

# Jesus or Barabbas

Matthew 27:11-26

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on April 14, 2019

## Introduction

- ❖ **What do you think is the greatest need in society today?** That kind of question has been asked in every generation. And everyone seems to have a different answer. Back in 1907, President Teddy Roosevelt was asked what he thought was the greatest need in his day. He said railroads. It made sense in his day, but it was probably the last thing on your mind.
  - ▶ When you think of the greatest need in our day maybe what comes to mind is economic prosperity, world peace, a cure for cancer, an end to poverty, abortion, or sex trafficking. What about racial reconciliation or a healing of deep partisan divides? What about solutions to deal with climate change?
    - Or maybe you were thinking of something more personal. Maybe for you, the greatest need today is simply for your marriage to survive; for your kids *not* to reject you or to abandoned the faith; for you to find a stable job; for you to get a good grade on your upcoming finals.
  
- ❖ I doubt you're concerned about more railroads, but I'm sure there's something – something you consider to be the greatest, most pressing, most urgent need of the hour. Now we all know that there are a lot of different ways to answer that. But nonetheless, Christianity – in spite of all its diverse expressions over 2,000 years – **Christianity has, at its core, one definitive answer to the question.** What is the greatest need in society today? What is *your* greatest need? What is mine? Answer: a Substitute.
  - ▶ **The greatest need of the hour is for each us – for every man, woman, and child – to find a Substitute.** Someone who will take our place and stand before the Holy, Righteous, Blameless God of the Cosmos and receive the judgment we deserve. That's our greatest need because, left to ourselves, we would fall under God's holy wrath and incur an eternal punishment in hell.
    - **I've heard it wisely said that every Christian should care deeply about alleviating suffering around the world, especially eternal suffering.** That means we see the great needs of the world, and in those causes we seek to be advocates. **But we recognize that the greatest need in the world requires a Substitute, and we are not qualified to play the part.**
  
- ❖ But fortunately Someone is. And to his story we turn this morning. **Today is Palm Sunday, which inaugurates the start of Holy Week.** Today we commemorate Jesus's climactic entrance into the city of Jerusalem. We're told that Jews from all over Palestine were gathering in Jerusalem for the Passover feast. This include a large contingency from the region of Galilee where Jesus had developed a large following.
  - ▶ As we read earlier, the crowds celebrated his entrance with such flair that it felt like a royal welcome. **Jesus was being received by the people as a king.** That did not escape the attention of the religious leaders of the day. And they did not like it.
    - So by that Friday, after midnight, they arrested Jesus. Put him through a hasty religious trial in the middle of the night. Roughed him up. And in the morning, brought him to the Romans. To the provincial governor. To Pontius Pilate.

- ❖ **In this morning's passage, we're presented with a powerful illustration of how God provides for humanity's greatest need of the hour.** This morning we get a good picture of the Substitute that we all need. Now to get a good glimpse at this picture, I'd like us to look at it from three different perspectives within the narrative. We'll start with the insecure jealousy of the religious leaders, then the fearful self-interest of Pilate, and lastly the speechless wonder of Barabbas.

### **The Insecure Jealousy of the Religious Leaders**

- ❖ Let's begin with a consideration of the insecure jealousy of the religious leaders. These religious leaders who brought Jesus to Pilate were members of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council. They're identified as the "*chief priests and the elders*". Throughout the Gospels, these religious leaders are depicted as the primary antagonists to Jesus, opposing him, criticizing him, trying to trap him in his words.
  - ▶ Look at v18. **It says that Pilate was astute enough to know that they're envious of Jesus.** They can see that the crowds love him. And he keeps teaching with his own authority, questioning and undermining their long-standing traditions. And the people are hanging on his every word. So these guys feel seriously threatened by Jesus.
- ❖ Earlier, back in chapter 26:1-5, we read that these chief priests and elders of the people secretly plotted to arrest Jesus and have him killed. So they had already made up their minds. **These trials that they're putting Jesus through are just for show. They're not after justice. They're after blood.**
  - ▶ Now later in chapter 26:57, they finally manage to arrest Jesus, and they find worthless fellows to make false accusations but none of them stick. And in response to it all, the text says Jesus remained silent. Exasperated by the silence, the high priest demands Jesus to answer, saying, "*I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.*" <sup>64</sup>Jesus said to him, "*You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.*" (26:63-64)
- ❖ That was enough. V65 says, "*Then the high priest tore his robes and said, 'He has uttered blasphemy. What further witnesses do we need? You have now heard his blasphemy.'*" Now what did Jesus say that was so bad? Why did they call it blasphemy?
  - ▶ **You have to understand that, in his response, Jesus made two bold OT allusions – to Psalm 110:1 and Daniel 7:13.** Psalm 110 starts off with, "*The LORD says to my Lord: 'Sit at my right hand.'*" Now that was well-recognized by all Jews to be a messianic psalm. It's about the coming Messiah. And Jesus had noted earlier how David (who wrote the psalm) referred to the Messiah as his Lord (22:41-45).
    - Keep that in mind as we consider Daniel 7, another messianic reference. He's given a vision and says, "*behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. <sup>14</sup>And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom.*"

