

Mark 15:6-15 ⁶ At each Festival, Pilate used to release to the people one prisoner whom they requested. ⁷ There was one named Barabbas, who was imprisoned with the rebels and had committed murder in the rebellion. ⁸ The crowd came up and began to ask Pilate to do for them what he usually did. ⁹ Pilate replied, “Do you want me to release the King of the Jews to you?” ¹⁰ In fact, he knew that it was because of envy that the chief priests had handed him over. ¹¹ But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas to them instead. ¹² Again, Pilate replied to them, “Then what do you want me to do with the man you call the King of the Jews?” ¹³ “Crucify him!” they shouted back. ¹⁴ But Pilate said to them, “Why? What has he done wrong?” But they shouted even louder, “Crucify him!” ¹⁵ Since he wanted to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. After he had Jesus flogged, he handed him over to be crucified.

Before he was president, Woodrow Wilson was governor of New Jersey. Once one of the senators there died, and almost before he had assumed room temperature, some politician was calling to try to get the appointment. “I’d like to take the senator’s place,” he told Wilson. To which the governor replied, “It’s alright with me – if the undertaker doesn’t mind.” Of course, that’s not what he had meant. Who would want to take the place of a dead man? But even worse, who’d want to take the place of someone who was condemned to death? And yet today, as we walk with our Savior in his passion, we see him doing exactly that as a Substitute. The One who took the place of the one who was doomed to die; replacing the one who deserved to die.

Matthew says he was a “notorious prisoner.” The word John uses is “robber/bandit/rebel/ revolutionary.” Here Mark tells us he was involved with insurrectionists and murder. And in Peter’s sermon at Solomon’s Colonnade in Jerusalem, we find out this guy wasn’t just involved, he *was* a murderer. He had quite the rap sheet: felonies, murder, treason, terrorism – this was a man who deserved to be where he was. Someone who belonged on death row. Which is exactly where he was. When Jesus was crucified later that day, his wasn’t the only execution scheduled for that Friday morning. He was placed between two others on that skull hill. And actually Jesus’ crucifixion had not even been on the docket. Still, nothing special needed to be done to prepare for him. There was a cross already ready. The cross no doubt meant for this Barabbas. Probably the worst prisoner the governor Pontius Pilate could find. Three times he had said Jesus was not guilty. He was trying desperately to find some way to let him go free. And while he had kind of painted himself into a corner, there was still one more trick up his sleeve. There was this custom of releasing one of the Jewish prisoners during their festival of the Passover.

Surely if he put them side by side, common sense would prevail. Jesus, the innocent. And Barabbas, the criminal. Barabbas, the murderer. And even if some of the Jews might have been able to consider him kind of a freedom fighter against the Roman oppressors, still this guy was a public menace, not the kind of criminal you’d want loose on the streets with your wife and kids. Besides, Pilate knew it was for “envy and jealousy” that the religious leaders were pushing this. And he was right about that. The Pharisees and priests and teachers of the law – yeah their feelings were hurt because their hypocrisy had been disclosed. Their pride was injured because this Jesus was teaching with obvious authority and their pontifications and bloviating was a legalistic house of cards that couldn’t stand the force of God’s true law, and at the same time had no place for God’s gracious gift of free salvation.

They were worried about their popularity, their positions, their system of work-righteousness. Pilate had called that one right. But what he had underestimated is how strong, how powerful those feelings could be. Enough to not only overcome truth and justice, but also enough to overcome common sense and anything rational. To the point of inciting a mob to go against God and conscience. To the point of calling a curse on themselves and their future generations. To the point of insisting on choosing Barabbas, instead of Jesus. Jesus obviously innocent. Barabbas obviously guilty. But Barabbas goes free. He lives. And Jesus dies.

That Barabbas, who had been condemned to death, was replaced by Jesus the Christ. Maybe you have enjoyed an adventure movie where the main character somehow survives an impossible situation. Somehow escapes from his inevitable doom. Evades a horrible death at the last instant. The cavalry arrives. The ceiling falls on the bad guy. Whatever unimaginable stroke of good fortune. The impossible happens and the hero is spared. Well no other author could have come up with a more amazing way for this condemned prisoner to receive a reprieve. You can almost imagine this Barabbas unable to think about anything but his upcoming execution. The last meal the night before. A fitful night of almost no sleep. Early in the morning the cell door opens. The guards roughly pull him out and push him ahead into the noise and turmoil and commotion before the governor. Here it comes. The torturous whipping and then off to the most horrible death they could think of back then. But wait. What's this? The chains are taken off. There's no cross for him to carry. No spikes to be driven through his feet and hands. No hours of excruciating pain. Instead he hears, "All charges are dropped. Barabbas, you are free to go. Get out of here. Next time you won't be so lucky." Can you imagine? The deep breaths of outside air. Death cheated. Almost too good to be true. How can this be happening?

