

Decision Day

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Date: 11 October 2026

Preacher: Mr Ian Macrae

[0:00] Mark chapter 15 and verse 15. So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released for them Barabbas.

! If you follow the news at all, you'll be familiar with the idea of prisoner swaps, where two sides come together and they exchange prisoners that they've been holding.

Sometimes they are one for one, at other times one prisoner is exchanged for many. They don't always seem fair or balanced, but those involved think the exchange is worth making.

And we're going to go back 2,000 years to witness the most famous, the most important and the most unequal prisoner swap in history.

It takes place on a day of a momentous decision in Jerusalem. And it's a decision that still confronts you and me today. We're going to think about this decision, this decision day from the perspectives of three main characters mentioned in the first few words of verse 15.

[1:20] The crowd, Pilate and Barabbas. And I hope we'll see that everything they do is ultimately connected to Jesus, who is the central character in the narrative and who is the subject of the decision being made.

So first of all, we've got the crowd. Here we are at the Passover in Jerusalem, where we meet this crowd of Jews who are in the city for the feast.

And they're here when Jesus is on trial before Pilate, charged with treason against the Roman emperor. Now notice a couple of things about the crowd.

Firstly, different words are used to describe them in our English Bibles. Depending on what version you read, you'll find different words. But apparently it's only one Greek word.

And it's not a word that means a crowd, like a peaceful crowd. We might say there's a crowd in here today. It's a crowd, it's a word that means a mob or a rabble.

[2:23] There's a quality, a negative quality to the word describing this crowd. There's something menacing. There's something dangerous, threatening, dark about this crowd.

It mirrors the language from Psalm 22, verse 16, which we read, Dogs encompass me. A company of evildoers encircles me. Save me from the mouth of the lion, from the horns of the wild oxen.

Then notice what they say, and in particular, how they say it. They know that there's a tradition where the Romans release a Jewish prisoner at Passover, so they're going to make sure the Roman decision makers are crystal clear about what they want.

They want this man, Barabbas, to be the prisoner who is freed, and they want Jesus to be put to death. In verse 8, we read that they're getting their message across by crying aloud.

They're shouting and yelling at the top of their voices. Then in verses 13 and 14, we're told that they're shouting and crying out. And again, apparently it's the same Greek word used in each verse, and it's not just shouting, it's a word that means screaming, screeching.

[3:42] This isn't chanting or singing like you might hear at a football match. This is a crowd that is almost out of control, furious, desperate to get its own way.

You might remember, for those of you who have read it, and if you haven't, I really would encourage you to do so, the part in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, where C.S. Lewis describes the scene leading up to Aslan's death, when the witch has gathered her followers around.

If you don't know the story, Aslan is a lion who represents Jesus, the witch represents the devil. And in this scene in the book, there's anger and there's hatred, and there's even a bit of celebration in the air.

And this is how C.S. Lewis puts it. A great crowd of people were standing all round the stone table, and though the moon was shining, many of them carried torches, which burned with evil-looking red flames and black smoke.

But such people, ogres with monstrous teeth, and wolves and bull-headed men, spirits of evil trees and poisonous plants, and other creatures whom I won't describe.

[4:54] Now, Lewis was writing a story for children. And for children, the picture he paints is a horrible one. But it's a reflection of the hearts and minds of the people forming this mob, forming this crowd here in Jerusalem, as they're baying for the blood of Jesus.

And the crowd is being encouraged by the chief priests. These religious leaders, they're not passive. They're not trying to keep the peace. They're stirring the mob up.

And the crowd does exactly what the chief priests want them to do. Pilate comes out. He asks them, What evil Jesus has done? Why do you want him punished?

But this just makes the mob angrier. They shouted, All the more, Crucify him. In Matthew's account of this incident, he tells us that a riot was starting.

Friends, this is a scene of violence, of hatred, of complete and utter chaos. Notice as well how they keep going until they get their way.

[6:08] In verse 13, They cried out again. Now we read this, and we probably picture an almost polite scene, where the crowd shouts to say what they want, and Pilate, probably up on his balcony, coming out from his palace, has his say.

The crowd's gone quiet. And then the crowd says something again, and then they go quiet, and they let Pilate speak. But the Greek, talking about the Greek, I don't know Greek, but reading about those who do, the Greek puts a different light on it.

