

The Heart of the Gospel: Gethsemane to the Burial of Christ

Chapter 10: The Civil Trial of Christ—Barabbas Chosen over Jesus

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Now at that feast he released unto them one prisoner, whomsoever they desired. And there was one named Barabbas, which lay bound with them that had made insurrection with him, who had committed murder in the insurrection. And the multitude crying aloud began to desire him to do as he had ever done unto them. But Pilate answered them, saying, "Will ye that I release unto you the King of the Jews?" For he knew that the chief priests had delivered him for envy. But the chief priests moved the people, that he should rather release Barabbas unto them. And Pilate answered and said again unto them, "What will ye then that I shall do unto him whom ye call the King of the Jews?" And they cried out again, "Crucify him." Then Pilate said unto them, "Why, what evil hath he done?" And they cried out the more exceedingly, "Crucify him." And so Pilate, willing to content the people, released Barabbas unto them, and delivered Jesus, when he had scourged him, to be crucified. (Mark 15:6-15)

And they had then a notable prisoner, called Barabbas. Therefore when they were gathered together, Pilate said unto them, "Whom will ye that I release unto you? Barabbas, or Jesus which is called Christ?" For he knew that for envy they had delivered him. When he was set down on the judgment seat, his wife sent unto him, saying, "Have thou nothing to do with that just man: for I have suffered many things this day in a dream because of him." But the chief priests and elders persuaded the multitude that they should ask Barabbas, and destroy Jesus. The governor answered and said unto them, "Whether of the twain will ye that I release unto you?" They said, "Barabbas." Pilate saith unto them, "What shall I do then with Jesus which is called Christ?" They all say unto him, "Let him be crucified." And the governor said, "Why, what evil hath he done?" But they cried out the more, saying, "Let him be crucified." When Pilate saw that he could prevail nothing, but that rather a tumult was made, he took water, and washed his hands before the multitude, saying, "I am innocent of the blood of this just person: see ye to it." Then answered all the people, and said, "His blood be on us, and on our children." Then released he Barabbas unto them: and when he had scourged Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified. (Matthew 27:16-26)

And Pilate, when he had called together the chief priests and the rulers and the people, Said unto them, "Ye have brought this man unto me, as one that perverteth the people: and, behold, I, having examined him before you, have found no fault in this man touching those things whereof ye accuse him: No, nor yet Herod: for I sent you to him; and, lo, nothing worthy of death is done unto him. I will therefore chastise him, and release him." (For of necessity he must release one unto them at the feast.) And they cried out all at once, saying, "Away with this man, and release unto us Barabbas:" (Who for a certain sedition made in the city, and for murder, was cast into prison.) Pilate therefore, willing to release Jesus, spake again to them. But they cried, saying, "Crucify him, crucify him." And he said unto them the third time, "Why, what evil hath he done? I have found no cause of death in him: I will therefore chastise him, and let him go." And they were instant with loud voices, requiring that he might be crucified. And the voices of them and of the chief priests prevailed. And Pilate gave sentence that it should be as they

required. And he released unto them him that for sedition and murder was cast into prison, whom they had desired; but he delivered Jesus to their will. (Luke 23:13-25)

After humiliating Christ, Herod sends our Lord back to Pilate and his jurisdiction (Lk. 23:11). Pilate calls together the chief priests, the rulers and the people (Lk. 23:13). The mention of the people indicates that Pilate wants to make a public pronouncement. Perhaps the governor (in light of the favorable treatment of Jesus during His triumphal entry on the previous Sunday) believed the masses would be useful in setting the innocent Savior free. “The crowd was momentarily increasing from the town. It was not only to see what was about to happen, but to witness another spectacle, that of the release of a prisoner. For it seems to have been the custom, that at the Passover the Roman governor released to the Jewish population some notorious prisoner who lay condemned to death.”¹ After the crowd is assembled Pilate states the accusations of the Jews (i.e. inciting the people to rebellion); says that he has examined the case (“The term is used in the technical sense of having gone through a legal examination.”²); and then finds the Savior innocent for the second time (cf. Lk. 23:4). He even adds that Herod has not found anything wrong with Jesus. For both Pilate and Herod, it was obvious that Christ had done nothing worthy of death. Pilate then, attempting to meet the Jewish leadership half-way, proposes punishing the Lord. The Greek word used, translated “punished,” can mean “scourge.” Given the fact, however, that Pilate had not yet sentenced Jesus to death the physical punishment under Roman law would not have been as severe as scourging.³

Pilate, by his announcement and proposed chastisement of the Savior, was attempting to set the Lord free and satisfy the Jewish leadership’s lust for blood at the same time. But, the priests and elders would have none of it; they made it very clear that Jesus must die. At this point Pilate is getting desperate. On the one hand he wants to let his innocent prisoner go; on the other hand, if the Jewish leaders stir up the people and cause a riot, Pilate (given his past failings in dealing with the Jews) could lose his job. Consequently, Pilate comes up with a plan that he believes is foolproof. He will take advantage of a Passover custom (Jn. 18:39) and let the Jewish people decide what to do with Jesus. If the Jewish masses set the Savior free, then the chief priests and rulers cannot do anything about it. If they send the Messiah to the cross, then the governor can soothe his conscience by laying the blame for the crucifixion of Christ at the feet of the Jews. “He already knew that it was because of envy that the chief priests had delivered Jesus to him, envy aroused by the Nazarene’s popularity. So he probably reasoned as follows: ‘I will give the people a choice between Jesus and a dangerous criminal, namely, Barabbas. Surely, they will choose to have Jesus released. Why, even the leaders cannot with consistency ask for the release of a violent, murderous insurrectionist, since just a little while ago they were accusing Jesus of insurrection! And as to the crowd, I know how they will vote. With them Jesus is very popular, as was shown even a few days ago (in connection with the triumphal entry).’”⁴

¹ Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, 2:576.

² Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, 580.

