

Barabbas, the Man who was set Free

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[0 : 00] Well, let me encourage you folks to keep those verses in Matthew 27 open in front of you. And just for the next 15 minutes or so, as we remember this the most incredible of days, I want to take us back to the events of that very first Good Friday.

And what I'd like us to do is to spend some time in the shoes of this man who we've met in Matthew 27 called Barabbas. Now, Barabbas, I don't imagine that he did this, but if he was to do this at the end of his life and write his memoirs, write his autobiography, I would put a pretty penny on the fact that he would call it The Man That Went Free.

This is Barabbas, The Man Who Went Free. You see, the only time that Barabbas is mentioned in the Bible is in this episode here, in the final moments of Jesus' life.

But so important is this event that all the gospel writers include it. So Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all record this episode that happened with Barabbas.

And the funny thing about it is that Barabbas doesn't even make an appearance. One of you noticed that is we heard it read to us there by Alistair. He's mentioned four times in these verses as Matthew records it.

[1 : 25] But each time it's from the lips of other people as they talk about him rather than from Barabbas himself. I mean, Barabbas could not be any more passive in this episode here.

And yet he is a man who, as we'll come on to see, so profoundly represents each one of us here tonight. I'll first introduce to him, if you have it there, verse 16.

And just look at the adjective that Matthew uses to help us see what kind of man this man Barabbas is. Do you see it there in the text? He is notorious. So Barabbas says he's notorious.

Now, if you type notorious people into Google, what comes up are names like, and this is what I got yesterday when I did it, Jesse James. Heard of him? Jesse James, the American bank robber.

He's number one. Number two is Pablo Escobar, the Colombian drug lord. Number three is Lance Armstrong, the disgraced cyclist. These people who have forged a bad reputation for themselves and the whole world knows about it.

[2 : 34] And that's Barabbas. He's notorious. So everyone knows that he is one of Jerusalem's bad guys. He's the kind of guy that you don't want to bump into in a dark alley at night.

He's that kind of guy. He's the kind of guy you're hoping that your daughter doesn't bring home and say to you, Mom, Dad, meet my fiancée. That's Barabbas. Barabbas is a zealot.

What a zealot is, is really just a freedom fighter, a religious freedom fighter who's got one aim in life, and his one aim in life is to see that the Romans are kicked out of Jerusalem.

That's Barabbas. That's the zealots. And he's likely, he's, and it's highly likely that he's in prison because he's been involved in a rebellious uprising against the Romans, and he's committed murder in the process.

So try and picture Barabbas. Just get inside this text for a minute. Try and picture Barabbas. He's sitting there in this dark prison cell.

[3 : 36] He knows he's there because he's guilty. He's playing it over in his mind. He knows he's guilty. Now think about it. In this day, there's no appeal system that he can use. There's no legal aid which he can apply for.

The only thing that's in Barabbas' diary, so to speak, is his death. That's the only day, the only thing that's coming up in his to-do lists. To die. And to die by crucifixion.

This Barabbic Roman form of execution that's reserved for the worst of people. The one that makes a public statement to the watching world from Rome. That if anyone dares to rebel against Rome's king, if anyone dares rebel against Caesar, then this is the fate that they can expect.

Now Barabbas doesn't know when that's coming. All he knows is that it is coming. So picture this scene. He's in the cell. He's there. Dark prison cell. And from his cell, he hears the crowd.

And they're baying for blood. They're shouting, crucify him, crucify him, crucify him. And Barabbas gets that sinking feeling in his gut. And he thinks, well, this one must be for me.

[4 : 44] This is it. It's been good while it lasted, but this is it. Let's put on a brave show for the people. And let's go out a defiant hero. Because this is the kind of image I want the watching world to leave them with.

I want them to see that I'm brave. So let's put on a brave show. And all of a sudden, he hears the clinking of keys in his cell. And the guards, the one who's probably absolutely delighted to see him behind bars, this Roman guard, he shouts to him and he says, Barabbas, Barabbas.

And he's told to his astonishment, not that it's time to go. He's told, you're free to go. And what? You're free to go. Well, he's not going to waste this opportunity.

