

MATTHEW 27:11–31. (EHV)

When Jesus stood in the presence of the governor, the governor asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus said to him, “**It is as you say.**” When he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he answered nothing. Then Pilate said to him, “Don’t you hear how many things they are testifying against you?” But he did not answer him—not even one word, so that the governor was very surprised. At the time of the Festival the governor had a custom to release to the crowd any one prisoner they wanted. At that time they were holding a notorious prisoner named Barabbas. So when they were assembled, Pilate said to them, “Which one do you want me to release to you? Barabbas—or Jesus, who is called Christ?” For Pilate knew that they had handed Jesus over to him because of envy. While he was sitting on the judgment seat, Pilate’s wife sent him a message. “Have nothing to do with that righteous man,” she said, “since I have suffered many things today in a dream because of him.” But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus put to death. The governor asked them, “Which of the two do you want me to release to you?” “Barabbas!” they said. Pilate said to them, “Then what should I do with Jesus, who is called Christ?” They all said to him, “Crucify him!” But the governor said, “Why? What has he done wrong?” But they kept shouting even louder: “Crucify him!” When Pilate saw that he was accomplishing nothing and that instead it was turning into a riot, he took water, washed his hands in front of the crowd, and said, “I am innocent of this righteous man’s blood. It is your responsibility.” And all the people answered, “Let his blood be on us and on our children!” Then he released Barabbas to them, but he had Jesus flogged and handed him over to be crucified. Then the governor’s soldiers took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole cohort of soldiers around him. They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him. They twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head. They put a staff in his right hand, knelt in front of him, and mocked him by saying, “Hail, King of the Jews!” They spit on him, took the staff, and hit him repeatedly on his head. After they had mocked him, they took off the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.

We are continuing our series on Jesus’s passion or suffering between Holy Thursday and Good Friday. In this devotion, we will look at the release of the criminal Barabbas and how this clearly and beautifully pictures the spiritual reality behind this entire ordeal.

One of the most fascinating aspects of the account of Jesus’s passion is how Jesus’s trial, and its outcome, drastically alters the fate of a man named Barabbas.

Barabbas is mentioned by all four Evangelists. We just heard Matthew say he was a “notorious prisoner.” Mark says that he was in prison “with the insurrectionists who had committed murder in the uprising” (Mark 15:7). “The Uprising” seems to have been a specific, well-known event. Luke says that he had “been thrown into prison for an insurrection in the city, and for murder” (Luke 23:19). And John says that “he had taken part in a rebellion” (John 18:40).

Yet in spite of all this, Barabbas ended up being released. And actually, how Barabbas

came to be released probably tells us better than anything else just how horrible a man he really was.

Pontius Pilate the governor was bound and determined to get Jesus acquitted of the charges leveled against him by the Jews. He was determined to do this not only because he knew Jesus was innocent, and because Jesus unsettled him, but also because Pilate did not like the Jews and was unwilling to give in to their demands in general. Philo, a Jewish philosopher and historian, and a contemporary of Jesus, said that Pilate had a “very inflexible disposition,” was “very merciless as well as very obstinate,” and that he did not wish “to do any thing which could be acceptable to his [Jewish] subjects” (*On the Embassy to Gaius*, 301, 303).

Pilate truly thought that if he gave the Jews only two choices—to release Barabbas, or to release Jesus—they would choose absolutely anything over releasing Barabbas, and he would therefore be able to set Jesus free. Thus we can detect just how horrible and dangerous a criminal Barabbas was.

But Pilate’s plan backfired. He underestimated the Jewish leaders’ determination to have Jesus executed, and now he had backed himself into a corner. By giving the Jews a choice between Jesus and Barabbas, he had already unwittingly equated the two men as criminals and declared Jesus guilty. So if the Jewish leaders did choose to release Barabbas, Pilate would really have no choice but to condemn Jesus to death, since he had already put the two men on the same plane.

And that’s just what the Jewish leaders did. So, in the end, Pilate “released Barabbas to them, but he had Jesus flogged and handed him over to be crucified.”

