

November 19th, 2017  
 I AM BARABBAS  
 John 18:28-40

Last week we saw the apostle John masterfully weave together this split screen effect of Peter denying His Master, while at the same time Jesus protecting His disciple. John dismembered Peter's denials so that we could understand this was happening at the same time. This week, again, we see John constructing his narrative different than the other gospels in order to magnify one main object: the absolute innocence of Jesus Christ, and the absolute depravity of everyone else.

Pilate three times throughout this trial declares that Jesus is innocent. **v. 38** "*I find no guilt in him*"; **19:4** "See, I am bringing him out to you that you may know that *I find no guilt in him*"; **19:6** "Take him yourselves and crucify him, for *I find not guilt in him.*" God used this wicked atheistic pagan governor to bear witness to all of history that Jesus Christ was absolutely innocent of any wrong doing. And this witness of Jesus' innocence has been collaborated on all accounts.

- At his birth, the angel called Him "the *holy* child" (**Lk 1:35**).
- Judas the betrayer bitterly said "I [have betrayed] *innocent* blood" (**Mt. 27:4**).
- The criminal who was crucified next to Christ said "this man has done *nothing wrong*" (**Lk 23:41**).
- The centurion who supervised Jesus' execution said "Certainly this man was *innocent!*" (**Lk 23:47**)<sup>1</sup>

John is going to move through the first phase of Jesus' political trial very quickly to emphasize Jesus' innocence. There were six phases of Jesus' trials—three of them *religious* before the Jews, and three of them *political* before the

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<sup>1</sup> This compilation of verses from John MacArthur's *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: John 12-21*, (Chicago, IL.; Moody Publishers, 2008), pg. 324

Gentiles. All of humanity—both Jews and Gentiles—were represented in this trial of Jesus Christ, because this is the crime of all humanity—putting the innocent Lamb of God to death.

That is the other thing that is put on this display in this first phase of Jesus' political trial—the absolute depravity of everyone else. There are three types of persons represented here. **First**, we have the pharisaical prosecutors played by the religious Jews. These are the moralists. The good people of society. The ones who pay their taxes, who don't cheat on their wives, who give an honest day's work to their employees, who everybody speaks well of. And on this basis, they think they are not in danger. But their hypocrisy blinds them from the truth: evil does not reside in what they “do not handle, do not taste, do not touch”<sup>2</sup> but they themselves are evil. Humanity *itself* is the problem of evil.

**Second**, we have the postmodern pagans played by Pilate. Pilate indeed thought well of Jesus. Unlike the self-righteous Pharisees, he was even amazed by Him at times. But he refused to surrender to Jesus' truth claims and follow him. This very man whose business it was to determine truth from falsehood denied the very Truth as it stood right before him.

**Lastly**, we have the pardoned prisoner—Barabbas. The most openly wicked of all the characters because he couldn't hide from what he had done. He was caught, ensnared by his own evil deeds and now he was waiting his death sentence. Unlike the pharisees, he had no self-righteousness that he could claim. Unlike Pilate, everyone knew the truth, he was a wicked, thieving murderer. Last week we saw the best of Jesus' disciples on display. This week we see the worst of all sinners. And yet, this chapter ends in the most surprising of all ways. Barabbas is pardoned. Why? How? Because Jesus Christ took his place.

Dear congregation, look beneath this surface of this narrative. This is much more than *mere* historical events. This is the drama of all redemption. Every character in this play (save Jesus) is unimaginably wicked, unimaginably depraved, unimaginably rebelling against Christ. And only Barabbas is

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<sup>2</sup> Colossians 2:21

pardoned. So the most pressing question you can ask yourself is this: who am I? Who are you? Are you the pharisaical prosecutor—pretending to be righteous, pretending to be on God’s team, yet inwardly you are filled with all sorts of wickedness? Or are you the postmodern pagan—you have an affinity towards Jesus, you think he’s a good man, perhaps even innocent, but you have not bowed the knee to His truth claims because you care more about your life than His. Or are you Barabbas—the pardoned prisoner? Everyone knows you that you have been a wicked sinner, BUT Jesus has taken your place and now you are free.

