

The People's Choice!

John 18:38-40

Introduction

In Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, a young Frenchman, named Charles Darnay, was condemned to die by the guillotine. One hour before his execution was to take place, he was visited by his close friend – a young Englishman, named Sidney, who could have passed for his twin. Sidney had already made up his mind to take Charles' place on the guillotine – an act of love that he hoped would save his friend's life and return him to his wife and child.

To that end, Sidney gained admission to the dungeon. After the guard had left, Sidney overpowered Charles, by using an anesthetic which left him limp and sleepy. He then, exchanged clothes with him and called the jailer. Pretending to be the one condemned to die, he asked that his unconscious "visitor," supposedly overcome with grief, be removed and returned to his home.

The plan worked and Charles Darnay was rescued from death. On his way to the guillotine, the young Englishman, Sidney Carton, spoke these final words, "It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done . . ."

There is a perspective on the final moments of Christ's life that is often overlooked. It is the perspective seen through the eyes of a criminal – a criminal who was condemned to die on a cross, but instead, another man hung in his place.

The condemned criminal would go free – and his name was Barabbas! It would be Barabbas, more than any other person at the scene of Calvary, who could say, "I have a substitute dying in my place."

The story of Barabbas has some tremendous things to say to those of us who have received Christ as our personal substitute. Barabbas also has some things to say to anyone who is still chained in the dungeon of unbelief – to anyone who wants to be free!

For those reasons, let us take a closer look, as John, the gospel writer, pens just two verses. We will start with chapter 18, verse 38.

Pilate said to Him, "What is truth?" And when he had said this, he went out again to the Jews, and said to them, "I find no guilt in Him."

The Predicament of Pilate . . . A Coward as Judge

Now, before we go any further, I want to remind you of some events that will bring Pilate to make this desperate attempt to free Jesus Christ - it is the drama behind the drama.

Pilate was already in trouble with, not only the Jews, but Tiberius, the Roman emperor. When he became governor over Palestine, the first thing he did was leave his capital city of Caesarea and come to Jerusalem for a visit. When the Roman leaders came, they always stayed in the old Palace of the Herods in the western part of the city. And, like those rulers before him, Pilate came with a bodyguard of soldiers.

One of the soldiers would be carrying the standard of Rome – a pole with an insignia attached. This was a type of banner with the emblems of Rome displayed. Attached to the standard was a metal bust of the reigning emperor, who was regarded as a god. It was not unusual for soldiers to pay religious homage

before the banner after a victory – as Titus did when he later destroyed Jerusalem.

Now, to the Jew, this was considered idolatry. They always demanded that the soldiers remove this metal bust before entering the holy city of Jerusalem. In the past, all of the other governors had obliged the Jews – but Pilate refused. The Jews lobbied him heavily and finally, he told them to meet him in the amphitheater. He then surrounded them with armed soldiers and informed them that, if they did not stop their requests, they would be killed there and then. To his surprise, the Jews bared their necks and invited the soldiers to strike. Not even Pilate could massacre defenseless men. He was beaten and forced to remove the image. That is how he started his reign.

The second thing that occurred was when he decided to build an aqueduct to bring water into Jerusalem, where the supply was inadequate. He did not have the money to do this, so he sent his soldiers to forcibly take the money from the temple treasury. The people rioted and surged through the streets. Pilate then sent his soldiers, in ordinary clothing, to mingle with the people. At a given signal, they attacked the mob – clubbing and stabbing hundreds of Jews to death.

Eventually, Pilate was reported to Tiberius. He would later be called to stand before the high court of Rome and give an account.

So, in the midst of an already disturbing reign, clouded by poor decisions which infuriated the Jewish population, having already been warned by his superiors not to cause additional problems with the Jews, Jesus now stands before him. The crowd is becoming hysterical and the Jewish leaders are, no doubt, threatening to report him again. What should he do? He knows Jesus is innocent.

The Principle of Passover . . . A Customary Reminder!

Then he remembers something! He takes, from the pages of Israelite customs, a “sure fire” way to have Jesus released. It is a stroke of courtroom genius. Now look at verse 39, Pilate says,

But you have a custom, that I should release someone for you at the Passover; do you wish then that I release for you the King of the Jews?