Most Christians know all of this about Barabbas. But since this is the only Barabbas the Bible mentions, many people probably don’t know just how common a name Barabbas was.

In Aramaic, the language most Jews spoke in Jerusalem in Jesus’s day, the name Barabbas is Bar Abba. In the Jewish Talmud, the legend is told of a man named Samuel who wanted to talk to his deceased father about an unresolved financial matter. So he went to the cemetery and told the other spirits, “I am looking for Abba.” They replied, “There are many by the name of Abba here.” So he said, “I am looking for Abba Bar Abba.” They replied, “There are also many by the name of Abba Bar Abba here.” When he finally clarified that he was looking for Abba Bar Abba the father of Samuel, they were finally able to help him (*Berakoth* 18b).

You see, Abba itself was a common Jewish name, which simply means, “My father” (cf. Mark 14:36; Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6). So if your name was Abba and you had a son, you might very well name him, or nickname him, Bar Abba—or Barabbas, as we now say it—which simply means, “Son of Abba” or “Son of my father.” And, as you can see from the meaning, even if your name wasn’t Abba, you could still easily give that name to your son.

In fact, which of you men listening this could not have received that name? Who of you is not a son or daughter of your father? The name Barabbas or Bar Abba was almost the Jewish equivalent of the English phrase “Joe Everyman.”

That deserves some pause for thought. Joe Everyman was bound in a prison on death row for committing murder and rebellion. Suddenly he hears a Roman soldier coming keys-a-jingling to his cell. The soldier pulls out his keys, unlocks the cell door, and tells Joe Everyman, “You are free to go. They are crucifying a man named Jesus in your place.” Joe Everyman, even though he is guilty, is given the verdict of “not guilty” and set free.

Make no mistake, Barabbas was a real criminal who was really set free on that day in history about 1,990 years ago. But he was also a picture, a window into the courtroom of another, greater judge declaring a verdict that day—declaring a verdict about Jesus and a verdict about us.

The Jewish leaders and Pontius Pilate declared Jesus guilty for sinful reasons—the former out of envy and dissatisfaction with Jesus’s teaching, the latter out of selfish ambition, self-preservation, and convenience. But God the Father also declared Jesus guilty, and he did so for a completely righteous reason. It was the reason that a guilty criminal with an “Everyman” kind of name went free. It was the reason Isaiah states plainly in chapter 53: “We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of all of us. . . . By oppression and judgment he was taken away. . . . Yet it was the LORD’S will to crush him and cause him to suffer. . . . For he bore the sin of many.” Or as St. Paul says, “The One who had no experience with sin God made to be sin for us, so that we in turn might become the righteousness of God in him” (2 Cor. 5:21).

There is a day coming; it’s called Judgment Day. It is a day on which God the Righteous Judge will announce his verdict about all of us. The verdict that he will announce for all of you who believe in Jesus on that day in the future is the same verdict he announced on that day in the past: Jesus was guilty; you are not. For his sake, you are not guilty.

So the verdict, “worthy of death,” is not only the Jewish leaders’ verdict of Jesus, it is not only Pilate’s verdict, it is not only our sinful nature’s verdict, but it is also God’s verdict, and so it is also the verdict of our new person, the verdict of faith, for completely different reasons. It is the verdict of faith, because faith believes that Jesus wanted to bear our guilt for us, that he wanted to suffer God’s wrath and punishment in our place, that he wanted us, and all people, like Barabbas, to go innocent and free.

Who is Barabbas? In a way, he is you. In a way, he is me.

And because we, like Barabbas, are acquitted in Jesus’s innocence due to Jesus’s condemnation in our sin, which was exactly what God the Father wanted, God the Father therefore raised his Son from the dead so that now he too stands guilty no more (Rom. 6:9–10). Jesus now eagerly waits for the day when he will return and raise us from the dead and take us to be with him in the home of all those believe in him, the home of all those who are, by God’s own declaration, “Not guilty,” the home of all those who are, by the grace and work of Jesus, Barabbases, sons of his heavenly Father. Amen.