Well, we know how. A switch had been made. The rebel/murderer/thief had been replaced. The Innocent would die in his place. Jesus had taken his place. Now Jesus, not Barabbas would be carry that heavy cross. Now Jesus, not Barabbas would make the trip up that ugly hill. Now it would be Jesus, who hadn't ever done anything wrong, slowly dying for all to see. You talk about a travesty of justice. The guilty set free, the innocent condemned. Yes, there was a lot of pressure put on Pontius Pilate. And yes, the chief priests and Sanhedrin had been working for a long time to make this happen. And yes the crowd had been incited into a frenzy. And yes the sinless One was replacing the one who rightfully should have died. But don't worry. Like always, no matter how dark or unfair or hopeless things can seem, the real God is in charge. And this actually fit into his plans. Jesus did it *on purpose*. Like a soldier diving on a live grenade to save his fellow soldiers. Jesus willingly took the punishment, the execution meant for Barabbas. But when Jesus trudged up Golgotha and allowed himself to be nailed to that cross, he wasn't just paying for one instance of insurrection; one murderer's sentence; the just dues of one miserable robber.

As John's first epistle tells us, "He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the whole world." It wasn't just Barabbas who deserved what Jesus got. It was for us, part of the *whole world*. Us, horrified that *they* would prefer the awful Barabbas to the good and loving Jesus. Even though we make the same choice over and over and over. Jesus or Barabbas? And we choose the Barabbas of hatred and resentment and talking bad about others instead of Jesus' instruction to love. And we choose the Barabbas of deceit and lying and deviousness instead of the honesty and obedience Jesus desires that we think might

not bring us as much money or satisfaction. We choose the Barabbas of lust and complaining and worrying instead of being satisfied with the goodness Jesus wants for us. And you know, it's not just choosing Barabbas and being accomplices. It goes way beyond that. We *are* Barabbas. You are Barabbas. I am Barabbas. We have stolen. Robbed God of his glory in making gods of ourselves. Robbed him in the way we have misused the time and talents and treasures he has entrusted into our keeping. We have been seditious traitors against the government of his much higher kingdom. Murderers in hateful thoughts and mean and malicious words. Committing outright rebellion every time we have gone against the perfect will of a perfect God.

And yet, as we stand before the judgment seat of the Almighty God, the Prince of Peace is bound in our place and we are released. We are acquitted; he is crucified. Like the rite in the Old Testament on the day of atonement of confessing the sins of all the people onto the scapegoat, before sending it out to die in the desert. Or the ritual for cleansing someone who had had leprosy. Where the priest was to take two birds with some scarlet yarn and cedar wood and hyssop. And then they would kill the one bird over a pot of water, and then dip the other one in the blood before letting it fly away free. It comes down to this: one must die. Barabbas or Jesus. You the sinner or Christ the perfectly spotless Son of God. By coming to this earth as a man and perfectly keeping all God's law – never hating or robbing God of his glory or rebelling like we do; and then perfectly loving, perfectly obeying, perfectly serving – the holy Son of God put himself in the position of being our substitute. And “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us.” So it wasn't just Barabbas' chains that were taken off, and it wasn't just Barabbas' spot on the cross that was taken. That was you and me and all people that Jesus replaced. The righteous God counted the sufferings and death of his perfect Son as payment sufficient for the sins of the world. And now like Barabbas, we are free. No longer doomed. Replaced by the Innocent One.

Sometimes in Lent, in repentance, we put ourselves in the place of some of the various characters. Who do you want to be this year in Lent? Peter? Pilate? Judas? The taunting crowd; the religious elite; the cruel soldiers? Yeah, we take our turns at all of those depending on the day, depending on the circumstances. But now God puts us into the role of Barabbas. You and I are Barabbas. Now not many parents are naming any of their kids Barabbas. But actually it's really a great name. It means “son of the father.” And especially when we see that son of the father replaced by *THE SON* of *THE FATHER*, what an even greater role. The guilty and condemned, replaced by the Innocent. And now we are sons and daughters of the father in a much greater sense.

You know, there are quite a few novels and plays and movies about Barabbas. And unlike the Bible, they all provide an ending for his life. All different kinds of endings. Sometimes he's a strong convert to Christianity. Other times he's a slave in the salt mines or some other difficult life. But they really all come down to two possibilities. In the most famous version of the novel and movie, he ultimately becomes a follower of the one who took his place. In other versions, he goes back to his previous life of crime, gets arrested again, and gets put to death anyway. Now, even though we don't know how it turned out for Barabbas, we do know how our stories turn out. Jesus took our place under God's wrath, paid for all our sins. Released us from Satan's prison. Our sentence has been overturned. And we are truly free. With a new lease on life and a perfect eternal life in store. Jesus or Barabbas? Give us Jesus. God did. Amen.