He's up, he gets, and he's shoved out the doors. And as Barabbas is led away to life and his freedom, he sees another man passing him.

And this man, it's really clear to see, is being dragged away to his death. And it dawns on Barabbas that that man that I crossed paths with, he is taking my place.

[5 : 59] On the cross. I'm going free because he is being sentenced to death. And so the moment passes. And I was trying to think on it this week.

I wonder if Barabbas, as he finds himself roaming the streets of Jerusalem again, he's a free man. He's a legally free man, declared legally free. I wonder whether he grabbed somebody who he knew had been on that crowd.

That crowd. And he grabbed them by the collar and he said, what on earth happened back there? Why am I free? What on earth happened?

Well, you see, it's widely understood that there's a custom that's developed over the years in this day between the Romans and the Jews. And it takes place every Passover festival in Jerusalem.

And really what it is, it's a goodwill gesture from Rome. It's designed to keep the peace, to keep the people happy. Because the Jews aren't happy that the Romans are there. And so they put on this little custom to win the Jews' favor.

[7 : 02] And if you want to think about it like this, this is the Romans saying, listen, we're not all that bad. And to prove it, you can have one of your own back once a year. Would that keep the peace?

This is what they're doing. And the deal was, every year the people are presented with two Jewish prisoners. And they're being asked to choose which one of them is going to be released.

And on this particular Passover day, the choice before the crowds is Barabbas or Jesus. It's really simple. Barabbas or Jesus.

So think about it. Here's the scales. You've got the notorious Roman killer who murders people for a living. And on the other hand, you've got the innocent Jewish carpenter.

Now, we often use that phrase, don't we, in our culture, it's a no-brainer. You've heard that one before. It's a no-brainer. And we talk about making obvious decisions. It's a no-brainer. Well, this one to me seems a bit like a no-brainer.

[8 : 06] And what's more, Pilate, the Roman governor who's overseeing this deal, he's not exactly neutral in this one. You might have picked it up as we read it through. He's not neutral in this one. He wants Jesus off the hook.

That's really clear to see. And what he's done is he's thought unto himself as he's thinking about putting this deal on the table for them. He's thought about, who's the worst prisoner that I can get in my sales? Who's the worst person that's out there?

Because if I put them up against Jesus, then surely the people will see this as a no-brainer. And Jesus will go free. And what's more, do you see in verse 17 how he's even dropping hints to the crowd that Jesus is the one people are calling Christ.

He's saying, this is what you call this man. You call him Christ. He wants them to see that people think well of Jesus. And what's more, his wife's getting on in the act as well.

As if to say, don't punish that man. I mean, Barabbas is not just the underdog in this one. He's not even just the 500-1 to-1 outside shot. Barabbas surely has got no chance in this deal.

[9 : 14] But the thing to see is that Pilate has so hugely underestimated just how much hatred there is towards this man, Jesus.

Now, follow with me. This comes across as Barabbas learns. Remember, he's still talking to the person. He's grabbing the scruff of the neck. He learns that Pilate asked the crowd three questions.

Really simply, here's three questions. Firstly, verse 17. And then again at verse 21, because they didn't answer it the first time. He says, which? Which of these men do you want me to release to you?

That's what he asked us. And after some persuasion from the religious leaders, against all the odds, the crowd chanted back, not Jesus' name. They chanted back, your name, Barabbas.

Barabbas. Barabbas. They wanted you to go free because they wanted Jesus to go to the cross. You know that cross that had your name written all over it? Yeah, well, we sent Jesus there. And we made our feelings crystal clear to Pilate.

[10 : 20] And Pilate, in a stunned tone, we could hear it in his voice. He turned to us and verse 22, he asked us, the witch, we picked Jesus. And then he asked us, what? What should I do with Jesus then?

This is what he asked us. We could tell by the tone of his voice that he thought we've made the wrong choice here. This one is unfair. But regardless, we thundered back and we shouted louder than before.

We shouted, crucify him, crucify him, send Jesus to the cross. So he's asked us which. He's asked us what. And then thirdly, he turns and asks us why.

What's he done? And yes, we were a little hazy on the facts. But with this man, Jesus, with a blasphemy charge hanging over him, it wasn't the smartest move for us to stand against the religious leaders.

