

## Matthew 27:15-26

### Introduction

Just last night, Jesus was in the upper room with His disciples where He gave them the bread and the cup, symbolizing His broken body and His shed blood. Then He went out of the city to the garden of Gethsemane where he fought the good fight, surrendering His will to the will of His Father. Then He went out willingly to meet his betrayer. He was seized and taken to the house of Caiaphas, the high priest, where He testified the good confession and on that basis was condemned to be deserving of death. While Jesus was testifying the good confession, outside in the courtyard Peter denied three times that He knew who Jesus was. Now Peter's passion and zeal would be combined with brokenness and true humility. When the morning finally came, Jesus was bound to make Him look like a dangerous criminal and led away to Pilate the governor. At some point in all of this, Judas returned his thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, overcome with guilt. But the shepherds of Israel didn't care for Judas' soul, and their response drove Judas to the final despair of suicide. Then they used the "blood money" to buy the potter's field as a burial place for strangers. But even this was a fulfillment of prophecy, showing us that Jesus came to replace all of the cruel and heartless shepherds, and to be the good shepherd of Israel. When the sheep reject the good shepherd, they're choosing destruction and judgment. So even in this sordid, and seemingly pointless story, we see the triumph of God's sovereign word. Meanwhile, Jesus was standing before the governor. He was a faithful witness to Pilate, and then He was silent and gave no more answer to the false accusations. Pilate wanted Jesus to speak up. Pilate wanted to release Jesus if only to spite the Jewish chief priests and elders. But in His silence, Jesus proclaimed and declared the gospel of God's love for sinners. In His silence, Jesus showed us that our words should never be motivated by the desire to preserve or gain justice for ourselves, but rather only by the desire to bear faithful witness and testimony to God's truth.

**I. Matthew 27:15** — Now at the feast the governor was accustomed to release for the crowd any one prisoner whom they wanted.

The feast, of course, is the feast of Passover when Jerusalem was filled with crowds of Jewish pilgrims from all over Judea and from Galilee in the north, and even from other more distant lands. With so many crowds in Jerusalem, this was the perfect time for the Roman governor to think about appeasing his Jewish subjects. So apparently it was a tradition for the governor to "release *for the crowd* any one prisoner *whom they wanted*." I emphasize the words "*for the crowd*" and "*whom they wanted*" because these are the words that help us to see and understand the lesson of this passage. "Now at the feast the governor was accustomed to release *for the crowd* any one prisoner *whom they wanted*."

**II. Matthew 27:16–17** — And they had then a notorious prisoner called [Jesus]\* Barabbas. So when they had gathered, Pilate said to them, "Whom do you want me to release for you: [Jesus] Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?"

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\* Most Greek manuscripts do not include "Jesus" as the first name of Barabbas. In fact, one commentator points out that there are only two manuscripts of significance along with only a couple of early versions which have the reading "Jesus Barabbas." (France) So if we make our decision based on manuscript evidence (external evidence),

Two prisoners named Jesus. Jesus Barabbas and Jesus who is called Christ. Barabbas means “son of the father” (bar abba), so it’s possible that he was the son of a Jewish rabbi. We know that Jesus is the one and only son of His heavenly Father. But these similarities in words and names will only end up highlighting how completely and totally *different* these two prisoners really are.

Along with most translations the ESV says that Jesus Barabbas was a “notorious” prisoner. But that would really depend on who you talked to. If you asked the Roman authorities, they would say that Barabbas was notorious. But the only other place this Greek word appears is in Romans 16:7 where it’s variously translated “well known” (ESV; NET), “outstanding” (NASB; NIV), “prominent” (NRSV), “noteworthy” (HCSB), “highly respected” (NLT), and “very important” (NCV). So no doubt if you asked many of the Jews, they would say that Barabbas was *outstanding* – a true patriot of Israel. Barabbas was well known for his crimes of treason and rebellion against Rome, and it was for these crimes that Barabbas had been condemned to die by crucifixion (cf. Mark 15:7).