Because the word used here to say, they cried out again, isn't just they cried out for a second time. It's saying about something that's going on, and on, and on, and on, and on.

It's not just once or twice that they're shouting, crucify him, but time and again, keeping going for as long as it takes, until they get their own way.

Think about that. It's appalling enough, isn't it, to say these words once, about the Son of God, crucify him.

[7:18] How much more horrendous, friends, to keep repeating them over and over and over again, until they get what they want. This crowd hates the Romans.

They hate Jesus. They display hatred towards God who delivered their forefathers from Egypt, the God who gave them the Passover. They're in Jerusalem to celebrate.

It's a frightening, dark, barbaric, evil scene in Jerusalem 2,000 years ago. But I want you to imagine, just now, imagine that you could hear the sound of a crowd screaming, shouting, chanting, somewhere outside the church, somewhere in the town.

Imagine you went out, and you followed the sound, and you turn onto Cromwell Street, and you come across an angry, hate-filled crowd of men, women, and children, screaming, crucify him, crucify him, about the Lord Jesus.

You'd see the crowd, and you'd hear their shouts, and you'd feel the animosity, and the hatred, and you'd stop in your tracks, and you'd want nothing to do with them, and you'd turn and run away as fast as you could.

[8:34] Or would you join them? Would you join that crowd today?

Would you join them in their shouting, and screaming, and hatred? Would you add your voice to the voices shouting, crucify him? Well, the crowd in Jerusalem has made their decision, and they're not backing down.

What about you? Well, you may never say, crucify him with your mouth, but friend, if you're rejecting Jesus, you're saying that you don't care about him.

You're saying that he means nothing to you. You're saying that you have no need of him. You're saying that it's no odds to you whether he lives or dies. Is that you today? I'm sure some of you will have seen the film Gladiator.

It came out quite a while ago now. There's a scene in that film that it reminds me of, or at least in my mind's eye, it's kind of how I picture this scene in Jerusalem.

[9:43] And in the scene of the movie, there's thousands of spectators crammed into an arena to see gladiators fighting against warriors they're paying for blood. They're looking for entertainment.

They've paid to go there and be entertained. It's the same sort of crowd, isn't it? And in this scene, the gladiator, the hero of the movie, is up against five men. And of course, the idea is that he puts up a valiant fight and eventually he loses.

Either he's badly injured or he's killed. But this gladiator is no ordinary gladiator. He's a skilled soldier. And within about 20 seconds, he's killed these five men who are facing him. And when he stops, the crowd, which was in a frenzy moment before, is absolutely silent. And the gladiator looks around and says, are you not entertained?

This is what you came for. You came for violence. You came for blood. You came for death. And now you're quiet. You got what you came for. They'd come for entertainment, friends, but they're shocked by what they actually see.

[10:49] They came expecting to see death and violence and bloodshed, but they wanted to see it on their terms and on their terms only. And maybe when they don't see it on their terms, maybe they're appalled.

Maybe they realize that what they call entertainment is actually a matter of life or death. Well, this mob in Jerusalem, they want to be entertained. That's part of what a crucifixion is to them. I wonder how many of them would look back at this so-called entertainment in days and weeks and months and years to come and be absolutely appalled that this is what they were calling for. Pilate asked the crowd what he should do with Jesus. Rightly or wrongly, he gave them a decision to make. The crowd looked to those who should know best, the religious leaders, for a steer, and they steered them even deeper into an anti-Jesus attitude.

Those in the crowd that day made their decision about what should be done with Jesus. Well, you're not part of a crowd being for blood today. But friends, you still have the same decision to make.

[12:02] What will you do with the man they call the King of the Jews? Then we come to Pilate.

Pilate was a prefect or a governor representing the Roman emperor in Judea for 10 years. Historians who lived during or just after Pilate's rule tell us that he was a harsh, cruel, inflexible, and corrupt ruler.

He was quick to use violence to suppress unrest. He ignored the religious sensibilities of the Jews and he cared very little about offending them. He was confident in his position as the emperor's man in Judea, knowing that he was the authority in the land with hundreds of soldiers at his disposal.

other than the emperor himself, Pilate feared nobody. But that's not the picture we have of Pilate here, is it?