³ An expert in ancient Roman law writes, “The synoptic writers thus get their technicalities right in this small matter—the severe beating accompanies the capital sentence, and the lighter whipping goes with the proposed act of *coercito*” (A. N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament*, 28).

⁴ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Luke*, 1017.

Who Is Barabbas?

Regarding Barabbas little is known. Matthew refers to him as a notorious (*episemon*) prisoner. This word can have either a good sense or a bad sense. To the Romans, no doubt Barabbas was “notorious” as an evil doer; but to the Jews he may well have been “notable, well known” or even “popular.” Mark says that Barabbas was an “insurrectionist” or “rebel” who had committed murder during a rebellion (Mk. 15:7). John adds that Barabbas was also a robber (Jn. 18:40). Barabbas “was one of that numerous and constantly growing party who detested the Roman rule, and who afterward gained such notoriety as the Zealots.”⁵ He “was a member of the local resistance movement. Because of his opposition to the Romans he would be a hero to many of the Jews, and they had no hesitation in preferring him to the Galilean.”⁶ All the gospels emphasize his wicked character. He was a bold brigand and murderer who likely justified his actions because they were politically motivated.

The name Barabbas means “son of the father.” It was a conventional proper name in the days of Jesus. It may be a name emphasizing a child’s endearment to his earthly father; or, a name given to the son of a Rabbi or teacher. “It is found as the surname of several rabbis. Jerome (*On Matthew*) asserts that in the apocryphal Gospel According to the Hebrews the name was ‘son of their master’ (*filius magistri eorum*), which points either to a form of Bar-rabban (‘son of a rabbi’) or to Bar-Abba (‘son of the father,’ in the sense of teacher).”⁷ There are some dubious Greek texts which have ‘Jesus Barabbas’ in Matthew 27:16. If that was his full name then the people would be choosing between Jesus who is called Christ (Mt. 27:22) and Jesus son of the father.

The Choice of the Mob

Pilate had placed the choice between freeing Barabbas and Jesus in the hands of the multitude, perhaps believing the people would not listen to their own rulers and religious leaders. The governor probably believed that the people would let the Savior go free. Pilate, however, was gravely mistaken because he did not know God’s plan nor the deceitfulness and depravity of the human heart. “Here was Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, *determined* to release the Saviour, yet [was] prevented from doing so. From all eternity God had decreed that Pilate *should* sentence His Son to death, and all earth and hell combined could not thwart the purpose of the Almighty—He could not be *all*-mighty if they could! Christ was ‘delivered up (Greek) by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God’ (Acts 2:23).”⁸ As we all know, the covenant people rejected the Messiah and asked Pilate to set Barabbas free. This tragic event raises some important questions. Why would the covenant people set a wicked man who was a murderer, brigand and revolutionary free and condemn a perfectly innocent man to death? Also, what are some important applications that can be learned from these events?

Regarding the primary question there are some important things to consider. (1) We see the influence of the wicked Jewish leaders upon the people. The gospels emphasize that the chief priests and elders persuaded the multitudes that they should ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus (Mk. 27:22, 26). A little later, the leaders were the first to cry out for crucifixion (Jn. 19:6). The

⁵ Samuel J. Andrews, *Life of Our Lord upon the Earth*, 535.

⁶ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 773-774.

⁷ J. J. Edwards, “Barabbas” in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 1:472.

⁸ Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John*, 3:205-206.

chief priests and elders were like demonic cheerleaders calling on the people to cry out “Crucify Him” (Jn. 19:6; Mk. 15:13, 15; Lk. 23:21) or “Let Him be crucified” (Mt. 27:22, 26). We must not forget the ability of religious and political leaders to have an effect on their countrymen either for good or for ill. One of the great themes of the Old Testament is how the kings of Israel who were wicked led the nation into idolatry. Repeatedly, God will tell us that a king was guilty of doing evil in the sight of the Lord and “in his sin by which he made Israel sin” (1 Kg. 15:26, 34; 16:19, 26, 31; 22:52; 2 Kg. 3:3; 10:29; 13:2, 11; 14:24; 15:9, 18, 24, 29; 17:21-22).

People very often have a paternal mind set toward the state and implicitly trust in what their leaders are doing. Therefore, rulers can lead many people into great evil. In modern times Stalin, Mussolini and Hitler are obvious examples of this principle. Consequently, believers who live in a secular state that is hostile to the faith need to be aware of this tendency and guard against following a political leader to do evil. In America believers have been very naive when it comes to political leaders and have repeatedly been used by both major political parties to further a pagan statist agenda. Modernist “Christians” and so-called neo-evangelicals have been lap dogs to degenerate socialists, communists and liberal democrats. Many evangelicals and fundamentalists have faithfully served the milder idolatry and statism of the Republican Party. It is very important that Christians study the Bible and Christian doctrine and learn to apply biblical principles to all aspects of life. Solid, knowledgeable, faithful believers who spend time in front of the Word instead of the television will not easily be used by wicked politicians and church leaders.

The manipulation of the multitude by the chief priests and elders raises another interesting question. Was this crowd that demanded the crucifixion of Christ the same group or largely the same group that, only days before, praised the Savior as He made His triumphal entry into Jerusalem? There are two different opinions regarding this matter. Some scholars believe that the crowd screaming for the crucifixion of the Nazarene was a *different group* than those who joyfully greeted Jesus when He rode into Jerusalem. These men argue that since the arrest was secret, the disciples had fled and the Jewish trial was carried out during the night, that few of Christ’s supporters were in that crowd. Some commentators even speculate that a crowd of Barabbas’ supporters had gathered with the intention of demanding the insurrectionist’s release (e.g., Cranfield, Barclay).