- ☆ I Am The Pharisaical Prosecutor
- ☆ I Am The Postmodern Pagan
- ☆ I Am The Pardoned Prisoner

The question is: who are you?

### *The Big Idea...*

Jesus transfers His people from death to life, not because we are good people, but because He takes our place on death row

## I. I Am The Pharisaical Prosecutor

### **John’s omission**

If you look down at **v.28**, we read “Then they led Jesus from the house of Caiaphas to the governor's headquarters.” The space between **v.27** and **v.28** is where this trial takes place with Caiaphas, but John doesn’t mention it. He is running as quickly as he can to Pilate in order to hear his declaration: “I find no guilt in him” (**v.38**).

### “It was early morning”

He records that these Jews led Jesus to Pilate’s headquarters *early in the morning* (v.28)—meaning it was somewhere between 3-6 am.<sup>3</sup> Remember that the Jews were doing everything in secret. Judas led them to Jesus at night in the garden *away from the crowds* so that the fickle crowds wouldn’t interfere. Likewise, here they arrive at Pilate’s house *early* so that Pilate could try Him, condemn Him and execute Him before the crowd even knew what happened.

### The hypocrisy of self-righteousness

But when these Jews arrived at Pilate’s headquarters, something very peculiar happened. Look at the second half of v.28 “They themselves did not enter the governor's headquarters, so that they would not be defiled, but could eat the Passover.”<sup>4</sup> The Jews had to be ceremonial clean to eat this meal, and they considered Gentile’s homes to be unclean. So they refused to go into Pilate’s courtroom with Jesus because they wanted to be pure.

Here is perhaps the most tragic irony in this whole passage, as D.A. Carson says

“the Jews take elaborate precautions to avoid ritual contamination in order to eat the Passover, at the very time they are busy manipulating the judicial system to secure the death of him *who alone is the true Passover.*”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: John 12-21*, (Chicago, IL.: Moody Publishers, 2008), pg. 325

<sup>4</sup> Passover was the yearly celebration of the Jews, remembering when God delivered them from Egyptian slavery. Passover remembers the last plague in Egypt when a lamb was slain and the blood was smeared over the door of each home protecting it from the angel of death. If the angel saw the blood, it would *passover* that home. If the angel didn’t see the blood, the firstborn of that home would die. And this was remembered every year with a celebration.

<sup>5</sup> D.A. Carson, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Gospel According to John*, (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991), pg. 589

## Dislocating impurity

Dear congregation, whenever the humanity has dislocated sin, people die. There is a Netflix series called *The Man in the High Castle*, it envisions a dystopian America in which WW2 was not won but lost to Nazi Germany. Now they run the country. One of the main Nazi characters—John Smith, an SS officer, terrorizes the resistance by day—torturing, killing, plotting—only to come home to his white picket fence family at night with deluxe hot dinners and sipping liquors in front of the fire. He runs a moral family. He teaches his children how to be good citizens, and yet he is a terrorist to true humanity. John misplaced where impurity is found. He located in the weaker races. This comes back to haunt him when he discovers his son has muscular dystrophy. The only cure that the Nazis prescribe for this now impure boy is death.

When impurity is dislocated, people die. Jesus was being handed to his death by the Jews because they were blind to the fact that pollution was not in Pilate's home but in their own hearts.

## Everything unbelievers do is impure

Dear unbeliever, your problem is not that you do this or that thing wrong, but that everything about you is wrong. **Titus 1:15** says “To the pure, all things are pure, but to the defiled and unbelieving, *nothing is pure*; but both their minds and their consciences are defiled.” Jesus Christ came into the world to rescue those who are sick. But if you think you are well—if you seek to please God by your own pretended goodness—you are effectively cutting yourself off from Jesus Christ. That what these Jews were doing.