Most Old Testament scholars believe this custom found its roots in the Passover. The Israelites

remembered their slavery in Egypt, as Exodus, chapter 12, tells us. The Passover was the celebration of their release from, in effect, an Egyptian dungeon. As a way of commemorating their release, every Passover celebration, they would release one Jewish criminal from prison.

The *Mishnah*, a commentary on Jewish life, referred to the custom as a way of illustrating the fact that, “the Passover lamb would be sacrificed for one whom they promised to bring out of prison.”

It was a beautiful custom, and though we could assume that petty criminals were selected for release, I am sure that no released criminal ever quite got over the sensation of being freed – though guilty.

Some time earlier, the Romans had captured a criminal named Barabbas. “Surely,” Pilate thought, “the people would rather have this healer and teacher released to them than a felon.”

But, as you already know, Pilate’s attempt failed. In the process of his attempt, however, another character steps unwittingly into this drama. This hardened felon will never forget what happened during that Passover celebration.

A Prisoner of Rome . . . A Convict on Death Row!

Turn to the amplified account of Barabbas’ story, in Matthew, chapter 27. We will begin at verse 16.

And they were holding at that time a notorious prisoner, called Barabbas.

A Legacy In His Name

Stop for a moment. I want you to see two things about the name of this criminal. There is a legacy gone sour, implied in his name.

We are never given any name other than Barabbas. However, that is simply an Aramaic expression which told us who his father was. The first part of this Aramaic word is “Bar,” which simply means, “son”. The last part, “abbas,” tells us about his father. Perhaps you remember reading the phrase, “Simon bar Jonah”. That tells us that Simon was the son of a man named Jonah.

If I were so designated, my name would be Stephen bar Keith, meaning that I am Stephen the son of a man named Keith.

So, who was Barabbas' father? All we have is the word "abbas," or "abba," which we already know means "father". Son of a father?! That's strange.

Well, William Barclay pulls back the layers of history and reveals that the greatest and most respected rabbis, during the time of Christ, were referred to as "abbas". In fact, well into the second century the custom persisted.

Barabbas was the son of a godly rabbi. He was a preacher's kid.

Now, we know something about his father, but we still do not know Barabbas' first name!

We discover his name in some of the oldest versions of the New Testament – the ancient Syriac and Armenian versions. It is a name that was perhaps, later dropped from the Alexandrian text, which I am holding in my hands. Perhaps it was dropped due to a desire to dissociate that precious name with a notorious criminal. *Why?* Because his name was, in Greek, "Jesus".

It is interesting that, in Matthew's account, in chapter 27, verses 17 and 22, Pilate refers to Jesus, during this discussion about Barabbas, as ". . . Jesus who is called Christ". Why the designation? Jesus was a common name – like Steve, or Bob, or John. There were many little Jewish boys who were called Jesus. It was the Old Testament name "Yeshua," or "Joshua". It would be the hope of the parents that their little boy would grow up and be a deliverer – a strong godly man.

So, this rabbi and his wife had a little boy. They were thrilled and decided to name him "Yeshua," "Jesus"!

So, Pilate stood and addressed the crowd and gave them the choice. Look at verse 17.

When therefore they were gathered together, Pilate said to them, "Whom do you want me to release for you? Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?"

Skip to 21 and 22.

But the governor answered and said to them, "Which of the two do you want me to release for you?" And they said, "Barabbas." Pilate said to them, "Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" They all said, "Let Him be crucified!"

Imagine, "Which Jesus do you want to be rid of?! Jesus the Christ or Jesus, the preacher's kid?"

Can you imagine the irony of asking the question, which was, in effect, "Which one do you want me to release, Jesus, the son of a rabbi, or Jesus the Son of God?"

The people's choice was unanimous – they wanted the rabbi's son released.

A Long History of Crime

Just who were they asking to have released? If you combine the gospels, you will discover that there was evidently, a history of crime. He had a "rap sheet" that was a mile long.

John, in chapter 18, verse 40, referred to him as a "robber". In the Greek, this is the word, "lestes," which referred to a dangerous man. On the post office bulletin board, Barabbas would have the words clearly stated, "Armed and extremely dangerous".

Mark, in chapter 15, verse 7, called him a "murderer".