He doesn't seem strong or confident or powerful in this account. Why not? What's different? Well, the difference is that on this day, whether Pilate ever really understood this or not, he isn't dealing with an ordinary prisoner or even with an ordinary man but he's dealing with the son of God.

[13:27] There's something about this man that is unique. There's something about him that makes Pilate hesitate. There's something going on here that makes Pilate for all his corruption, for all his cruelty, understand that this man is completely innocent of all the charges brought against him and he should be set free.

Indeed, Pilate tries to free Jesus more than once. He's got the measure of the Jews. Verse 10, he perceived that it was out of envy that the chief priests had delivered him up.

He tells the crowd three different times that Jesus is innocent. In Luke's account of this, he says, I find no guilt in this man.

After examining him before you, behold, I did not find this man guilty of any of your charges against him. Neither did Herod, for he sent him back to us. Look, nothing deserving death has been done by him.

The German theologian F.W. Krumacher, he picks up on something very interesting connected to Pilate's public declaration that Jesus is innocent.

[14:38] This is what he says. He says, however strange it may sound, Pilate becomes our advocate. He legally absolves Jesus from all criminality and in him his followers also.

Not only is Jesus innocent in God's sight, he's innocent according to the law of the land and Pilate makes that crystal clear. He wants to release Jesus and I think he believes that when he gives the crowd the choice of Jesus or this other infamous criminal, that they'll choose Jesus.

But the crowd has an ace up its sleeve. In John 19 we see, we read an implied threat, a threat that the crowd will get word to Caesar that Pilate has allowed treason against the emperor to go unpunished.

Oh, Pilate can't have that. He can't make an enemy of the emperor. So, as we see, he tries, in Luke particular, Luke 23, he tries to reach a compromise with the Jews.

He offers to punish Jesus and then release him, even though he hasn't done anything wrong. And even this little detail, which we only find, I think, in Luke, provides an incredible insight into Pilate and into the crowd.

[15 : 54] Here's this governor with all the authority of Rome, a man he knows to be innocent in his court, but he's so desperate to satisfy the mob that he doesn't have the courage to set him free.

He's come up with this great plan, though. And that's going to, it's a plan that's going to ease his conscience and surely satisfy the Jews. He's going to punish Jesus.

Now, when we read that, it probably doesn't sound like a big deal, but commentators believe that the punishment Pilate is proposing is scourging a violent, agonizing, brutal punishment that in and of itself often led to death.

It's not a slap on the wrist Pilate's offering as a compromise. It's what the Romans meted out to a convicted criminal just before he was crucified.

And still, despite being offered the next best thing to Jesus as being crucified, the crowd says, that's not enough. You've got to go even further.

[16 : 59] And at the end of the day, it's more important to Pilate to keep the mob happy than it is to do the right thing. William Hendrickson puts it like this. Pilate tried again and again to bypass Jesus.

He discovered that this was entirely impossible. He was forced to take a stand, and he took the wrong stand. Pilate could have freed Jesus.

He had an excuse to do so because of the tradition of releasing a prisoner at the Passover. He had the law on his side because every court on the land had found Jesus innocent.

It should have been easy for him. But nobody can choose to ignore Jesus. Nobody can bypass Jesus in life. Nobody can opt out of taking a stand about Jesus.

What's your stand today? Are you for him or against him? We've got the crowd, we've got Pilate, and then thirdly, we've got Barabbas.

[18 : 16] Why is the mob shouting for Barabbas? He's a murderer, he's a troublemaker, he's a thief. If he was alive today, he'd be known as a terrorist.

So why are the Jews shouting for him in particular to be released? Well, we know that he's guilty of committing crimes, and according to the Roman law, the law of the time, he deserves to be put to death for those crimes.

I think the reason the Jews want him in particular to be released is in verse 7, where it says, Barabbas is among the rebels in prison who had committed murder in the insurrection.

The insurrection is rebelling against the rulers. Why do they want him? What's going on here? A lot of commentators believe that Barabbas wasn't just involved in supporting the rebellion, the uprising, the insurrection against the Roman rulers, that he was one of the ones who started it.