## “What accusation do you bring?”

Because they wouldn't go into Pilate's house, **v.29** says “So Pilate went outside to them and said, “What accusation do you bring against this man?” First notice, that they are unable to bring even one legitimate charge against him. It's true that in the other gospels they claim several false political charges that would get Pilate to bite. John doesn't record these accusations because they

were completely baseless. But secondly notice how they compensate for this lack of evidence, **v.30** “They answered him, ‘If this man were not doing evil, we would not have delivered him over to you.’” They are sneering these words. They are basically saying ‘Why would you even question us? We didn’t bring him because He has done good! He is evil. Your job is to purge evil. Now do your job.’<sup>6</sup> The fact is, they couldn’t give Pilate a charge that would stick against Jesus. They didn’t want a trial, just an execution.

### **This was to fulfill the word that Jesus had spoke**

So Pilate responds *in kind* **v.31** “Pilate said to them, “Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law.” Pilate was insightful into the heart of these men. **Matthew 27:18** says “For he knew that it was out of envy that they had delivered him up.” So at first, he refuses to take part in this charade.<sup>7</sup>

The Jews didn’t like this answer that Pilate gave, picking halfway up in **v. 31** “The Jews said to him, ‘It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death.’ It was illegal according to Roman law for the Jews to try and put anyone to death legally. They were under Roman occupation, and Rome didn’t want these Jews putting any loyalists to death. So they were forced to go to the Romans, the very ones they hated, in order to crucify the Christ. **v.32** says “This was to fulfill the word that Jesus had spoken to show by what kind of death he was going to die.” Jesus wasn’t going to die in some backward alley. He was going to die the most public, the most shameful, the most painful death possible—Roman crucifixion. This is what He prophesied. Not as a *mere* prediction. But as part of God’s eternal plan. The death of the Son of God would be the greatest spectacle the universe has ever seen. And both the Jew and the Gentiles, just as Jesus predicted—would take part in the crime of all humanity.

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<sup>6</sup> Adapted from R.C. Sproul’s *St. Andrew’s Expository Commentary: John*, (Orlando, FL.,: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2009), pg. 351

<sup>7</sup> Pilate was a horrible judge. He knew that Jesus was innocent but here he tells them to judge this innocent man. He doesn’t care whether Jesus lives or dies, he just doesn’t want Jesus’ blood on his hands so he can pretend he is innocent. And this brings us to one irrevocable and invincible truth: everyone must decide for or against Jesus. You must either kiss the Son, or you will help crucify Him.

## What is your biggest problem?

The question is: are you the Pharisaical prosecutor?<sup>8</sup> Do you outwardly appear righteous to others, but are full of hypocrisy and pride on the inside? The easiest way to answer that is by asking “What do you think is your biggest problem in life?” If you don’t think your own heart is your biggest problem in life, you are in the same position as these self-righteous Jews.<sup>9</sup> This is the greatest stumbling block to passing from death to life. Jesus said “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.” (**Mark 2:17**). It’s not great sins that keep people out of heaven, it is their damnable good works.

## II. I Am The Postmodern Pagan

### Profile of Pilate

This is Pilate. He is the postmodern pagan. Pilate was not an innocent victim in this trial. He cannot be characterized as being forced against his own will. Pilate has a long history of brutality with the Jews. We saw this several weeks ago when we read in **Luke 13** about his mingling the Galileans blood with their sacrifices. But we do know several things about him regarding this trial with Jesus. We know he was afraid (**John 19:8**). We know he was amazed at how Jesus responded (**Matthew 27:14**). We know he was warned not to have anything to do with that righteous man, by his wife’s dream (**Matthew 27:19**). We know that he desired to release Jesus (**Luke 23:20**). We know that he knew Jesus was innocent because of his three declarations of that fact. But he didn’t

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<sup>8</sup> Matthew 23:27-28 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.”

<sup>9</sup> The Jews believed that their biggest problem was outside of themselves. If Jesus would have given them what they wanted (the defeat of the Romans) they and we would have gone to hell. Jesus fought against the greatest enemy—sin.

care. Truth wasn't important to him. What was important to him was his power, and his position. And so in the end he satisfied the crowd (**Mk. 15:15**)

### **“Are you the King of the Jews?”**

So let's look to **v.33** So Pilate entered his headquarters again and called Jesus and said to him, “Are you the King of the Jews?”<sup>10</sup> The reason why Pilate asked this question, is because this was the most serious charge that the Jews leveled against Him (**Luke 23:2**) The Jews knew that their theological disputes with Jesus would not interest Pilate. So they brought this charge, that Jesus claims to be a king in order “to impress Pilate with how dangerous Jesus was, and therefore to bring down the death penalty.”<sup>11</sup> They wanted Pilate to see that Jesus was a threat to Rome itself.<sup>12</sup> Now when Pilate asks this question to Jesus, what he hopes for is a quick and simple “No.” Because then, this whole trial can end, and the Jews will have no recourse.