Others argue that indeed many of the same people who lauded Jesus when He entered the city were now the very same people calling for His death. This is the better interpretation for the following reasons. a) The Savior was a well-known figure and word would have traveled fast through the streets of Jerusalem of His trial before Pilate. b) When the apostles preached the gospel after Pentecost they made very broad statements of condemnation to the inhabitants of Jerusalem (e.g., “...Jesus who you delivered up and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he was determined to let Him go. But you denied the Holy One and the Just, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you and killed the prince of life” [Ac. 3:13-15; cf. 2:36]). c) Most of the people who praised the Savior when He entered Jerusalem were viewing Him through their own carnal concepts of the kingdom. They were expecting a military-political leader, a mighty conqueror; not a humiliated, beaten man in chains. When they realized that Christ was not going to meet their expectations, it was not hard for the chief priests and elders to turn them against Him. The Jewish leaders probably argued that He was an imposter, a false Messiah, a magician. They would capitalize on the people’s messianic expectations and argue: “How in the world can this beaten, bruised, bloodied, spit-covered mess in chains be the Christ—the deliverer of Israel?” d) Further, Pilate was an extremely unpopular figure among the Jews. Who were the

people going to listen to? Their own political and religious leaders or this hated Roman pagan oppressor?

e) Further, the Jewish leaders likely capitalized on an interruption in the proceedings. Matthew 27:19 indicates that Pilate was interrupted by his wife who had a dream about Jesus. When the governor stepped aside to talk to his wife, the chief priests and elders worked the crowd so they would release Barabbas instead of Jesus. Although some commentators believe the message was delivered to Pilate publicly, it is more likely that the message from his wife was heard in secret. If this is the case, then we see here the special providence of God in sending this dream to Pilate's wife, not only as another testimony to the innocence of the Savior, but also to give the Sanhedrin more of an opportunity to pervert the people and increase their guilt.

The result of the leaders' influence is, "And they all cried out at once saying, 'Away with the Man, and release to us Barabbas'" (Lk. 23:18; cf. Jn. 18:40). The people are so cooperative in condemning the Savior they do not merely ask for the release of Barabbas; but actively spew hatred toward the Messiah. "Away with this Man"—"Get rid of Him; get Him out of our sight; take Him off the face of this earth; put Him to death."

(2) Let us consider why the people were so easily convinced to turn upon our Lord and release Barabbas. There are two primary spiritual reasons why this occurred. a) The people who had cheered Jesus and were now crying out for His death were unregenerate. They were carnal professors of religion. If there was a true work of the Holy Spirit upon their heart, then they would have evidenced it by a faith and love toward their Messiah. They would never have listened to the voice of Satan speaking lies through their religious and political leaders. Thus, we see that Israel's heart of stone, blind eyes and deaf ears were used in God's providence to save the whole world. As Paul says, "Just as it is written: 'God has given them a spirit of stupor, eyes that they should not see and ears that they should not hear, to this very day'" (Rom. 11:8).

As noted, the unregenerate can be impressed by signs, wonders and popularity. However, their profession is shallow; it has no root. Therefore, it is very fickle and liable to change. Many of us have encountered people who floated about on every wind of doctrine. Let us therefore beware that we are not unregenerate, shallow-ground hearers who end up rejecting Christ because our hearts are still in love with this present evil age. "The service of sin and the service of God are continually before us. The friendship of the world and the friendship of Christ are continually pressed upon our notice."⁹ Are we going to evidence a new heart by continuing to cling to Jesus through thick and thin; or, will we follow the crowd into perdition?

b) Also, the Jews rejected their Messiah because of their unbiblical theology. They welcomed the Savior into the city with open arms and shouts of praise when they believed He would crush the Romans and rule upon a literal throne in Jerusalem like King David. But when they encountered the suffering Servant in His supreme state of humiliation and learned that Christ was not *that* kind of a king; they wanted nothing to do with Him. Their professed love and admiration turned to hatred. They placed their trust in a Messiah of their own imagination and, therefore, they cast Jesus away as a worthless imposter. They had to choose between the suffering servant who conquered through his sacrificial blood, who ruled by means of the Spirit and their worldly Caesar-Messiah who slaughtered the Gentiles like an Islamic fanatic. Tragically for them, they chose the latter.

Ironically, in this Passover release, which was supposed to honor the original Passover, the Jews completely forgot the symbolism of the slain lamb. The firstborn of the Jews were saved by the blood of lamb without spot and blemish. Instead of trusting in Christ to save them

⁹ J. C. Ryle, *Mark*, 249.

by His sinless life and vicarious sacrificial death, the Jews in essence were placing their trust for deliverance in the arm of the flesh. By choosing Barabbas they, in a sense, were choosing their future confrontation with Rome and eventual destruction. Our Lord offered salvation by faith in His person and work. Those who followed Jesus must not follow the sword of the flesh but the sword of the Spirit. Barabbas offered the Jews a kingdom founded upon self-effort, hatred and violence. The Jews' racism, self-righteousness, and salvation through law-keeping or legalism made Barabbas the logical choice. Barabbas not only fulfilled their carnal, chiliastic dreams but also left deliverance in man's hands, in human achievement. This surging, angry mob demanded a Messiah of their own presuppositions. And, that is precisely what they got. Barclay writes, "they chose the man of blood instead of the prince of peace.... They chose *hatred and violence instead of love*. Barabbas and Jesus stood for two different ways. Barabbas stood for the heart of hate, the stab of the dagger, the violence of bitterness. Jesus stood for the way of love. As so often has happened, hate reigned supreme in the hearts of men, and love was rejected."¹⁰

The Jews in their humanistic legalism chose antinomianism and pragmatism over biblical law and truth. They knew that Barabbas was a murderer and a brigand, yet they set him free. They gave freedom to Barabbas even though the law of God explicitly says, "Whoever kills any man shall surely be put to death" (Lev. 24:17; cf. Ex. 21:12ff.; Num. 35:17). According to biblical law, the man who intentionally kills another man *must* be put to death. (The only exceptions would be in the case of just warfare or self-defense). To allow a guilty murderer to go free, according to the law, was to defile the land. "So you shall not pollute the land, and no atonement can be made for the land, for the blood that is shed on it, except by the blood of him who shed it" (Num. 35:33). Therefore, when the Jews preferred a thief and murderer to Christ, they cursed themselves from both the law and from their Messiah. Their land was defiled and would be drenched with their own blood and the blood of their children.