And because of this, he was famous amongst the Jews. He was seen as a sort of freedom fighter, a William Wallace, Braveheart sort of character. In the eyes of the mob, Barabbas deserves to go free because he's been fighting to free the Jews from the tyranny of the Romans.

[19 : 37] Well, isn't it ironic, though, friends, that they would prefer Barabbas, who was trying to free them from the Romans, to Jesus, who was offering freedom from sin and God's judgment.

I wonder if you've ever thought about Barabbas' name. The word, the first part, Bar, means son. Abbas means father.

His name means son of father. father. So here we are, we've got two men accused of treason against Rome, one guilty, the other innocent. They're both Jews, they're both fighting against an enemy, they're both fighting for the sake of others.

The mob wants one, hates the other, and they have effectively the same name. Here is son of our father on one hand, and the son of the heavenly father on the other.

Even Barabbas' name should be a reminder to the crowd here in Jerusalem of what Jesus has said about the relationship he has with God the father. They want to welcome the murderous son of our father into their midst, and they want to crucify the perfect son of the father.

[20 : 56] Barabbas and Jesus are accused of the same crime, they appear before the same judge. Barabbas' name is a reminder of Jesus' divinity. Barabbas is seen as a deliverer by the Jews, whilst Jesus, the true deliverer, is rejected by the Jews.

There are so many parallels between them. I wonder, was Barabbas saved? Did he become a Christian?

You might think that's a senseless question, but Jesus takes the place of sinners, and he took Barabbas' place, didn't he? Crumacker again, he says, Barabbas and Jesus changed places. The murderer's curse, disgrace, and agony are transferred to the righteous Jesus, while the liberty, innocence, safety, and well-being of the Lord become the lot of the murderer.

He took Barabbas' place literally. Barabbas was guilty, and according to the law, his punishment should have been death. Pilate freed him, and when Pilate freed him, all the charges that were made against him disappeared, never to be brought against him again.

[22 : 11] He is completely free in the eyes of the law. Nobody can accuse him of these crimes again. Who's that like? Who's that like? Isn't the same thing true of you if you're a Christian?

Jesus has taken your place, the judge has set you free, and nobody can accuse you again. The law of God can't condemn you because God himself has set you free.

Friends, isn't it incredible that the innocent would suffer and die instead of and for the sake of the guilty, for you and I? Someone talking about this incident said, I am Barabbas, and there's a sense in which that's true for everyone, because like him, you and I are, as a result of our sinful natures, rebels.

We're guilty of breaking God's law. And Barabbas is a metaphor for every Christian, because just as Jesus took Barabbas' place and suffered Barabbas' penalty, he does the same thing for you and for me.

Friends, it's important that you see yourself in what is taking place here in Jerusalem 2,000 years ago, just as relevant, just as fresh, just as important today as it was, as it took place.

[23 : 34] We'll try to picture Barabbas sitting in his prison cell in the darkness beneath Pilate's palace. He can hear the noise of a mob, he can hear shouting and chanting and screaming, he can't hear what they're saying, but he knows that something is happening, something big is going on.

He knows that he's been sentenced to death, he knows that this is the time where there's going to be at least one crucifixion, he can feel the tension, he can feel the hatred that's surrounding Pilate's palace, he can feel the malice in the air, and he hears a door opening up the corridor, and he hears guards coming along the corridor, their feet are stamping, their keys and their arm are jangling, he breaks out into a sweat, his mouth goes dry, are they coming for me?

Are these the last moments of my life before I get nailed to a tree? Where are they headed? Where are they going to stop? And they stop outside his cell, and they open his door, and Barabbas thinks, that's it, no hope, and the guard says, get up Barabbas, on you go, you're free.

You could believe it, he's gone from death to life, unexpectedly, in the blink of an eye. What a moment that is for Barabbas.

What a moment that is for every Christian, God's love. You you are free from the guilt of sin. Well, of course, we don't know if Barabbas was saved or not, but he is an example of anyone who has believed in Jesus.

[25 : 30] Every one of us is guilty of rebelling against God. we have by our sins killed the Son of God, guilty of murder like he was. We've robbed God of time and abilities and honor and praise and glory, a robber like he was.

But friends, because Jesus took your place and mine, we are set free and will be free for eternity. What would Barabbas have thought of this man, Jesus, for the rest of his life?