Luke, in chapter 23, verse 19, referred to him as an "insurrectionist". This is very important, because it tells us *who* Barabbas was guilty of murdering! Luke tells us that Barabbas was part of an ever emerging group of men who were insurrectionists leading in guerilla warfare. They were attempting to weaken and ultimately, overthrow Roman rule in Palestine. He would have been fiercely loyal to Judaism, but perhaps believed that his godly father's passive stand against the rule of Rome should be replaced by hand-to-hand combat and hidden daggers.

Matthew, in chapter 27, verse 16, called him a "notorious prisoner". Besides meaning "well known," "notorious" literally meant, "marked". In other words, he was a "marked" man – there had evidently, been a hunt for this leader of rebellion against Rome.

I would agree with one commentator who suggested that Barabbas was probably a hero among the Jews. He was their Robin Hood – a patriot who had already succeeded in killing Roman soldiers and leading an armed revolt against Rome.

He was the kind of Messiah they were wanting. He was the kind of Jesus they had been waiting for! They wanted a zealot leader to overthrow Rome, and Barabbas was their hope. He met their expectations of what Messiah would do. Barabbas was the people's choice! "Give us Jesus, son of the rabbi. Crucify Jesus, Son of God!!!!!!!"

My friend, are you an unbeliever today, because Jesus does not fit your definition of God? Has His story disappointed you too? Has He failed to live up to your expectations too?

A Last Minute Release

Now, the Bible tells us in Matthew, chapter 27, verse 16, that,

. . . they were holding [him] at that time . . .

That tells us that Barabbas was being held in the only prison in Jerusalem, which was known as the Fortress of Antonia. Not only did it serve as the prison, but also as the barracks for the Roman soldiers who accompanied Pilate on his visits to Jerusalem. That fortress was only several hundred yards away from the Palace of the Herods, where Pilate held his courtroom proceeding.

It is very likely that Barabbas was aware of the growing mob of people. Without a doubt, he could hear their cries of, “Crucify, crucify,” and, for all he would know, the mob would be calling for his crucifixion. He was too far away to hear the words of Pilate, but close enough to hear the crowd.

Look at Matthew, chapter 27, verse 20 and 21. Imagine Barabbas hearing only the cries of the multitude.

But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the multitudes to ask for Barabbas, and to put Jesus to death. But the governor answered and said to them, “Which of the two do you want me to release for you?” And they said, “Barabbas.”

Barabbas hears his name. His ear perk up. Continue to verses 22 and 23.

Pilate said to them, “Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?” They all said, “Let Him be crucified!” And he said, “Why, what evil has He done?” But they kept shouting all the more, saying, “Let Him be crucified.”

Matthew used the word “krazo,” meaning, “to scream”. The imperfect tense pictures the continual action; that is, the crowd kept screaming this chant, “Crucify Him . . . Crucify Him . . . Crucify Him!”

Can you imagine Barabbas’ fear? He must have been paralyzed with panic.

Use your imagination for a moment and wonder. Donald Grey Barnhouse triggered my imagination,

and I want to push the play button on yours now. Listen to Barnhouse as he writes,

The Roman soldiers had stopped the riot and had taken Barabbas. His blood-guiltiness was established. He was flung into his cell to join two other condemned men – there to wait the moment of his death.

Now, a man who is to be hanged has difficulty in keeping his hand away from his throat, where the rope is soon to choke him. I have been told by a chaplain in a prison, where men are executed in a gas chamber, that the condemned practice long breathing, sometimes will hold their breath, until it seems that their eyes will pop from their sockets. They know that they are going to be put into a gas chamber, and that they will hear a little hissing sound of incoming death, and that the breath that they are now forcing into their lungs will be the last that they shall ever know. So they will hold on and on, straining at the thongs that tie them to their chair, until they are forced, by the law of breathing, to exhale the last breath that contains oxygen and take in the death that floats around them.

Barabbas must have looked at his hands and wondered how it would feel to have the nails ripping through his flesh. He must have remembered scenes of crucifixion, death, and the slow agony of the victims who suffered, at times, for a day or two before merciful death came to release them. He must have awakened with at start, if he heard any hammering in the jail. And, his mind must have anticipated the sound of the clanging hammers that would bring death near to him.