Legalism (which is humanistic to the core) always sides with antinomianism against God and His law, because legalism is the attempt to reach God by one's own effort or achievement. Thus, in the name of law (humanistically defined) they choose lawlessness. "They choose the law-breaker instead of Jesus. One of the New Testament words for sin is *anomia*, which means lawlessness."¹¹ Because of the depravity of the human heart, men despise the lawgiver and His law. They set up gods in the place of God and humanistic laws in the place of the moral law. The Jews had to trample the law of Moses under their feet in order to reject their Messiah.

A person can only truly embrace the moral law of God by embracing the Savior because it is only in Christ that the law is fulfilled. Jesus eliminates the curse and penalty of the law by enduring the penalty in the place of the believing sinner. He also fulfills the requirement of a perpetual obedience to the moral law by perfectly obeying all of its precepts in our place. Therefore, men are justified or declared righteous by God solely on account of what the Savior has done, not on the basis of any supposed subjective righteousness, merit or good works. Only biblical Christianity truly honors the law of God.

Believers who were not raised in Christian homes know that before conversion they had much in common with the Jewish mob. While one may not have been choosing a murderer over the Messiah in one's daily life; nevertheless, Jesus was continually being rejected in favor of one's false gods. When we had the opportunity to look into the things of God we chose human philosophy or eastern religions because the crowd said this was cool. This was the in thing. Being spiritually blind, we did not yet see the beauties of the Savior; so, in our sinful ignorance

¹⁰ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 357-358.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 357.

we danced with demons and played with the trinkets of Satan. While we did this we thought we were so hip and illuminated.

When we had the opportunity to spend time with solid, true Christians we instead chose profane, frivolous friends. We didn't want to be bored by "squares" who spoke about divine realities. They were a nuisance to our worldly, deaf ears. Our pleasure was in profane speech, in coarse jesting and frivolous meaningless nonsense. We chose worthless trash before the gospel of God. When we had the opportunity to attend public worship to hear the things of God, we instead chose the beach, the park or the baseball game. Our hearts were in tune with the world and out of tune with the truth. The crucifixion, death and resurrection of Christ were less important to us than getting a tan or acquiring a new baseball card. We were without hope and without God in the world. We preferred the foul Barabbas of our lusts to the perfections of the Savior. With the crowd we cried, "Away with the gospel so that I can minister to my own fleshly delights. Jesus, get out of my existence so that I can run after sin and wallow in it like a pig."

This was our history apart from Christ: the days of darkness when our soul went after virtually any form of evil instead of the Savior. For this reason we thank God that He reached out to our dead hearts with His precious grace. If Jesus did not send His Holy Spirit into our hearts, quickening them, then we would still choose the Barabbas of our idols over the Mediator. We know this because the natural man cannot know the spiritual things of God (1 Cor. 2:14). An unregenerate man would no more love or desire Christ than a boulder could roll up a hill. Therefore, when we contemplate our past lives of vanity and darkness, we are very thankful that God has changed our hearts to see the beauty of Christ. If it were not for God's grace, we would be no different than those in the crowd which chose Barabbas over Jesus and shouted, "Away with Him; let Him be crucified!"

c) Another theological reason for the Jews' rejection of Jesus was their perverted Christology. After Pilate had our Lord scourged and presented Him to the Jews, "they cried out, saying, 'Crucify Him, crucify Him!' Pilate said to them, 'You take Him and crucify Him, for I find no fault in Him.' The Jews answered him, 'We have a law, and according to our law He ought to die because He made Himself the Son of God'" (Jn. 19:6-7).

The first people to cry out "crucify" are the chief priests and their bodyguards. "The use of the verb as a one word slogan (there is nothing in the Greek corresponding to 'him')"¹² is a perfect mob chant of hatred. The chief priests and their henchmen lead the angry mob by example. The verb "cried out" (*exrougasan*) "denotes a loud shout, 'roared' (Dods); 'yelled' (Moffat)."¹³

What is interesting regarding this episode is that the Jewish leaders in their frustration regarding Pilate's repeated statement of the innocence of Christ go back to their original religious charge against Him. This would be the seventh and final charge by the Jews against Jesus. "First they charged Him with threatening to destroy the temple (Matt. 26:61); second, with being a 'malefactor' (John 18:30); third, with 'perverting the nation' (Luke 23:2); fourth, with 'forbidding to give tribute to Caesar' (Luke 23:2); fifth, with 'stirring up all the people' (Luke 23:5); sixth, with being 'a king' (Luke 23:2); seventh, with making Himself the Son of God (John 19:7). This sevenfold indictment witnessed to the *completeness* of their rejection of Him!"¹⁴ The Jewish leadership understood that Pilate had rejected all their arguments which

¹² Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 793.

¹³ Ibid, footnote 12.

¹⁴ Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John*, 3:213.

attempted to paint the Savior as a dangerous revolutionary. Therefore, they would try this new tactic which would change the nature of the trial.

The Jews had convicted Jesus of blasphemy in their trial before Caiaphas (Mk. 14:64; Mt. 26:65-66; Lk. 22:70-71). They, however, had up to this point ignored the blasphemy charge throughout the trial before Pilate. As noted, they believed that if the prosecution of the Savior was framed in political terms a conviction would be more easily procured. Although the Jews do not give up on their political charges (cf. Jn. 19:12), this charge regarding blasphemy is somewhat of an admission of defeat regarding the political accusations. Beasley-Murray writes,

