, which I think is quite curious.

We're left with a big question mark. What happened next? What happened to Barabbas? He was set free. Did he go back to his life of violence, of insurrection, of murder, of robbery?

Was his life changed? We don't know. Much of the Christian life is kind of like that. We serve, we worship, we speak, we share.

For me, I preach, you know, this morning, I preached to a lot of different people. I have no idea where they stand spiritually. I have no idea what they believe and how they respond.

God does. All we are called to do is to be faithful, to share this good news. Barabbas had a personal encounter with Jesus on Good Friday.

[27 : 07] He encountered Jesus as a substitute, an unlikely substitute, and he was set free. But I'll tell you something that's true about Barabbas. He doesn't appear in the Bible again, but he will meet Jesus, just like each one of us will meet Jesus.

But there's only two ways in which we will meet him. We will meet Jesus either as Savior or as Judge. Barabbas had a unique experience with Jesus on the Friday, but we will have a common experience with Jesus on that day.

We aren't going to live forever. There is an end, and there is a meeting that's scheduled between us and Jesus. Jesus who died, Jesus who was buried, Jesus who was raised.

My prayer and my encouragement is to trust in him now, to receive him as Savior now, because then we will never fear the judgment that will be coming.

We will have a Savior who rescues us from death. We will experience that same substitution that Barabbas experienced spiritually. He experienced it literally.

[28 : 18] We can experience it spiritually. The guilty are set free because the innocent man was punished. This character of Barabbas fades into the annals of history.

But on that Friday morning, there he was, scheduled for execution, and there he was set free. Why? Because the innocent man was handed over to be punished.

Jesus Christ died, but on the third day he was raised. We have hope, we have help, we have comfort, we have joy, we have peace that is found nowhere else than in Jesus Christ.

So we trust him. We receive him, we believe in him, and we follow him along the road. We don't take the way of Barabbas. We don't say it's my way. We say actually from this point forward, it's Jesus' way.

I'm going to follow the one who died. I'm going to follow the one who was buried. I'm going to follow the one who was raised to life. I'm going to put God first. I'm going to put others second.

[29 : 19] And I'm going to put myself third. When you encounter Jesus and follow him along the road, he promises that he will take you from where you are to where he is.

So your life now is a movement forward and a movement upward because of who he is and because of what he has done. Let us pray. Father, we thank you for your word, your truth, your gospel.

We thank you for the Lord Jesus who lived and who died, but who rose again from the dead. We thank you for this character called Barabbas. We know very little about him. We ask, Lord, that we would learn that in Barabbas we see a perfect illustration of the gospel.

We are guilty as charged. Jesus is innocent of all charge. Jesus was punished. The guilty can be set free. Help us to place our trust in the one who died, the one who was buried, and the one who rose again from the dead.

Help us receive the fruit of his victory. Victory over sin, victory over evil, victory over death. So that we need not fear evil. We need not fear the grave.

[30 : 27] We need not fear death. Because we have a strong and a triumphant Savior who will be with us from now until forever. And these are our prayers in the name of Jesus.

Amen. Well, we're now going to sing our final psalm, which is from Psalm 87. Psalm 87, and we'll join our voices to sing these words to God's praise.

Amen. Amen. Amen.