### **The prisoner interrogates the judge**

But Jesus will not satisfy this desire of Pilate's. He will not simply say “No.” That would be a lie. Look at **v.34** “Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?” **First** notice the pastoral heart of Jesus. ‘Pilate are you sincerely asking me this question? Is it truth that you are seeking?’ Dear congregation, why do you seek Jesus? Boys and girls do you follow Jesus because your parents seek Him, or do you follow Him on your own? Does following Jesus look like going to Disneyland or the doctor's office? Do you want to follow Him because your heart loves him and desires to see

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<sup>10</sup> “The effect of the Jews' scruples is to send Pilate scuttling back and forth, acting on two stages as it were, a front stage and a rear stage. This simultaneously enhances the drama of the narrative, ensures the Jews do not hear Jesus' self-disclosing claims before Pilate, and ‘portrays the human predicament in which one must choose between Jesus and the world.’” D.A. Carson, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Gospel According to John*, (Grand Rapids, MI.,: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991), pg. 589

<sup>11</sup> D.A. Carson, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Gospel According to John*, (Grand Rapids, MI.,: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991), pg. 592

<sup>12</sup> Such a parallel with how the world works today against the church.

Him and please Him? Or do you follow him because you know that if you don't, you and your parents won't get along? Nobody will inherit eternal life because they know someone who knows Jesus. You yourself must *know* Him. **Secondly**, underneath this question Jesus is reading Pilate's heart. He's saying 'Pilate the real question you should be asking Me is "Are you my king?"'<sup>13</sup>

Now at this point, Pilate realizes that his heart is being exposed. This Galilean prisoner is making him feel very uncomfortable. Who does He think He is?

### **"What have you done?"**

So Pilate responds in v.35 "Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done?" Here is where Pilate's postmodernity shows up. "Am I a Jew?" 'You Jews—like every other nation on earth—have your *own* notion of god. Don't press that on me. Your truth is not my truth. I am a Roman. Do you think I care whether or not You are the promised Messiah or not?'<sup>14</sup> Pilate and Jesus come from two very different worldviews. Pilate assumes that there is no such thing as one universal all-encompassing truth. Jesus is declaring there is. And that Pilate is in the very presence of that Truth.

As annoyed as Pilate is, he is also aware that the accusation against Jesus doesn't warrant death. And so he asks at the end of v.35 "What have you done?" In other words—*what have you really done* to gain the hatred of your *own people*? So Jesus resigns Himself. Pilate will not have his heart spoken to, and so he answers Pilate's first question. But Jesus cannot answer with a simple yes or no.

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<sup>13</sup> D.A. Carson, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Gospel According to John*, (Grand Rapids, MI.,: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991), pg. 593

<sup>14</sup> F.W. Krummacher, *The Suffering Savior*, (Carlisle, PA.,: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2004), pg. 228

### **Yes I AM a King, but not like you think**

Look how Jesus answers in **v.36** “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world.” Jesus uses a definite article here “My kingdom is not of *this* world”—meaning ‘My kingdom is not at all of the sort that the Jews have told you. My kingdom does not conquer through political parties or through the sword, if that were the case then my own men would have fought to the death to prevent my arrest. But it was I who stopped their fighting.’

Oh the incredible tension that moment must have produced. Pilate’s heart no doubt skipped a beat. Why would Jesus stop His own arrest? And Pilate did not miss what Jesus said. Three times he heard Jesus say “My kingdom...my kingdom...my kingdom.” So Pilate probably stutters out his next words. **v.37** “So you are a king?”