We could picture the scene like this. A crowd of Jews had already gathered early that morning to ask for the release of Jesus Barabbas. But as the crowd was gathered there to ask for the release of “Jesus, son of the father,” here come the chief priests and elders with another bound prisoner – Jesus, the one and only Son of the heavenly Father, Jesus – Messiah. And the accusation against this Jesus will be much the *same* as the charge against Jesus Barabbas. He claims to be a king. He’s a threat to the state. He’s an enemy to Caesar. But in reality, there could be no greater contrast between Jesus Barabbas and Jesus who is called Messiah. Barabbas was guilty of violence and murder in an armed rebellion against Rome. But Jesus taught His disciples to love their enemies and to go an extra mile when a Roman soldier ordered them to go one. It was Jesus who commanded Peter to put his sword back where it belonged. Pilate can see the difference between Barabbas and the one called “Messiah,” and so he taunts the chief priests and elders by

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we’ll obviously follow the ESV, the NASB, and the KJV and *not* include “Jesus” as Barabbas’ first name. But what about the internal evidence (which reading is more likely to be original based on things like context, or which reading seems most likely to have given rise to the other)? Origen lived in the first half of the third century (before any of the Greek manuscripts of Matthew that we have today had come into existence), and he said: “In many copies it is not stated that Barabbas was also called Jesus. [This omission is] probably right since the name ‘Jesus’ does not belong to anyone sinful.” On the one hand, Origen seems to be saying that in his day, the majority of manuscripts actually *supported* the reading “Jesus Barabbas.” But then Origen also explains *why* “Jesus” might be deleted from many copies. It was awkward and embarrassing, and for some, simply not right or even possible that a sinner like Barabbas should have the name “Jesus” (cf. Mark, Luke, John). But it’s important to remember that Jesus (or Joshua) was one of the most common Jewish names in the first century (France). So if we can explain *why* “Jesus” would have been *deleted* in most later manuscripts, can we explain *why* “Jesus” would have been *added* in a *few* manuscripts (and *only* in Matthew)? While this addition could have helped to emphasize Matthew’s comparison and contrast between Jesus Barabbas and Jesus who is called Christ, most people find it inconceivable that any scribe or copyist would have *added* “Jesus” to the text as Barabbas’ first name if it was not already in the original (cf. Origen). So in this case, the internal evidence (which reading best explains the rise of the other and so therefore is most likely original) and the external evidence (which reading is most strongly supported in the manuscripts) actually disagree! If we make our decision based on the internal evidence, we will obviously follow the the NIV, the NRSV, and the NET, and *include* “Jesus” as Barabbas’ first name. I believe the internal evidence weighs heavier than the external evidence, and so I follow the reading “Jesus Barabbas” (cf. France). Notice first of all that these two different readings do not affect in the slightest any area of doctrine. No variant ever does! And second of all, these kinds of variants are exceedingly rare – which is an amazing testimony to God’s providence in preserving for us His word.

asking the crowd: “Whom do you want me to release for you: Jesus Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?” Pilate’s still looking for a way to get Jesus released, and to spite the chief priests and elders. Pilate hopes that the *crowds* will overrule the chief priests and elders and ask now instead for the Jesus who is called Messiah.

Once again, notice the emphasis: “Now at the feast the governor was accustomed to release *for the crowd* any one prisoner *whom they wanted*. And *they had*<sup>†</sup> then a notorious prisoner called [Jesus] Barabbas. So when they had gathered, Pilate said to them, “*Whom do you want* me to release *for you*: [Jesus] Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?”

**III. Matthew 27:18** — For he knew that it was out of envy that they had delivered him up.

Pilate’s right. But does he really understand what this envy is about? The chief priests and elders aren’t just jealous of Jesus’ popularity. This is a rivalry (if it can be called that) between the creature and his Creator. This is the resentment of a sinner against his divine Judge. This is a rivalry between the chief priests and elders and the one who has just said to them: “From now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven” (26:64). This is an envy full of anger and hatred because this Jesus dares to expose their sin and call them to account. They would rather have no Messiah at all than to have this Jesus. Pilate “knew that it was out of *envy* that they had delivered Him up.” But there’s another reason that Pilate wants to get Jesus released.

**IV. Matthew 27:19** — Besides, while he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, “Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered much because of him today in a dream.”

Pilate knows that Jesus is innocent. Pilate doesn’t care at all for the chief priests and elders and would like nothing more than to spite them. Pilate has tried to no avail to get Jesus to defend Himself. Now Pilate tries to release Jesus by giving the crowds a choice between Jesus Barabbas and Jesus who is called Christ. And then in the midst of all this, we learn that Pilate has received a message from his wife: “Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered much because of him today in a dream.”