- ❖ So when Jesus says, “*But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven,*” that is a very bold claim. He’s not claiming to be a political Messiah seeking an earthly throne – as another king in the line of David. No, he’s not claiming to be David's heir but David's Lord. **He’s claiming to be the Daniel 7 Son of Man who rides upon the clouds and receives dominion, glory, and an eternal kingdom from God.**
  - ▶ Maybe that wasn’t immediately obvious when you read it, but the chief priests and elders certainly picked up on it. But they simply refused to believe his claim. **Instead of falling on their faces in repentance, their faces start filling with rage.** They accuse him of blasphemy and drag him before the Romans and demand his execution.
  
- ❖ The text tells us that envy is their driving motivation. **Their jealousy of Jesus colored all their actions.** For so long they enjoyed in the respect of the people. They were the recognized religious authorities. The crowds would come to them for answers, for advice, for atonement. But now it's all, “*Jesus said this. Jesus did that.*” They're totally jealous.
  - ▶ **And what's beneath all forms of jealousy? Insecurity. Jealous people are the most insecure people.** Whatever shaky platform they’ve built their identity on has been unsettled. Life feels like it’s coming apart. Jealousy is you trying to recover what gave you a sense of stability. It could be the affection of a lover, the praise of others, or the success of your peers. **Whatever the case, jealousy stems from insecurity. When the foundation of your identity is threatened and its weakness is exposed.**
  
- ❖ **For these chief priests and elders, their entire identity had centered on being the smartest guy in the room.** The most learned. The most knowledgeable authority on what the Scriptures taught. But suddenly, this Galilean carpenter with no formal training appears out of nowhere – outdebating them, preaching with an authority surpassing theirs, performing signs and wonders they can only dream of – you can imagine how insecure they became.
  
- ❖ Jesus has that kind of effect on people. He can be viewed as a threat. **Because if his claims are true – if he is the Messiah, the Son of Man who possess all dominion and authority – then he threatens all the sources we turn to for an identity.** He exposes the inherent weakness and fragility of these foundations that we’re building our lives upon.
  - ▶ Scripture teaches that there are essentially two responses when confronted by the Son of Man. **You either reject his claims, and he becomes a “*stumbling stone, a rock of offense*” (1 Pet 2:8).** Who threatens your security. So you want nothing to do with him. **Or the other option is you accept his claims. You repent and turn to him in faith, and he becomes your “*cornerstone*” (1 Pet 2:7).** That secure stone capable of holding up your entire life and bearing the weight of all your expectations. Jesus becomes that solid rock and foundation for your identity.
    - So who is Jesus to you? A stumbling stone or your cornerstone? Now some who perceive him as the former will react strongly like the chief priests and elders and will outright reject Christ.

## The Fearful Self-Interest of Pilate

- ❖ But others, equally viewing Christ as a stumbling stone, will be more subtle and attempt to adopt a more neutral stance. Much like what we see in Pontius Pilate's response to Jesus. Let's turn then to our second point: The fearful self-interest of Pilate.
  - ▶ If you try to put yourself in Pilate's shoes, you realize that he's been put in a tough situation. In Matthew 27:11, the religious leaders bring Jesus to stand trial before Pilate. Being under Roman rule meant the Jews had no legal authority to condemn a man to death. Only the provisional governor could make that call.
  