### **For this purpose I have come into the world**

Jesus answers him halfway through **v.37** “You say that I am a king. (In other words: ‘You say correctly that I am a King’<sup>15</sup>) For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world.” When Jesus says here “I was born”—He’s speaking of His incarnation—of His putting on flesh. When He says “I have come into the world”—He means that before the world existed, He existed. Jesus is eternal. ‘I AM not a *mere* man Pilate. I AM the one to whom the angels hide their faces and cry “Holy, holy, holy.” I AM the one to whom the wicked men at the end of the age will cry out to have the mountains fall on them in order to hide from My fierce wrath. I have existed for innumerable ages and I will exist long after the age of the sun and the moon itself. From everlasting to everlasting I AM God. Yes I AM a King.”

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<sup>15</sup> John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: John 12-21*, (Chicago, IL.,: Moody Publishers, 2008), pg. 331

And then He says at the end of v.37 “I came to bear witness to [that] truth. Everyone who is of the truth<sup>16</sup> listens to my voice.”<sup>17</sup>

### **What is truth?**

And the postmodern heart is just seen to be just as hard as the pharisaical heart. Pilate responds “What is truth?” Scornfully. Mockingly. There are hearts like Pilate’s in this room. Pilate wasn’t against Jesus. He wanted to release Him. Some of you aren’t against Jesus. You might think He is a really great guy. But you haven’t bowed the knee to His truth claims. Being “not against” Jesus Christ is not enough. If you cannot resolve to give your heart and soul to Jesus Christ, entirely surrendering to Him, you are on the path to destruction.

Dear congregation, this is why Jesus was on trial. Because He claimed and still claims that His way is the only way. “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (**John 14:6**) The destiny of every single human being is controlled by this one question: What have you done with Jesus Christ? Have you believed upon His name? Have you been born again into His spirit? If so, then you have passed from death to life. If not, you stand condemned because you have not believed in the name of the only Son of God (**John 3:18**). Every other religion is entirely false. There is no hope outside of Jesus Christ. He is truth itself.

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<sup>16</sup> “Jesus conquers by the convincing evades of truth; he rules by the commanding power of truth, and in his majesty rides prosperously, because of truth (Psalm 45:4). It is with his truth that he shall judge the peoples (Psalm 96:13). It is the scepter of his kingdom; he draws with the cords of a man, with truth revealed to us, and received by us in the love of it; and thus he brings thoughts into obedience.” Matthew Henry

<sup>17</sup> Oh so much more to say here on the new birth and how it is necessary for us to even hear truth. That is what Jesus is pointing to. Only those who are born again can even know spiritual truth savingly. “Truth is believe to be a common thing but God declares, on the contrary, that it far exceeds the capacity of the human understanding.” John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries Vol. XVIII*, (Grand Rapids, MI.,: BakerBooks, 2009), pg. 212

### III. I Am the Pardoned Prisoner

#### Say no to the middle path

Let's look at the rest of this story. Midway through **v.38**, we read "After he had said this, he went back outside to the Jews and told them, "I find no guilt in him." Stop. If Pilate had real integrity at this point, He would have released Jesus. But Pilate was trying to find the middle path. The path where he can remain still favored by the people so he doesn't have a rebellion on his hands, and the path where he can not condemn an innocent man.<sup>18</sup> Look at **v.39** "But you have a custom that I should release one man for you at the Passover." Apparently there was this tradition between Rome and the Jews, that during this high holy day, one of the Jewish criminals would be released.

Pilate saw his opportunity. Turn with me over to **Mark 15:6-7**, because I want you to see why Pilate saw this as his way of escape. "Now at the feast he used to release for them one prisoner for whom they asked. And among the rebels in prison, who had committed murder in the insurrection, there was a man called Barabbas." Notice something very important in **v.7**. There were *rebels*—plural, in prison. There were lots of prisoners. So what does Pilate do? He runs through his mind the record of these men. Perhaps he had some time before he went out to speak to the Jews to look at the official prison records and find the worst criminal that he could find. And then he found him—Barabbas. John only records that he was a robber—a thief. But Mark here records that he was an insurrectionist, and a murderer. Barabbas was a urban terrorist. He was the worst of the worst that the Roman prison held.