While the Fourth Evangelist refrains from recording the trial before Caiaphas, this may be viewed as a clear echo of it; moreover he has earlier referred to the Jewish charge that Jesus made himself the Son of God and the Jews' desire to put him to death for it (see esp. 5:17-18 and 10:30-39). Significantly the former passage links the claim to be Son of God with Jesus' performing "signs" on the sabbath day (5:16-18); in the eyes of the Jewish teachers and rulers this brought him within the orbit of Deut. 13:1-6 and made him a false prophet, for whose activities the death penalty is laid down. We recall that this view of Jesus as a false prophet appears to lie behind the interrogation of Jesus by Annas (18:19-23), and that a reminiscence of it has been preserved in the Talmud (Yeshu was hanged "because he practiced sorcery and enticed Israel to apostasy," *Sanh.* 43a). In setting forth this charge to Pilate the chief priests were not abandoning their accusation that Jesus claimed to be the king of the Jews, but rather supporting it with a religious charge of sufficient gravity to warrant his death on the basis of their law, a consideration that Pilate should not view lightly (had they so wished they could have strengthened the accusation by declaring that Jesus had made his claim to kingship in blasphemous terms). The reader, however, recognizes at once that the new charge betrays the real reason for the remorseless quest of the chief priests and Pharisees for his death. The messianic pretension was serious enough, but the claim to be Son of God, with its accompanying roles of Redeemer and Revealer, was intolerable.¹⁵

This was the tragic reality—the Jews had so perverted the doctrine of the Messiah by their traditions, faulty exegesis and spiritual blindness that when the Christ came they hated Him, persecuted Him, bore false witness against Him and used the Romans to put Him to death. If the Jews understood their own Scripture they would have known that the Messiah is "Immanuel—God with us" (Isa. 7:14); whose name will be called "the Mighty God, the everlasting Father" (Isa. 9:7); "Jehovah our Righteousness" (Jer. 23:6); "whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting" (Micah 5:2). Regarding the coming Messiah the psalmist says, "Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever: the scepter of thy kingdom is a right scepter. Thou lovest righteousness, and hatest wickedness: therefore God, thy God, hath anointed thee" (Ps. 45:6-7). In Psalm 110 (the most quoted Old Testament passage in the New Testament) "the Son" is set poetically in parallel with Jehovah. "The Lord said unto my Lord, 'Sit thou at my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool.' The Lord shall send the rod of thy strength out of Zion: rule thou in the midst of thine enemies. Thy people shall be willing in the day of thy power" (vs. 1-3).

Pilate's response to this new accusation (i.e. new for Pilate) was that "he was the more afraid" (Jn. 19:8). John says "more afraid" because Pilate was already unhinged by the Savior's character, his wife's dream (Mt. 27:19) and the fact that he knew Christ was innocent. For Pilate this trial was becoming a nightmare. Then, on top of all this, he hears that Jesus claimed to be the

¹⁵ George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 338.

Son of God. This knowledge greatly increased his fear. He was filled with dread, for he had just had this Man scourged. Among pagan Greeks and Romans at this time it was commonly believed that the gods could come to earth and appear as mortal men. We see this in Acts 14 where after a healing by Paul the heathen mob called Barnabas, Zeus and Paul, Hermes (Ac. 14:12).

This great fear results in an interesting interchange between Pilate and Jesus. Pilate takes the Savior back into the Praetorium and asks “Where are You from?” The governor wants to know whether Christ is a god or a man, from heaven or from earth. “‘If thou art some superior being, more than a common man, tell me plainly, that I may know how to deal with thy case. Tell me privately, while these Jews are not present, that I may know what line to take up with thine enemies’—We may well believe that Pilate caught at a secret hope that Jesus might tell him something about Himself, which would enable him to make a firm stand and deliver Him from the Jews.”¹⁶

John tells us that the Savior responded by keeping silent. “But Jesus gave him no answer” (Jn. 19:9). Why did our Lord refuse to answer Pilate’s question? One reason is that Christ had already spoken to Pilate about the source of His kingdom and the nature of His mission without result. The governor had not taken these deep truths from the Savior seriously at all. The main reason that the Savior was silent was that He did not want to say anything that might hinder His sufferings or cause Pilate to set Him free. “If Christ had avowed himself as God as plainly as he avowed himself king, it is probable that Pilate would not have condemned him...the Romans, though they triumphed over the *kings of the nations* they conquered, yet stood in awe of their gods.”¹⁷

Our Lord’s refusal to answer Pilate was not something the powerful governor was used to, especially in such circumstances. As a result, Pilate was annoyed. The governor was very self-conscious about his pride and position of authority. Further, in his own twisted, cowardly way Pilate believed he was seeking a way out for Jesus. Why then, he thought, would the Nazarene remain silent and refuse to help? John records the governor’s perturbed response. “Then Pilate said to Him, ‘Are You not speaking to me? Do you not know that I have the power to crucify You, and power to release You?’” (19:10). “In the last resort it was Pilate alone who could say ‘Crucify’ or ‘Release’, and this frank recognition of it makes nonsense of all the shifts to which he resorted in the attempt to avoid making a decision. Ultimately he could not avoid responsibility and these words show that deep down he must have realized this.”¹⁸

It is in response to Pilate’s question that the Savior speaks His last words to the governor before the crucifixion. “Jesus answered, ‘You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above. Therefore the one who delivered Me to you has the greater sin’” (Jn. 19:11). In a calm, dignified manner Christ deals with two different issues. First, He corrects Pilate’s proud claims regarding having power over Himself. The governor’s claim to an absolute power is one which ungodly tyrants are fond of making. From Caesar to Hitler and Stalin, wicked men like to think of themselves as the source of power and greatness. This reminds us of the biblical testimony regarding Nebuchadnezzar. “Whomever he wished, he executed; whomever he wished, he kept alive; whomever he wished, he set up; and whomever he wished, he put down” (Dan. 5:19). Jesus rebukes Pilate and honors His Father by telling the governor that he really has no power over him at all except the power sovereignly bestowed by the Father. Pilate believed his own power was arbitrary, intrinsic and absolute; but Jesus says it is limited by

¹⁶ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3:312.

¹⁷ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:1191.