I wonder how often he thought of the man who died instead of him. I wonder if when he left his cell, he followed the crowd to Calvary to witness the death of the man who was on his cross.

I wonder if he noticed that the two criminals on either side of Jesus were robbers. In John's account, he adds this detail. He says, now Barabbas was a robber.

I wonder if the plan was to have three robbers crucified. that day. I wonder if Barabbas looked at that middle cross and said, that should be me. Well, as we said at the outset, Jesus is at the center of everything that happens here.

[26 : 47] And it's all in God's plan to save people. In God's plan, Pilate is the governor of Judea. In God's plan, Barabbas is in prison at this exact moment.

In God's plan, Jesus is willing to take his people's sins and pay the penalty for them. The characters here come face to face with Jesus and with what he has done, and they have to make a decision for

themselves.

You Jews and chief priests, do you want Jesus? Do you want him back, the one who's completely innocent? innocent, or would you prefer the terrorist, the murderer? Who's more important to you? Pilate, you're a ruler with all the power and authority of Rome behind you. You've got hundreds of soldiers at your back and call. You've got no reason to be afraid of these Jews. You and Herod have grilled Jesus and examined the case against him, and you've both found him to be innocent. Even your wife has sent word. She's certain of his innocence too. She doesn't want you to be responsible for the death of this man. What are you going to do, Pilate? Barabbas, what a story you've got to tell.

[28:03] You're a criminal. You're on the way to the cross with no hope of escape, and now you're free. Free and innocent. What do you think of the man who took your place?

Will you thank him? Will you give yourself to him? Will you go to him for spiritual freedom as well for salvation? Barabbas, what will you do with Jesus?

What about you today? Are you in the mob shouting crucify him? Are you hiding behind Pilate thinking like he did that it's more important to do what will make the crowd happy than what God wants?

Are you looking for compromise? Are you trying to bargain your way into heaven? I am Barabbas. You are Barabbas.

Friend, your situation is just as dire as his was if you don't have Jesus in your life. You can benefit from this prisoner swap too, just as much as Barabbas, even more than Barabbas if he didn't come to know Christ as his saviour.

[29:22] This isn't just a short-term fix. It's an eternal fix. If you ask him to forgive your sins and you put your trust in him. So how will you respond to Jesus today?

What's your decision? Are you going to accept him? Or are you going to turn your back on him, walk away, and say you just don't care?

Let's pray. Lord, we ask that you would speak to us through the passage we've been thinking about, and that you would help us if we've never realised before to realise the seriousness of a life as a sinner, who has not been saved.

To realise the seriousness of the offer of salvation that was achieved by that incredible prisoner swap in Jerusalem 2,000 odd years ago. Give thanks that in your grace it's not just Barabbas who benefited, but that you offer the benefits of that to each and every one of us.

If we come to you seeking forgiveness, for our sins, and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, help us all to do so. In his name and for his sake.

[30:48] Amen. Amen. The final singing is in Psalm 118.

It's a Scottish Psalter version, so you'll find this on page 3. 9-9 of the psalm book. Psalm 118, I'm going to sing from verse 20 to 26.

The tune is Coalsill. this is the gate of God by it the just shall enter in. Thee will I praise for thou may hurtst and hast my safety been. That stone is made head cornerstone which builders did despise. This is the doing of the Lord and wondrous in our eyes. This is the day God made and it will joy triumphantly. Save now, I pray thee, Lord, I pray, send now prosperity.

Blessed is he in God's great name. that cometh us to save, we from the house which to the Lord pertains, you blessed have. These verses of Psalm 118 from verse 20 to 26 to God's praise.

[32:00] This is the gate of God. This is the gate of God by it the church shall enter.

The will I praise for love me hers and hath my safety been that stone is made!

The corner stone which build her dead He is by this is the doing of the Lord!

will! He will! He will!!! He! He! He will be!

will He will be He will! will joy triumph triumph and lead save now I pray Thee Lord I pray send prosperity!

[33:48] He blessed is he in great that cometh us to from the house who come to we from the house which to the Lord pertains you blessed heart conclude prayer we would worship accept the from our that your word with us anything said or and must be for the remainder day bless your servant as he preaches here evening as preaches this as and pardon

Jesus Amen Amen may may