

## The Gospel of Barabbas – Matthew 27:11-21

**Introduction:** In the past few messages in the book of Matthew, we've been looking at the last week of Jesus' life on earth before His crucifixion. Particularly, we've focused on several of the people who were involved in the story. Last week, before the bad weather hit us, I was set to preach on Pilate, and his famous question, "*What then shall I do with Jesus?*" I will address that question next week, but for tonight, I want to focus on another character in the story – Barabbas.

Now, in preparing for this message I realized that one can say everything there is to say in the Bible about Barabbas in one sentence, maybe two if you really stretch it out. That's probably why you haven't heard very many sermons about Barabbas.

Barabbas' story is not normal. His story is not like the cops and robbers stories we see on TV where at the end of the show the bad guy is caught and justice is served. His story is more in line with the O.J. Simpson trial where the killer was set free. We don't like it, but there's nothing we can do about it. There is just something within us that cries out against injustice.

**READ Matthew 27:11-21 & 26 (NIV).**

Jesus has been arrested by the Jewish leaders for claiming to be God, and brought before the high priest the scribes and the elders but they had no power to put a man to death. The Roman's had that authority, but in order to take Jesus to Pilate they had to charge him with treason, that He claimed to be king.

Now Pilate had no interest in dealing with Jesus. The only reason he dealt with this issue at all was because of the large crowd of people that were shouting to crucify Jesus. Pilate's wife tried to warn him to have nothing to do with Jesus. In fact, she called him an innocent man. That's when Pilate thought he had come up with a plan to make the people release Jesus. He remembered a Jewish custom of releasing a prisoner during the Feast of Passover, so he thought he would do that. He remembered a man by the name of Barabbas who was being held in prison for murder. He thought to himself, "*The crowd would never let me release this notorious murderer back into society, so I'll just narrow their choices between this murderer and Jesus. They'll call for Jesus' release, and I'll be off the hook.*" However, things didn't turn out as Pilate hoped. The crowd called for him to release Barabbas and crucify Jesus.

Now, let me tell you what all we know about Barabbas. Matthew says that he was a *notorious prisoner* (16). Mark says that he was an insurrectionist *murderer* (Mark 15:7). John says that he was a *robber* (John 18:40). That's all we know about Barabbas, but it's enough to let us know that he was a bad dude who had committed a lot of sin in his life. It's enough to let us know that he deserved to be in prison awaiting execution.

Now the prison where Barabbas was being held was about 2,000 feet away from where Jesus was being tried. Pilate asks, "*Which one do you want me to release to you: Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?*" And the crowd shouts "*Barabbas.*" Now Barabbas can hear the crowd, but he can't make out what Pilate is saying. Pilate says, "*What shall I do then with Jesus, who is called the Christ?*" The crowd shouts "*Crucify him!*"

From what Barabbas can hear, he probably thinks he is about to be crucified. Then, in just a few minutes, a band of burley Roman soldiers come to open up the cell to get Barabbas and as they do, they tell him to go. He is now free.

“Free to go?” Barabbas says. “Yes someone else is dying today in your place,” the guards reply.

Now, it’s obvious even from what little we know about him that Barabbas was a sinner, and deserved to be in prison awaiting execution. But what I want to point out tonight is that whether we want to admit it or not, Barabbas identifies every one of us. The Bible says that “*all sinned and come short of the glory of God.*” (**Romans 3:23 NIV**). And just like Barabbas we were sitting in prison, chained in bondage with a death sentence hanging over us.

Now we may have never done anything as bad as Barabbas. We may not be a murderer or a robber, or an insurrectionist, but in the eyes of God, any sin is bad enough to condemn us to death. **Romans 5:12 (NIV)** says, “*Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned.*”

Barabbas was a murder and a thief, and had already been convicted of those crimes and under the law he deserved to die a physical death. **Genesis 9:6 (NIV)** says, “*Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man.*”

But there is also a spiritual death that all sinners deserve. **Romans 6:23 (NIV)** says, “*For the wages of sin is death...*” This spiritual death – being separated from God, was passed down to all mankind the moment Adam and Eve disobeyed God. From that moment, a spiritual death sentence was placed upon all of humanity. **Romans 5:17 (NLT)** says, “*The sin of this one man, Adam, caused death to rule over us...*”

But back to Barabbas; in spite of all he’d done to be thrown in prison and condemned to die, I’m sure he really wanted to be released. There’s something within the heart of mankind that yearns for freedom, even if we know we don’t deserve it.

Barabbas was released to enjoy his freedom by an event he wasn’t even aware of at the time. His freedom was brought about through no effort of his own. His freedom was secured by Jesus.

When Jesus announced His public ministry, He said, “*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has appointed me to preach Good News to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the downtrodden will be freed from their oppressors, and that the time of the Lord's favor has come.*” **Luke 4:18-19 (NLT)**.

Now, I’m not saying that Barabbas was saved as a result of his release from prison. One has to put their faith in Christ in order for salvation to be accomplished. **Galatians 3:23 (NIV)** says, “*Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed.*” But, I am saying that even though we have no record of Barabbas ever being saved, it was Pilate and the crowd’s decision to condemn Jesus to death that opened up the way for Barabbas’ freedom.

A few years ago, 3 members of a Christian peacemaker team were in Iraq protesting the war when they were taken captive and held for four months, until they were rescued by American and British forces. When this organization released a press statement about their freedom, they never once mentioned the people who freed them. Instead they reported the story saying that they were let go and they condemned America for being in Iraq.

As I said, we don't know if Barabbas ever got saved. Chances are he didn't because we never hear from him again. But it was Jesus who opened up the way for his freedom. And we can see in his account exactly what many people have done to Jesus. He came to set us free. He paid the ultimate price for our sins on the cross, and yet many people fail to even acknowledge Him.

Who was it that placed Jesus on the cross? Was it the Roman soldiers? Judas? Pilate? The crowd? It was all of them, but mostly it was my sin and your sin. Jesus went to the cross for sinners; and as the Apostle Paul said, I am chief one!

We are told in Leviticus 16, that on the Day of Atonement, Aaron, the high priest would go in and offer a sacrifice for his sins and the sins of his household. Then he'd take two goats and cast lots for them – one for the Lord and one for the scapegoat. One goat would be sacrificed as a sin offering for the people, and the other goat would be presented alive before the Lord. He would place his hands on its head and confess over it the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites – symbolically transferring their sins to the goat and then release it into the wilderness.

When Jesus went to the cross He made atonement for our sins by taking all our punishment. He became our scapegoat. **2 Cor. 5:21 (NIV)** says, “*God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*”

That is the only reason we will be numbered with the thousands upon thousands and ten thousand times ten thousands of angels who will one day sing, “*Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!*” **Revelation 5:12 (NIV)**

God treated Jesus on the cross as if he had committed all the sins of the world, though He never committed one sin. God treats believers today as though we are righteous even though we still sin. The words to the song written by Elvina M. Hall are so true: *Jesus paid it all, All to Him I owe; Sin had left a crimson stain, He washed it white as snow. For nothing good have I Whereby Thy grace to claim, I'll wash my garments white in the blood of Calv'ry's Lamb. And now complete in Him My robe, His righteousness, Close sheltered 'neath His side, I am divinely blest.*

We are divinely blest. My prayer is that all of us would discover in full what Barabbas only discovered in part that day. That is the amazing grace of God is sufficient to save a wretch like me.