¹⁸ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 797.

the Father's will, subject to God's decree. Although Pilate is responsible for his actions, the only reason Jesus stands before him in bonds is because that is what God the Father wanted. God's providence "had allowed a man of Pilate's stamp to be placed in the procurator's office at this time."¹⁹ J. C. Ryle gets the meaning of the verse beautifully in the following paraphrase. "Thou talkest of power: thou dost not know that both thou and the Jews are only tools in the hands of a higher Being: you are both unconsciously, mere instruments in the hands of God."²⁰

Therefore, the purpose of our Lord's statement is not to give Pilate a biblical lesson in the civil magistrate's proper responsibility toward God as God's servant (see Rom. 13:1ff.) even though that is a legitimate application of the passage. But rather, He means to tell Pilate that no human authority, no matter how exalted, has its own power to pass judgment on the Son of God. Jesus alone has the power or authority to lay down His life (see Jn. 10:18), and Christ always obeys His Father's will. "The fact that he is in his present position, suffering these agonies, and on his way to death is due to his own volition. Pilate is to know that it is not he who holds Jesus in his hand; a higher hand holds Pilate."²¹

Second, our Lord tells the governor that the one who delivered Him up has the greater sin. This refers to Caiaphas, not Judas, for the high priest acting on behalf of the Sanhedrin delivered Jesus to Pilate. Judas delivered Christ to the Jews not to the Romans. The Jewish leaders (in particular Caiaphas) were guilty of a greater sin because their sin was a sin against knowledge. They had the Scriptures which spoke clearly of their Messiah. Yet, with premeditation and careful planning, the Jews did everything in their power to kill Jesus.

Pilate is guilty of a lesser sin because, as a heathen, he had little or no knowledge about the Savior. He was ignorant of the Holy Scriptures. By an act of providence Christ came before Pilate and the governor *sinned* by condemning an innocent man to death to avoid a confrontation with his superiors at Rome. However, the governor did not plot the death of Christ, with all the evil deception and satanic cunning that involved. As bad as Pilate's sin was, the Jews' sin was much worse. Lampe writes, "Pilate could have only heard something about our Lord's great miracles by rumor and report: they were all done under the very eyes of the Jews. Pilate injured Jesus unwillingly, and from cowardice: they injured Him from hatred and envy. Finally, Pilate was only the instrument: the Jews were the impelling cause. Thus our Lord pronounces His opinion concerning His judges, an opinion according to which He will one day judge them."²²

Jesus' statement is significant and remarkable for two reasons. First, the Savior explicitly teaches that there are different degrees of sin, some greater and some lesser, and by implication greater and lesser degrees of punishment. This ought to be a sobering doctrine to everyone in the visible church, for those who have the greater knowledge will suffer a much greater degree of punishment in hell if they apostatize from the faith. This point should especially be pressed upon covenant children who appear lukewarm in their love of Christ and spiritual things. Everyone who has been set apart in the visible church and has had the privilege of sitting under the doctrines of grace must be diligent in making sure they are sound in the faith and orthodox in their walk.

Second, the Savior, though in a supreme state of humiliation, calmly speaks as the judge of all the earth. The One who stands meekly before Pilate battered, bruised and bloodied is the judge of all mankind. Even in the midst of His intense suffering, our Lord was very conscious of

¹⁹ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 1264.

²⁰ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3:315.

²¹ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John's Gospel*, 1265.

²² Lampe as quoted in J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3:316.

His glorious victory. “Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb. 12:2). As we suffer persecution unjustly for our faith in Christ we must endure it with patience and look to Jesus, the judge of all mankind. He will give the due recompense of reward on that day.

That our Lord’s words to Pilate had a strong effect upon him can be deduced from John 19:12: “From then on Pilate sought to release Him.” Obviously the governor had wished to set the Savior free for quite some time. But now with the Lord speaking as the judge of Pilate and the Jews, there is an even stronger determination to set Jesus free. Although Christ refused to answer the question regarding His deity, His statement regarding sin and judgment had a profound effect upon the governor. He knew that Jesus had an authority beyond that of mortal men and this terrified Pilate.

(3) This choosing of Barabbas over Christ sets forth the sin of unregenerate men throughout history to this present day. In the Roman Empire the state tolerated every form of idolatry and perversion: chattel slavery, prostitution, sodomy, murder, gladiatorial slaughter and oppression. But there was one thing that could not be allowed: the worship and service of Jesus Christ as the Lord over lords. The innocent, humble followers of the Savior had to be removed from the face of the earth. They were slaughtered in the thousands simply for bowing the knee to the resurrected King and refusing to offer worship to Caesar. The cry of pagan Rome was “Away with this fellow. We have no king but Caesar!” “[P]agans called Christians ‘dregs of the people’ and ‘insolent barbarians,’ accused them of ‘hatred of the human race,’ and ascribed the misfortunes of the Empire to the anger of pagan deities whose Christian revilers had been allowed to live.... Tertullian notes ‘the general hatred felt for us’ {Apol.,iv,I.]. From the time of Nero Roman law seems to have branded the profession of Christianity as a capital offense...”²³

In the middle ages when the church had become nominally Christian and thoroughly corrupt, the unregenerate masses chose the pope of Rome, a wicked antichrist over the spotless Son of God. Spurgeon writes,

The world chose the harlot of Rome, and she who was drunk with the wine of her abominations had every eye to gaze upon her with admiration, while Christ’s gospel was forgotten, buried in a few old books, and almost extinguished in darkness. Since that day the world has changed its tactics yet again; in many parts of the earth Protestantism is openly acknowledged, and the gospel is preached, but what then? Then comes in Satan, and another Barabbas, the Barabbas of mere ceremonialism, and mere attendance at a place of worship is set up. “Yes, we are orthodox; so orthodox, so sound. Yes, we are religious, strictly religious; we attend our meeting-house, or go to our Church. We are never absent. We attend every form, but we have no vital godliness; we have not been born again; we have not passed from death unto life.” However, this will do; so long as we are as good as our neighbors, and keep the outward rite, the inward does not matter. This which is a foul robbery of God’s glory, this which murders men’s souls, is the Barabbas of the present age. An outward name to live is set up, and is received by those who are dead; and many of you now present are quite easy and content, though you have never felt the quickening Spirit of God: though you have never been washed in the atoning blood, yet you are satisfied because you take a seat in some place of worship; you give your guinea, your donation to an hospital, or your subscription to a good object, forgetting and not caring to remember that all the making clean of the outside of the cup and the platter