- ❖ But Pilate knew that he faced a precarious decision. **He didn't want to come across as too harsh nor as too lenient.** He already had the reputation of being harsh and merciless. In Luke 13:1, word is being spread about how he killed a number of Galilean Jews and profanely mixed their blood with the sacrifices they had prepared for God. That reputation stuck until the end of his governorship. The historian Josephus tells us that, in the end, it was Pilate's heavy-handed response to a Samaritan disturbance that led to his removal. So he was on the hot seat and knew that too harsh a response could threaten his job.
  - ▶ But at the same time, he didn't want to come across as being too lenient. **The Emperor Tiberius wouldn't tolerate a provisional governor turning a blind eye to rebels.** And that's how Jesus was presented to him – as a political activist, as a seditious rebel, claiming kingship, undermining the Emperor.
  
- ❖ So in v11, Pilate asks Jesus, *“Are you the King of the Jews?”* That must have been the charge brought to him. Jesus is going around claiming to be a king. Now notice Jesus's reply. He's very careful with his answer. He doesn't answer with a direct yes or no. A simply Yes would likely have confirmed Pilate's suspicion that Jesus is an earthly king making an earthly claim to power. But then a No would have been a lie. Because Jesus is a King – but of a kingdom not of this world (Jn 18:36).
  - ▶ So Jesus responds with, *“You have said so.”* Now that's the exact reply he gave when Judas asked if he was the betrayer (26:25) and when the high priest asked if Jesus was the Son of God (26:64). **The implication is that the questioner already knows the answer to his question.** Jesus doesn't need to say it. "Pilate, you already know – I am a King but not the kind they accuse me as being and not the kind that you fear – I am the Messiah, God's chosen king." All that is wrapped up in *“you have said so.”*
  
- ❖ Now beyond that, Jesus doesn't say much. In fact, Pilate is surprised at how he could remain silent and not defend himself. Look at v13, *“<sup>13</sup>Then Pilate said to him, “Do you not hear how many things they testify against you?” <sup>14</sup>But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed.”*
  - ▶ We learn in Luke's account, in Luke 23:2, that Jesus was being accused of (1) perverting their nation, (2) forbidding people to pay taxes to the emperor, (3) calling himself a king, and (4) stirring up people by his teaching. **His opponents were trying their hardest to paint him as the leader of a people's rebellion.**

- ❖ But Pilate saw right through all that. He knew they were just envious because of Jesus's popularity with the people. And he had no sympathy for the religious leaders nor any desire to do them a favor. **So Pilate tried to find a way to release Jesus without doing it directly. The crowd would do it for him.** Jesus was popular with the people after all.
  - ▶ According to v15, there was a custom between the Jews and Roman that formed over the years of their occupation. At every Passover feast, the Romans were willing to release one prisoner of the people's choosing. **It was tied to the Passover. It recalled how a son of Israel could be delivered from judgment by a sacrificial lamb.** In v16, we're introduced to a notorious prisoner named Barabbas. In Mark's account, we're told that Barabbas had recently taken part in an insurrection where he killed a man during the revolt (cf. Lk 23:19).
  
- ❖ Pilate figured he had the perfect opportunity before him. Give the people a choice between releasing a local insurrectionist who committed murder or a popular Galilean carpenter who spent his days walking from village to village preaching, teaching, and healing people. It seemed like a no-brainer.
  - ▶ We're also told in v19 that Pilate had another motivation to let Jesus go. He was listening to his wife. *"Besides, while he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, 'Have nothing to do with that righteous man (lit. the righteous one; cf. Acts 7:52; 1 Jn 2:1), for I have suffered much because of him today in a dream.'"*
    - There's an intended irony here. **A pagan, Gentile woman is able to recognize Jesus for who he is while the religious leaders of Israel remain willfully blind.** According to some Christian traditions, Pilate's wife becomes a Christian. The Eastern Orthodox Church has even canonized her as a saint.
  