Pilate now is confident that he has found a middle path. Surely the crowds would not want the most notorious criminal released over Jesus. And this self-confidence even shapes the way he asked the question. Turn back with me to **John 18:39** Remember, it was the chief priest who handed Jesus over to him. Pilate now comes out and appeals not to them, but to the whole crowd (Matthew 27:15), thinking they would release Jesus. Look end of **v.39** "So do

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you want me to release to you the King of the Jews?” And how do they answer? v.40 They cried out again, “Not this man, but Barabbas!”

Two critical truths to see here. **First**, there is no middle path. When Pilate thought he could be worldly and heavenly at the same time, he was gravely mistaken. Jesus said so clearly: “Whoever is not with me is against me” (**Matthew 12:30**) **James 4:4** “...whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.” If you are seeking to be friends with the world system, with the system that is rebellion against God AND seeking to be a friend of Jesus—you are not a friend of Jesus.

The **second** thing to see is that no accusation could stick to Jesus in this passage. Pilate declared him innocent. Yet everybody knew that Barabbas was guilty as hell.

### **I AM Barabbas**

Consider this man. Barabbas was the most desperate of all men living in Jerusalem at this time. If you have ever been to the Idaho State Penitentiary you know what I mean. The execution chamber. A viewing window. A noose. And a trap door. The next time Barabbas was going to walk out of that prison, was going to be to his death. Death by crucifixion. He was a societal reject. He was helpless, hopeless, and hell bound. Barabbas was in the worse position possible—death row. It was a nightmare. Can you imagine him asking himself: “How did I come to this? Perhaps he recalled the first time he stole and didn’t get caught. And then he did it again. And again. Hating himself more and more every time, but now ensnared into a life of crime in which he could not remove himself. And then he hit the big time. Leading a gang of notorious men against the Romans in an insurrection, and in the heat of the rebellion he murders in cold blood. And now, he has no hope of ransom. No bail. No judge that will overturn his case. He is accursed. And he is waiting to die the most horrific death ever conceived by human cruelty.

Dear congregation, such is our case. Don't you see? Barabbas' case is so desperate, because ours was so desperate. Your situation was not less accursed than Barabbas, but more accursed. Hear the indictment against the human race:

“None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.” “Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive.” “The venom of asps is under their lips.” “Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.” “Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known.” “There is no fear of God before their eyes.” **Romans 3:10-18**

If you think that you aren't that bad—you line up with Pharisee. If you think this isn't true—you line up with Pilate.

When Pilate made this offer to the crowd, this was not a *merely* historical event. This is the event of events. As F.W. Krummacher said

“In the position in which Barabbas stood to Jesus, we all of us stood to Him. With respect to us, it might also have been said ‘Who shall die — the transgressor or the Just one?’ It is impossible that both should be spared. The sword of divine justice must strike either to the right or the left. The curse that we had incurred must be inflicted.”<sup>19</sup>

Chapter 18 ends with this truth just hanging in mid air. Who will be nailed to that tree? Barabbas or Jesus? “The lot must fall to one or the other. One will be released. the other sent to the place of execution...Which of the two will be chosen—which rejected? If Jesus of Nazareth is set at liberty, Barabbas is inevitably lost. If the [Jesus] is rejected, then hail to the, Barabbas, thou art saved! His ruin is thy redemption; from His death springs life.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> F.W. Krummacher, *The Suffering Savior*, (Carlisle, PA.,: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2004), pg. 270

<sup>20</sup> *ibid*, pg. 269

# Application

Our Doctrine: Vicarious Atonement is what Jesus accomplished

Now we know the end of the story. Barabbas is released. Jesus is crucified. I said last week that John is a master story teller. But it is God who masterfully wove this drama together. This choice between Barabbas and Jesus was divinely appointed to show us the doctrine of vicarious atonement. Vicarious is an older word. It means “acting for another, filling the place of another, substituted in the place of another.” Barabbas passed from death unto life *because* Jesus took his place. Jesus was the vicarious atonement for Barabbas. Dear congregation, this is a very controversial doctrine.