And then, in his prison, from his cell, he hears the vague roar of the crowd that is roaring outside like the roaring of a troubled sea. He thinks he hears his own name. He can tell that there are angry cries, and fear rises in his heart. Then, he hears the sound of a key in the lock. The jailer comes to him and unbinds him from the chain that is wound around him. He must have thought that his time had come. But the jailer takes him to the door, opens it, and tells him – he is a free man. A free man!

Application – The Response of Barabbas . . . And You?!

In this wonderful story about Barabbas, we see that he so clearly illustrates the position of all humanity. He was condemned already, and awaiting final judgment. Luke, chapter 4, verse 18, clearly declared that the purpose of Christ's coming was to “. . . proclaim release to the captives . . .”.

Barabbas would be the only man in history to whom the death of Christ brought literal physical freedom, as well as potential spiritual freedom.

Frankly, we do not know how Barabbas responded to the jailer. I wish we did.

Imagine several different ways that Barabbas could have responded.

I can't believe it's true . . .

1. He could have said, “I can't believe it's true – I've sinned too greatly – it can't be possible! Do you know who you're talking to? I'm Barabbas, the notorious criminal, number one on Rome's most wanted list – a murderer; a liar. You look back at my life, oh how I've lived – starting with the day I left home. I was sick of my preacher father and religion. You don't know the tears my mother shed over me. I've messed up my life. I am a violent man, deserving a violent death. Surely, you must be mistaken.”

Has Christ appeared at the doorway of your cell? Have you told Him that salvation for such a sinner as you could not be free; could not be possible?!

The wonderful thing is that Christ died for death row inmates, failures, sinners, and outcasts.

I love the story M. R. Dehaan told of the town scrooge, named Mr. Kline. No one really seemed to care for the selfish old man, and children made up rhymes about his eccentricity.

Then, one particular Sunday night, he was walking down the street past the little Baptist church. It was a warm summer night and the windows of the church were open, which allowed the singing to be heard across the lawn.

No one knew it, but Mr. Kline had become convinced that life simply was not worth living. He

was discouraged and defeated and was at the end of hope. As the congregation sang, he caught the strains of a hymn, “Jesus died for all mankind and Jesus died for me.”

His hearing was not good and, when the congregation came again to the chorus, “Jesus died for all mankind,” he thought they were singing, “Jesus died for ol' man Kline.”

He exclaimed to himself, “That's me!”

Stopping in his tracks, he turned and entered the small auditorium. There he heard the simple message of the gospel and believed.

I don't deserve to die . . .

2. Or, just suppose Barabbas said, “I don't deserve to die – I'm innocent! And, I won't accept the pardon and leave this prison unless Rome declares me innocent.”

Many people refuse to accept God's verdict that they are condemned already. They refuse to leave their prison made by sin, because they refuse to admit they are guilty.

They remind me of Rodney Dangerfield – that eminent theologian who never can get his books published. He and his doctor were looking at his x-rays. “It's bad news,” the doctor says, “you're in terrible shape and you're going to need major surgery. It will be painful and very expensive surgery.”

Dangerfield thinks for a moment and then responds, “Listen, doctor, for a hundred bucks, do you think you could just touch up the x-rays?”

Do you know what good, moral, religious people are doing all over America this Sunday morning? They are touching up their x-rays. They have put in a ten dollar bill; they have sung a few hymns, and they think, “There, that ought to make it look better!”

But the truth remains – radical spiritual surgery is needed. Sin must be admitted, confessed, and forgiven. If you want to get out of prison, you have to admit your sinful need and guilt!

I don't want to be pardoned yet . . .

3. Or, perhaps Barabbas said, “I don't want to be pardoned yet – I appreciate the gesture, but I would rather stay in this prison and go through the process of reformation first. Let me get my life together before I accept a

pardon. I'm not ready for freedom yet. Let me first prove that I deserve my freedom!"

There are people to whom I have witnessed, who say, "Look, I believe everything you're telling me, but I'll probably fail God again."

And that is true – you will sin again – but Jesus died for sinners. Once you have become a Christian, you are not given perfection, but you are given a Person who will enable you. He is called the Holy Spirit. You are given a passion for purity – that is called the new nature.