²³ Will Durant, *Caesar and Christ* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1944), 646-647.

will never avail, unless the inward nature be renewed by the Spirit of the living God. This is the great Barabbas of the present age, and men prefer it before the Saviour.²⁴

(4) We will use the story of Jesus and Barabbas as an opportunity to study the vicarious nature of our Lord's suffering. The Savior who was sinless and perfectly innocent was sent to the cross in the place of Barabbas who was guilty and deserved to be put to death. As we look at the vicarious nature of our Lord's work, we do so as an *application* of our text; for there is no Scriptural evidence that Jesus died as a surety for Barabbas. (The word *surety* refers to one who legally takes upon himself the guilt and liability of punishment for the sins of another.) We never see the Mediator praying or pleading for Barabbas as He does for Peter. There is no biblical evidence that Barabbas ever repented and became part of the Jerusalem church. While it is possible He converted to Christ later on in life, we will never really know; the hidden things belong to the Lord. Further, (as noted) the tradition of the Jewish law of release which set Barabbas free was contrary to God's law. The law of release was purely arbitrary; there was no biblical law in it.

The Bible teaches that in order to remove the guilt and penalty for sin, Jesus took upon Himself all the guilt for our sins and the full penalty that we deserved. In other words, He suffered in our place as our *substitute*. Berkhof notes why a substitutionary atonement is our only hope:

There is a difference between personal and vicarious atonement. We are interested particularly in the difference between the two in connection with the atonement of Christ. When man fell away from God, he as such owed God reparation. But he could atone for his sin only by suffering eternally the penalty affixed to transgression. This is what God might have required in strict justice, and would have required, if He had not been actuated by love and compassion for the sinner. As a matter of fact, however, God appointed a vicar in Jesus Christ to take man's place, and this vicar atoned for sin and obtained an eternal redemption for man. Dr. Shedd calls attention to the following points of difference in this case: (1) Personal atonement is provided by the offending party; vicarious atonement by offended party. (2) Personal atonement would have excluded the element of mercy; vicarious atonement represents the highest form of mercy. (3) Personal atonement would have been forever in the making and hence could not result in redemption; vicarious atonement leads to reconciliation and life everlasting.²⁵

There are many passages in Scripture that teach that Christ bore the sins of His people. "Surely He has *borne* our griefs and *carried* our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was wounded *for our transgressions*, He was bruised *for our iniquities*; the chastisement for our peace was *upon Him*, and by His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way; and the LORD has *laid on Him* the iniquity of us all" (Isa. 53:4-6). "For He made Him who knew no sin *to be sin* for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Cor. 5:21). "Christ also suffered for us...who Himself *bore* our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness—by whose stripes you were healed" (1 Pet. 2:21, 24). "Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us" (Gal. 3:13). "Christ was offered to *bear* the sins of many" (Heb. 9:28). "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3). The "Lord Jesus Christ...gave Himself for our sins" (Gal. 1:3-4).

²⁴ Charles H. Spurgeon, "Barabbas Preferred to Jesus," 10:590.

²⁵ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1958), 375-376.

The Greek prepositions that are used in connection with Christ's death clearly teach a vicarious atonement. Jesus said, "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and give His life a ransom *for* [*anti*] many" (Mt. 20:28; cf. Mk. 10:45). The preposition *anti* means literally "in the place of" or "in exchange for." Christ came "to give His life *in the place of* many". The same Greek preposition is used in Matthew 5:38 where it says, "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" which means "an eye *in exchange for* an eye and a tooth *in exchange for* a tooth." It is also used in Matthew 2:22 where it says "that Archelaus was reigning over Judea *instead of* his father Herod."

Most passages which speak of Christ's death employ the more ambiguous preposition *huper*. "This cup is the new covenant in My blood which is shed for [*huper*] you" (Lk. 22:19, 20). "Christ also suffered...the just *for* the unjust" (1 Pet. 3:18; cf. Jn. 6:51; 15:13; Rom. 5:6-8; 8:32; 2 Cor. 5:14-15, 21; Gal. 3:13; Eph 5:2, 25; 1 Tim. 2:5-6; Heb. 2:9). The preposition *huper* is very similar to our English preposition, for. It has a wide meaning and thus does not always denote substitution. Sometimes it has the sense of, "for the benefit of" and at other times, it can mean "in the place of." Shedd argues that the New Testament authors often employed the preposition *huper* because they wanted to emphasize both points: "that Christ died in the sinner's place, and for the sinner's benefit."²⁶ One's interpretation, of course, must be determined by the context. Theological liberals, who reject the substitutionary atonement (because it does not fit in with their humanistic presuppositions regarding God, sin, and salvation), used to argue that *huper* could not possibly mean "instead of." Archeological discoveries, however, have once again proved the liberals wrong. Several inscriptions have been found that have *huper* with the meaning "as representative of."²⁷ Clark notes recent discoveries that use *huper* of professional "scribes who wrote for and instead of his employer."²⁸ The biblical doctrine of a vicarious atonement or a substitutionary sacrifice cannot be denied.

Christ's suffering and death was done in the place of His people. Jesus stood in the place of the sinner, bore his sin and was punished in the sinner's stead. But how was the sinner's sin placed upon Christ on the cross? The Bible teaches that whoever believes in Jesus has his sins *imputed* to Him on the cross. Paul says, "For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Cor. 5:21). This does *not* mean that Christ became a sinner or a wicked person, for such a teaching would contradict the many passages which teach that Christ was sinless and ethically perfect (e.g., Jn. 8:46; Heb. 4:15; 7:26; 1 Jn. 3:5; 1 Pet. 1:19; 2:22). What it means is that "the guilt of sin *as liability to punishment* was imputed to Christ [or reckoned to His account]; and this could be transferred, because it did not inhere in the person of the sinner, but was something objective."²⁹ Thus Peter could say, He "bore our sins in His own body on the tree" (1 Pet. 2:24).