- ❖ But all this explains why Pilate is hesitant to give the chief priests and elders what they want. **He's trying to avoid the wrath of Rome and the wrath at home.** But he'll have to face one or the other depending on which choice he makes, so he shirks his responsibility and leaves the choice up to the crowd.
  - ▶ Now v20 says that the religious leaders were able to persuade the crowd to choose Barabbas and demand that Jesus be crucified. Pilate realizes he misread the crowd. He thought they loved Jesus. But he was dealing with local Jews gathered together by their religious leaders. They weren't the visiting Galileans who had so warmly welcomed Jesus five days prior. **So given the choice between a man who you could argue is a local hero who stood up to the Man versus some Galilean who our leaders call a blasphemer – why wouldn't we choose our guy, Barabbas?**
  
- ❖ So Pilate clearly misread the situation. But he sees clearly now that this is a travesty of justice. **He knows Jesus is an innocent man who doesn't deserve death, much less a gruesome crucifixion.** In v23, he makes a final appeal, *"'Why? What evil has he done?'"* *But they shouted all the more, "Let him be crucified!"* <sup>24</sup>*So when Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves."*

- ❖ The washing of his hands was his way of saying this was not his intended outcome. He thinks it's wrong, and you could say that he was trying to help Jesus. **But in the end, Pilate chose to help himself. He was acting out of fearful self-interest.** He was trying to get out of this situation unscathed, without creating any trouble for himself. You can see how he was driven by fear. He feared Rome. He feared the crowd. He feared his wife. It seems like the only person he didn't fear was God.
- ❖ But no matter how much Pilate wished to wash his hands of this, he couldn't. He couldn't excuse himself. **Because to willfully ignore evil (or not to stop it) – when it is in your power to do so – makes you as culpable as the one who actively committed that evil.** Sins of omission are as bad as sins of commission.
  - ▶ So Pilate was mistaken to claim innocence of this man's blood. **He was wrong to assume that could take a neutral stance towards Jesus.** In the end, he's not absolved. Scripture holds Pilate accountable (cf. Acts 4:27). Church history doesn't do him any favors either. The *Apostles' Creed* – the Church's most ancient, well-known statement of faith – directly names Pilate as responsible for Jesus's death. It doesn't name Annas, Caiaphas, or Herod. Only Pontius Pilate.
- ❖ **It just goes to show that, when it comes to Jesus, you can't excuse yourself and play innocent.** You can try to claim neutrality towards Jesus. You can try the agnostic position and say you don't have an opinion about him. That you've washed your hands of him.
  - ▶ But I hope you see, from Pilate's story, that it doesn't work. You're still on the hook. You're still culpable. **The fact is: We are all guilty of Jesus's death.** Throughout history some have misinterpreted v25 in anti-Semitic ways, suggesting that the Jewish people are somehow more responsible for his death. No, that is a wrong reading and a willful ignorance of the fact that the first Christians were all Jews.
- ❖ The reality is that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. No one can claim innocence or neutrality. We all have a part in putting Jesus on that cross. **We all find ourselves in this story, in one way or another.** Some respond to Jesus with an active rejection like the religious leaders. While others respond to Christ with a more passive negligence like Pilate. Either way, we're found guilty and responsible for his death.

### **The Speechless Wonder of Barabbas**

- ❖ The only means of deliverance is to find ourselves in a third character – in the shoes of Barabbas. I don't think he's set up in this story as the foil to Jesus's character. It's not Jesus versus Barabbas. He's not the bad guy. **I'd argue that we're suppose to identify with Barabbas if we want any hope of being saved.** This leads to our final point: The speechless wonder of Barabbas.
  - ▶ Barabbas doesn't say a word in all of this. He's speechless in that literal sense. **But I think that, as he saw the events unfolding before him, he was left speechless in amazement and wonder.** Let me try to explain.

- ❖ **It starts by recognizing that Barabbas was likely scheduled to be crucified that day.** It's commonly stated that Jesus was crucified along with two thieves on the cross. It's because later in the chapter in v38 and v44 it says two robbers were crucified with Jesus. The KJV calls them thieves. But the thing is, they weren't really thieves or robbers. That's a possible translation for that Greek word (*lestes*), but **a better translation in this situation would be an insurrectionist or revolutionary.**
  - ▶ If you turn to John 18:40, you'll see that Barabbas is identified as a robber (*lestes*), but my ESV has a footnote saying it could also read "an insurrectionist". So it wasn't your run-of-the-mill thieves being crucified with Jesus. Theft wasn't a capital offense in the Roman empire. **They were insurrectionists and were likely Barabbas's co-conspirators.** He was supposed to be executed along with them. That's why three crosses were already prepared and ready to go that morning.
  