Barabbas, as well as you and I, do not receive the exchange of life for death by personal reformation; by personal restitution. We have to become a part of a prisoner exchange. What did Barabbas have to do to be freed? He only had to walk out of the prison! He only had to accept his freedom! That is it! Why? Because his freedom was paid for literally, by the Lamb who would be sacrificed in his place. I know that sounds too easy! I know that does not sound like your religious upbringing, but it is true.

Louis Pasteur's co-worker was Dr. Felix Ruh, a Jewish doctor in Paris. Dr. Ruh would focus much of his time working on the "germ theory" – the belief that people could be infected by invisible germs that carried the strains of disease. The "germ theory" had been officially denounced by the Medical Association. But, Dr. Ruh's granddaughter had died of black diphtheria, and Dr. Ruh, vowing that he would find out what killed his granddaughter, locked himself in his laboratory for days. He emerged with a fierce determination to prove, with his colleague Louis Pasteur, that the "germ theory" was more than a theory.

The Medical Association had so disapproved of Ruh, that they had succeeded in getting him temporarily exiled. He did not go far from Paris, however. He hid in the forest and erected a laboratory in which to continue his forbidden research.

Twenty beautiful horses were led out into the forest of the improvised laboratory. Scientists, doctors, and nurses came to watch the experiment. Ruh opened a steel vault and took out a large pail filled with black diphtheria germs, which he had cultured carefully for months. There were enough germs in that pail to kill everyone in France. Dr. Ruh went to each beautiful horse and swabbed its nostrils, tongue, throat, and eyes with those deadly germs. The scientists waited several days to see the outcome. Every horse developed a terrific fever, and all but one,

soon died. Most of the doctors and scientists wearied of the experiment and did not remain for, what they thought would be, the death of the last horse.

For several more days, this final horse lingered, lying pathetically on the ground. The orderly on duty, while Ruh, Pasteur, and several others were sleeping on cots in the stables, had been instructed to awaken the scientists should there be any change in the animal's temperature. About two a.m., the temperature showed a half degree decrease, so the orderly awakened the them. By morning, its temperature had dropped two more degrees. By that night, the fever had disappeared entirely and the horse was able to stand, eat, and drink.

Then, Dr. Ruh took a sledge hammer and struck that beautiful horse a death blow between the eyes. The scientists and doctors drew all the blood from the veins of this animal that had developed the disease, but had overcome it. They then raced to the Municipal Hospital in Paris, pushed their way past the superintendent and guards, and forced their entrance into a ward where several hundred babies had already been segregated to die from black diphtheria. With the blood of the horse, they inoculated every one of the babies. That one beautiful horse, that had been infected with the disease and had overcome it, died so that two hundred ninety seven babies could live.

Amazing – help from a theory that was unaccepted; healing from a source that was unorthodox – but babies lived, instead of died!

Ladies and gentlemen, it does not matter what the religions of the world declare and what the clerics deny – humanity is infected with a disease called sin.

- John, chapter 3, verse 18, tells us that we are already condemned.
- Romans, chapter 1, tells us that we are without excuse.
- Romans, chapter 6, verse 23, tells us that the penalty of sin is eternal death – separation from a holy God.
- Revelation informs us that the ultimate place of punishment is a lake of fire, called hell.

But, something happens – there was this Lamb who became infected with sin, but overcame it. Now, to those who receive the cleansing flow of His blood to wash their hearts; to those who believe in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ – this unproven carpenter, this unorthodox teacher – to those who

have given to Him their sin and their souls, they are released – spiritually healed forever!

Donald Gray Barnhouse once said that Christianity can be expressed in three simple phrases:

- we deserved hell
- Jesus took our hell
- there is nothing left for us but heaven.

As the hymn says,

*. . . Can it be that I should gain an interest in
the Savior's blood?*

Died He for me, who caused His pain?

*Amazing love! How can it be that Thou, my
God, shouldst die for me!*

*He left His Father's throne above, so free, so
infinite His grace!*

*Emptied Himself of all but love, and bled for
Adam's helpless race!*

*Tis mercy all, immense and free, for, O my
God, it found out me!*

*Long my imprisoned spirit lay, fast bound in
sin and nature's night;*

*Thine eye diffused a quickening ray; I woke
the dungeon flamed with light!*

*My chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose,
went forth, and followed Thee!*

*Amazing love! How can it be, that Thou, my
God, shouldst die for me!*

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 1/15/1995 by Stephen Davey.

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