By “righteous,” Pilate’s wife probably just means “**innocent**” (NRSV; NIV; NET; NLT; NCV). In Pilate’s dealings with the Jews, innocence was not always of any real importance. But Pilate’s wife has been convinced by her dream that there is something different about this Jewish prisoner. It’s almost as though she is *begging* her husband, “Have nothing to do with *that innocent* man.” The testimony of this Gentile woman reminds us of the testimony of Judas the traitor: “I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.” So who will the crowds ask for – Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called Christ? Barabbas, who is guilty of violence and murder in rebellion against Rome, or the one called Messiah – who claims to be Israel’s King, but yet is innocent of any crime against the hated Romans, and is even now in the apparent good graces of the Roman governor?

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<sup>†</sup> I take “they” to refer to the Jews rather than to the Romans (cf. France; contra Morris and Hagner)

**V. Matthew 27:20** — Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus.

If Pilate was counting on the kind of support Jesus had at His entry into Jerusalem only days earlier, then he was disappointed. The crowds on Sunday were mostly Galilean, but this crowd is probably made up mostly of people from Jerusalem. Even if some of these people were the same, the last couple of days had given them plenty of reason to see that Jesus would never be the Messiah *they* wanted Him to be. Now that He has been accused of blasphemy, it would not be difficult at all for the crowds to be persuaded.

Once again, notice the theme: “Now at the feast the governor was accustomed to release *for the crowd* any one prisoner *whom they wanted*. And *they had* then a notorious prisoner called [Jesus] Barabbas. So when they had gathered, Pilate said to them, “*Whom do you want* me to release *for you: [Jesus] Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?*” ... Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to *ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus*.

**VI. Matthew 27:21–23** — The governor again 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!” And he said, “Why, what evil has he done?” But they shouted all the more, “Let him be crucified!”

The crowd has become a bloodthirsty mob. They don’t just want Barabbas released, they want Jesus destroyed. And they don’t just want Jesus destroyed, they want Him crucified. The one who was crucified was said to be cursed by God Himself. The more frenzied they become, the more Jesus’ innocence becomes obvious. “Why, what evil has he done?” Pilate asked. But by now the crowds were blinded with rage. Jesus dared to be a “Messiah” who would not take up their agenda and fight their battles. Jesus dared to be a “Messiah” who exposed their hypocrisy and called them to repentance. Jesus dared to be a Messiah whose deliverance was not political but spiritual, not a deliverance from Rome, but from the chains of their own sin. Barabbas was better than this kind of “Messiah.” Barabbas knew what they really wanted. Barabbas shared *their* agenda and would fight *their* battles. Barabbas would not pretend that they were in greater need of deliverance from sin than of deliverance from Rome. And so they decided. “Release for us Barabbas, and let Jesus be crucified.”

**VII. Matthew 27:24–25** — 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.” And all the people answered, “His blood be on us and on our children!”

Three times we’ve heard Matthew refer to “the crowd” (15, 20, 24). Now for the first time, he refers to “the people” – and not just the people, but “all the people.” Throughout Matthew’s Gospel, the Greek word for “people” refers to the corporate nation of Israel. So in the answer of this crowd, Matthew hears the answer of the whole nation. This is not the kind of Messiah Israel wants. In fact, this is exactly the kind of Messiah Israel *doesn’t* want. So now we hear the whole

nation crying out, “His blood be on us and on our children!” They never would have said this if they really believed Jesus was the Son of God. But they were blinded to the truth by their own sin (Acts 3:17). And so by their own words, they called down upon themselves the terrible wrath of God in the destruction of Jerusalem only forty years later.

But where is Jesus in all of this? In the midst of all the intrigue, and all the shouting, and all the debate, where is Jesus? Have you been watching Him? He’s still standing there, for me and for you – *silent*. He is silent now because He has already spoken. Only a couple of weeks earlier:

- ✓ Matthew 20:17–19 — As Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside, and on the way he said to them, “See, we are going up to Jerusalem. And the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified.”

This will not just be a tragic miscarriage of justice like so many others this world has seen. As Jesus stands there quietly, He is not wondering what the outcome will be. Now He’s simply waiting for the fulfillment of His own sovereign word.