The doctrine of vicarious sacrifice and the imputation of the guilt of sin is clearly taught in the Old Testament sacrificial ritual that involved the sinner laying (or literally in Hebrew, "pressing") his hand upon the head of the sacrificial animal immediately prior to its sacrifice. "If his offering is a burnt sacrifice of the herd, let him offer a male without blemish; he shall offer it

²⁶ William T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner & Sons, 1889), 2:382.

²⁷ Deissman, *Light from the Ancient East* as quoted by Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 377.

²⁸ Gordon Clark, *The Atonement* (Hobb, NM: The Trinity Foundation, [1987] 1996), 65.65.

²⁹ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 377. God has a perfect and complete record of every sin that you have ever committed. "And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books" (Rev. 20:12). Thus, the guilt and liability for sin is objective. When theologians discuss the sinful nature inherent in the children of Adam, they talk about the *pollution* of sin. The progressive subduing of the pollution of sin in believers is called sanctification.

of his own free will at the door of the tabernacle of meeting before the LORD. Then *he shall put his hand on the head* of the burnt offering, and it shall be accepted on his behalf to make atonement for him” (Lev. 1:3-4; cf. 3:2, 8, 13; 4:4, 15, 24; 16:21). Theological liberals (who always seem to be running from the truth of God’s infallible Word) argue that this ritual merely symbolizes a declaration or setting apart of the supplicant’s property to God. Their theory, however, is disproved both from the analogy of Scripture and from the fact that the laying on and pressing of the hand does not occur in the bloodless cake or cereal offerings. The symbolism of the pressing of the hand on the sacrificial victim indicates both substitution (the clean animal will suffer and die in the sinner’s place) and the transfer or imputation of guilt (or liability) to the animal. This interpretation is decisively confirmed by Leviticus 16:21: “and Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, confess over it all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions, concerning all their sins, putting them on the head of the goat, and shall send it away into the wilderness by the hand of a suitable man.” Moorehead writes, “Most specific and definite is the language touching this remarkable scene. The high priest laid *both his hands* on the goat’s head. In the other sacrifices where a single individual performed this act it was his *hand*, one hand, that made the transfer; but here both hands were employed: the hands that had been filled with incense, that carried the blood into the Divine Presence, are now filled with the sins, iniquities and transgressions of the congregation, and these hands *put* them all on the head of the victim! Substitution and imputation cannot be more vividly expressed.”³⁰

The biblical teaching regarding Christ’s suffering and death being substitutionary raises an important question. Why is this doctrine important to us? It is important because: a) It tells us that God never overlooks sin. He either punishes sin in Jesus, the sinless substitute, or in the sinner himself. The wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23) and the curse and suffering of hell (Gal. 3:13; Rev. 20:12-15). Someone has to pay the price. This means that the issue as to whether or not to look to Christ for salvation is not merely academic, but crucial to our whole future.

b) The doctrine of our Lord’s vicarious atonement makes the gospel very personal. It is not enough simply to say that Jesus died on the cross almost two thousand years ago or even that the Savior died for sinners. We must believe and confess that Christ suffered and died *for us*. The gospel is not, “Ask Jesus to come and live in your heart.” It rather is, “Are you trusting in the person and work of Christ, that He suffered and died in your place, for your sins?” Although modernists reject it and evangelicals often neglect it, vicarious atonement is at the heart of the gospel.

Fifth, we must examine the supreme humiliation of Christ in the rejection by the Jews. Pilate, who was trying to rid himself of Jesus by this placement of Barabbas next to the Savior on the pavement, did not realize that God was using his cowardice and indecisiveness to take His Son a step lower in His state of humiliation. In this pairing of men before Israel—one the sinless Son of God, the other a thief and murderer—the nation was given a clear choice between their Messiah and ethical scum. It would be Israel’s choice of Barabbas over the Savior that would sharpen our Lord’s suffering as He went to the cross. He went to the cross as a thoroughly rejected man despised by the people (Isa. 53:3; Jn. 1:11). There are a number of things that make this rejection particularly humiliating.

a) Unlike their ancestors who for a time in part rejected David for the tall, handsome, smooth-talking Absalom, the Jews rejected Jesus for an everyday lawless thug. Barabbas was a

³⁰ W. G. Moorehead, *The Tabernacle: The Priesthood, Sacrifices and Feasts of Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, [1895] 1957), 188-189.

worthless man. This fact didn't matter to the Jews for they would choose anyone over their Messiah.

b) The Jews (as noted above) were not only rejecting Christ but also rejecting His three and a half years of teaching and ministry. The Man who had preached good tidings, healed the sick and fed the poor was cast off as refuse unto the tortures of Rome. The Jews chose the unthinking violence of Barabbas over the spiritual freedom of Jesus. They chose revolution over the gospel, hate over love, works over grace, the carnal sword over the Word of God. Everything our Lord stood for was despised and cast aside.

c) They rejected Jesus publicly in a court of law. It would be one thing if the Jews disliked the Savior and murmured against Him under their breath. But here the people that Jesus delivered from Egypt; who were privileged to receive the law-covenant; who were led through the wilderness and given the promised land; these people were crying out openly and publicly against Him. Their apostasy was at its peak. The Son of the vineyard owner has come and they say, "Come, let us kill him" (Mk. 12:7).

d) They not only rejected Him but they pleaded with Pilate for His crucifixion. They actively were crying out against Him. Not only did they demand the death of Christ, but they specifically requested a gruesome, exceedingly humiliating and painful form of execution—crucifixion. They demanded a means of death that involved a divine curse (Deut. 21:23). The people who Christ so faithfully served were seething in hatred against Him.

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