And so we just joined in and we shouted, crucify him, crucify him. We didn't even give Pilate an answer. And then Pilate gives the order to release you and to condemn Jesus.

[11 : 24] Barabbas, you're free. And I wonder if at that moment, it becomes crystal clear to Barabbas that this man, Jesus of Nazareth, physically took his place.

He took his place. He took my place. He's the only man, isn't he, in history who can say physically that Jesus took his place. And it's interesting because Barabbas' name means really simply son of the father.

Bar, son, Abba, father. He is the son of the father. And if you think about it, he's up against another son of the father in the form of Jesus Christ.

So really, this is a choice the crowd have between two sons. For all intents and purposes, as you consider the whole chaotic scene, the whole mess of this episode, you think to yourself, they've freed the wrong son and they've condemned the wrong son.

But the thing for us to see as we sit here 2,000 odd years later is that even though the people in this crowd, they put forward the wrong son, we can rejoice today in the fact that on this day, God put forward the right son.

[12 : 50] Because it looks like Pilate, do you see how Matthew describes him as the one sitting on the earthly seat of power, sitting on the earthly judgment seat? It looks like he's lost all control of this seat, doesn't it?

However, the Lord, who sits on heaven's throne, he's not lost control of this seat. The one who sits in heaven's seat of power is in total control.

And this God who we come to worship this evening, as the one who so loved the world, that he gave his one and only son, that all who would believe in him would not perish, but have eternal life.

Barabbas is the one man in history who can say, Jesus literally took my place. Jesus bore my guilt, my shame, the curse that I deserved.

And I received the release, the freedom, and the life that he deserved. That's Barabbas' testimony. That's what happened. But you're beginning to see how this man Barabbas, on a spiritual sense, he so profoundly represents each one of us here tonight.

[14 : 14] Because we might not share his life, we might not share his specific sins, but let me tell you this, we share his sin. And because we share his sin, we share his sentence.

The sentence, guilty and awaiting death, with no hope of saving ourselves. And praise God, that this perfect God-man, Jesus Christ, God's son, he took our place.

And he got what we deserved. And we get what he deserved. The thing that the Martin Luther called the great exchange, this is the greatest exchange in all of history.

that Jesus Christ gives up his life so that all those who trust in him can be forgiven and have eternal life.

This is the glory of the cross. The place where heaven's perfect love and perfect justice meet. The glory of the cross that God the Father sent God the Son to die for people like Barabbas and to die for people like us.

[15 : 36] Friends, as we sit here tonight, we've only got two words to say and that is thank you. Thank you. What amazing grace our God has shown us.

You know, I was thinking this week of the words of Charles Wesley. Charles Wesley, he responded to the cross and I love these words. He simply wrote this and hear his heart and all this and we'll finish with this.

Okay. And can it be that I should gain an interest in the Saviour's blood? Died he for me who caused his pain?

For me who him to death pursued? Amazing love, how can it be that thou, my God, should die for me?

And so as we sit here tonight, let's make that our heart's prayer that we would sit once again at the foot of the cross knowing that our sins are forgiven, knowing as we'll sing in a minute that this Jesus Christ stands at the right hand of the Father risen and interceding for his own and knowing that we are recipients of quite incredible grace.

[16 : 54] Thank you. And so just in a few moments time we're going to remember that as we take communion together. I was reading it to my little girl before we came out who Jesus took bread and said, this is my body, do this in remembrance of me.

And he took wine and he said, do this, take this in remembrance of me. We're going to do this and we're going to remember and we're going to worship him. What a great God we have.

So why don't we just be still for a few moments before we move on, before our God, let's just be still for a few moments and let's bring our prayers and our thanks to him and then I'll pray.

God made him who had no sin to be sin for us so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

our heavenly father we praise you tonight for sending your son Jesus for us to rescue us through his precious blood shed on the cross and we praise you for the forgiveness and the life that we have found in him and so we ask heavenly father that you would be with us now as we take bread and wine together that you would help us rejoice in your son Jesus Christ the one who is crucified the one who is risen and the one who will one day return and so we pray these things knowing that you hear us because we pray in his precious name amen amen