But for the crowds, Jesus’ silence is just more infuriating proof that He can never, ever, ever be their Messiah. It’s Barabbas they want – *not* this Jesus.

**VIII. Matthew 27:26** — Then he released *for them* Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, delivered him to be crucified.

They gladly welcomed Jesus Barabbas into their own number. And then they gladly watched as Jesus, who is called Messiah, was flogged and handed over to be crucified.

## **Conclusion**

Over and over again, these verses have testified to the *innocence* of Jesus. He is innocent of the charges against Him. He is innocent of any crime against Caesar. But this innocence is just what the crowd hates. After all, the reason they had come here in the first place was to demand the release of a *guilty* man.

How Israel longed for a Messiah – a Messiah who would deliver them from the things *they* wanted to be delivered from – a Messiah who would shower them with the blessings *they* had decided would make them happy. But when the Messiah came, announcing the true spiritual riches and blessings of God’s rule and calling the people to repentance, they couldn’t see any Gospel – they couldn’t see any good news. As Jesus stood quietly, silently before the Roman governor, all they saw was a man who could never, ever, ever be their Messiah. But at least in Barabbas, there was a man who would share *their* agenda and fight *their* battles. It was Barabbas they wanted, not Jesus.

Maybe it all seems so obvious to us. But is it really? Are we *daily* letting Jesus define for us and decide for us what our truest and deepest *needs* really are? Can we see and embrace in every possible circumstance and every possible outcome the daily working out of our salvation? Do we

rejoice when Jesus says that His plan for us is to deliver us from all our sinful desires and to grant us the peaceful fruit of righteousness? Or do our day to day prayers reveal that we have more in mind a Messiah who shares at least some of *our* agenda – an agenda that’s invariably focused primarily on the here and now of this world rather than on our *preparation* for the eternal joys of the kingdom of heaven. What kind of salvation do we most long for? What kind of blessings do we most desire? What kinds of goals are we most motivated by? What kinds of prayers do we most often pray? Which Jesus would you have chosen – Jesus Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ? And if that sounds too obvious, then which Jesus are we daily choosing – a Jesus whose agenda for us is all too often a spiritually cloaked version of our own selfish desires, or a Jesus whose agenda for us is truly to conform us to His own image – no strings attached – and fit us for glory?

As Jesus stood quietly, silently before the Roman governor, the crowd saw a man who could never, ever, ever be their Messiah. And so they demanded that He be crucified. When Pilate asked, “Why, what evil has He done?” they just shouted all the more, “Let Him be crucified!” When Pilate “took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, ‘I am innocent of this man’s blood’ ... *all the people answered*, ‘His blood be on us and on our children!’” This man would never, ever, ever be their Messiah. And so Jesus was delivered over to be crucified. And by His death, He made available even to this bloodthirsty crowd the forgiveness of all their sins and every spiritual blessing of Messiah’s rule. Just over seven weeks later, on the day of Pentecost, Peter proclaimed to all the people:

- ✓ Acts 3:13–15, 19–21, 26 [NRSV] — The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our ancestors has glorified his servant Jesus, whom *you* handed over and rejected in the presence of Pilate, though he had decided to release him. But *you* rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you, and *you* killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead... Repent therefore, and turn to God so that *your* sins may be wiped out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Messiah appointed for *you*, that is, Jesus... When God raised up his servant, he sent him first to *you*, to bless *you* by turning [every one] of *you* from your wicked ways.

Here is a mercy that far exceeds our ability to comprehend. God sent the message of Messiah’s salvation *first of all* to those who had clamored for His death, asking instead for a murderer named Barabbas. God sent the message of the cleansing, redeeming blood of Jesus *first of all* to those who once shouted these words: “His blood be on us and on our children!” Here is a picture of God’s unfathomable love even for *us*. The Apostle Paul writes:

- ✓ Colossians 1:21–23 (cf. Romans 5:10–11) — And you, *who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds*, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, *in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him*, if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven.

Are we learning every day to embrace the Jesus whose agenda for us is *only* this – to present us holy and blameless and above reproach before him? Are we continuing in the faith, stable and

steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel? All praise, and honor, and glory be to God that we, who once were *alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds*, he has now *reconciled* in his body of flesh *by his death*.