I was pressed in several conversations this week about what Jesus accomplished in the atonement. The view that kept getting pressed was that Jesus died so that everyone would have a chance to be saved. Jesus’ death didn’t accomplish the actual purchase of His people it is said, but rather an opportunity for sinners to be saved. But is that what we see in this drama?

Barabbas and Jesus exchanged places. The innocent and spotless record of Jesus, declared 3x by Pilate is transferred to Barabbas. He is set free from prison. His record is wiped. He instantly inherits safety, and well being, and acceptance back into society. What does Jesus get? He got the Barabbas’ guilt. He got his shame. He got his chains, and ultimately his death sentence. Jesus took Barabbas’ place, and this invincibly guaranteed Barabbas’ rescue.

The solution for guilt is substitution. It is not the man-centered notion that Jesus died for a chance for man to exercise his free will in choosing God. Yes it is true. We must believe the gospel. A person can not be justified before God unless he believes. But the question is: did Jesus purchase that belief through His atoning blood or did we purchase His blood and forgiveness through our belief? Either Jesus died for actual sinners such that they will be saved or He died for a chance for sinners to be saved. Jesus didn’t die for a chance for Barabbas to be freed. Jesus died, and Barabbas was freed.

## Our Delight: The secret of Barabbas' name

So then if vicarious atonement—or substitutionary atonement is the Biblical view, why Barabbas? Wasn't Barabbas just as guilty as these Jews, or Pilate in this episode? Why was he spared? There is something unique about Barabbas' name. It's actually two parts: Bar and abbas. Bar means "son of." Peter the apostle was called Simon Bar-Jonah, or Simon son of Jonah. Bar abbas means he is the son of some one. Abba means father. Bar abbas means son of abba, or son of father.

Jesus died for all the sons of the Father, all the daughters of the Father. Barabbas name is not some fluke in redemptive history.<sup>21</sup> There are no flukes in redemptive history. It is a sign. Jesus didn't die for a random, nameless, faceless people. He died for those whom the Father had given Him.

**John 10:11, 14-15** I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. [14] I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, [15] just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep.

Dear believer, this is you. When Jesus died, He exchanged places with *you*. Jesus became a criminal in *your* place. *You* became righteous.

Jesus was rejected in *your* place. *You* became adopted into the family of God. Jesus carried *your* curse. *You* inherited His riches.

Jesus suffered the punishment *you* deserved. *You* gained the happiness that He earned.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Even more, the RSV calls Barabbas by his first name Jesus.

<sup>22</sup> Adapted from F.W. Krummacher's *The Suffering Savior*, (Carlisle, PA.: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2004), pg. 272

## Our Duty: Live as freemen—as ‘Sons of the Father’

There are two types of legalists. The ones that say “I deserve God’s blessing.” Those are the boasters. But then there are those who say “I wish I could *deserve* God’s blessing.” This is where my heart goes most of the time. And I suspect many of your hearts as well. “I wish I could win God’s approval.”

Imagine Barabbas again in that cell. Imagine the messenger shows up, the prison doors creek open, sunlight floods the cell, and the sound of his voice echoes through the crowded stone cage: “Barabbas you are free to go. Jesus called the Christ has taken your place.” But then Barabbas starts objecting, this must be some sort of mistake, and his legal heart starts resisting the grace of God. “No,” he says “I will stay here until I *deserve* this freedom, I will become a model prisoner, and prove that I *deserve* such a pardon.” What would the officials at the prison had said to him? “Barabbas,” they say, “Do you think for a moment that you could possibly deserve being released? No. You are the worst one in this prison. You were not liberated for your own sake. You could improve one hundred fold and you would never be able to remove your guilt. No Barabbas, the sole reason you are being released is because Jesus Christ has exchanged His position for yours. He has taken your guilt, and you get His freedom.”

Beloved, if you pining away in your heart thinking “I wish I could deserve God’s favor” — that comes from a legal spirit. You can *never* deserve God’s favor. You are Barabbas. And Jesus didn’t wait for you to clean up before He substituted His life for yours. It is impossible for God to be more pleased with you than He is because He sees Jesus’ perfect record in your place. That is what substitution is. So be free. Live as a freeman. “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” (Galatians 5:1)