- ❖ **So when Jesus went to the cross that day, he was literally substituting himself in the place of Barabbas.** That was Barabbas's cross. It was reserved for him. But Jesus took his place. And not only that. Barabbas means "son of the father". Bar (son). Abbas (father).
  - ▶ So when Pilate brings forth the two prisoners and presents them to the crowd – one on left and one on his right – **there were two "sons of the father" standing there on the steps.** And what's more, some ancient manuscripts include a first name for Barabbas. You're not going to believe this – it's Jesus. In those days, Jesus was a very common name. **So there's a good chance his name was Jesus Barabbas.**
    - Now most manuscripts don't include a first name. It was probably omitted at some point out of reverence to the Lord. You can't have a notorious criminal in the Bible with the same name as Jesus.
  
- ❖ Oh but you could! That's the heart of the gospel. That's the message of substitution. **Here you have two sons of the father. Two men named Jesus.** One was rebellious and a murderer. The other was righteous and a healer. One deserved condemnation and death. The other merited blessing and eternal life.
  - ▶ **On that Good Friday, the innocent one bore the cross intended for the other. And the guilty one walked away a free man.** Jesus literally took Barabbas's place. Could there be a more powerful, more palpable picture of divine substitution?
  
- ❖ **Try to put yourself in Barabbas's shoes.** You wake up that morning in your prison cell. This is the day you die. You and your co-conspirators are scheduled to be executed by crucifixion. **You try to distract yourself, but you can't stop thinking about what it's going to be like to have nails driven into your hands and feet.** To be lifted up into the air hanging on a cross. "What's going to kill me first? Will I bleed out? Will it be asphyxiation? Will I simply die of exposure? How long will it take and how painful will it be?"
  - ▶ While you're lost in thought, suddenly your prison door swings open and guards come in. They're early. They put chains around your ankles and wrists and haul you to Pilate's steps, to his judgment seat, where your fate was pronounced days earlier.

- ❖ When you arrive, you notice a large crowd has assembled. They're agitated about something. They're yelling and shouting – at someone. There's a man, also in chains, standing beside Pilate. **He has the most peculiar expression on his face. His face is calm.** It's resolute. He's not yelling back at the crowd. He's not answering his accusers. He's not defending himself. That's different. That's not how you remember handling yourself when it was your turn.
  - ▶ As you're staring at this prisoner in amazement, suddenly you hear your name called. Can it be? **Is Pilate really giving a choice to the crowd to release one of us? You're thinking I've got no chance.** Why would they choose me? A convicted criminal. I'm a rebel. I'm a murderer. I deserve this crucifixion. That man over there looks as innocent as a dove. As faultless as a spotless lamb.
    - **But to your great surprise, the crowd is chanting your name.** They want you! Pilate seems exasperated. He washes his hands and walks away. The guards start taking the chains off your ankles and wrists. You're free to go. But you just stand there staring in speechless wonder – as this Jesus, who is called Christ, is led off to be scourged and then to bear *your* cross to Calvary.
  
- ❖ I wonder if Barabbas followed the events all the way to Calvary. Did he go to support his two friends that he thought he was going to die with that morning? **Did he go to take another look at this other Jesus – to see this man who substituted himself in his place?** As he stood there with the crowd, staring up at Jesus, I'm certain the only thought running through Barabbas's mind was, "It should've been me. It should've been me."
  
- ❖ That's what every Christian ought to say. **If you understand the gospel, then you understand that, in this story, you are Barabbas. I am Barabbas.** That judgment, that cross, that death was reserved for us. It should've been you. It should've been me.
  - ▶ **Where do you see yourself in this story? Who do you more closely identify with?** Is it the religious leaders? Is it Pilate? If you understand that your greatest need of the hour is a Substitute, then identify yourself with Barabbas. **The cry of saving faith says, "I am Barabbas. I need a Substitute and Jesus is it. He took my place. All glory be to God."**