

# Absolute Substitution

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**Bible Text:** John 18:38-39

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## Shreveport Grace Church

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I would like to invite you to look with me in your Bibles to John chapter 18. Whenever we meet around the Lord's table we look to a portion of Scripture that is a little different than where we have been studying, particularly in Isaiah, although we could easily have stayed in Isaiah chapter 53, such a great chapter over which you could put the title "Absolutely Substitution." But this is the theme of all of Scripture, I believe. I know as the Lord dealt in my heart a number of years ago and showed me I was lost and I began to reread the Scriptures having spent many years studying them even in the original languages and given a degree of master. I came to see that all that was but dung because I hadn't been taught of Christ. And to go back and start reading again in Genesis chapter one, reading all the way through the book of Revelation and marveling that I could have read the Scriptures all those years and missed Christ. But then, again, if you try to read with the light out you are not going to see and understand a whole lot. And the Lord turned the light on and I can still remember and thankfully the Lord purposed that I would have to leave that Bible in Africa when we left. I never did bring it with me. And it is probably a good thing. I would have probably made an idol out of it, because it had so many memories of going back and reading the Scriptures, wherever I could see Christ putting a C, wherever I found substitution putting an S. It just... and I would pause in reading for days and look at a portion and, you know, be humbled to the fact that I couldn't see Christ. I know he is there in every portion, but I had blank pages. There wasn't a C. There wasn't an S. I must be missing something. Go back and read.

But these are things as the Lord teaches us we come to value and this portion here in John is such a portion. But I want to read in John 18, come back to verses 39 and 40 because we know the story, that of Barabbas, but there are some things here perhaps we don't know and that as we pause and consider them, our attention will grow and I pray our love and appreciation and worship of Christ grow even more.

But here as the Lord stood before Pilate in this kangaroo court that had been put together and yet all the while God ordained it to be that way. You know, they weren't going to find fault with him. He is the Son of God. You know, if it had been on that basis, he would not have been crucified. They had to find false witness in order to crucify him. And so to accomplish God's will, the just one dying for the unjust that he might bring us to God.

But it says that Pilate—you see that in verse 38. Pilate said:

“I find in him no fault at all.”<sup>1</sup>

Whatsoever. And you won't. But he was before a crossroad here what to do.

Verse 39. He says:

“But ye have a custom, that I should release unto you one at the passover: will ye therefore that I release unto you the King of the Jews?”<sup>2</sup>

This is something that he had heard in reference to Christ and perhaps was using it even in a mocking way. But it says, verse 40.

“Then cried they all again, saying, Not this man, but Barabbas. Now Barabbas was a robber.”<sup>3</sup>

So here we have a just man that Pilate puts in front of the people and says, “Who do you want to release?” And they said, “We would rather this robber Barabbas be released than this man.”

Let's read over in Luke chapter 23. Each of the gospel writers were led to record something of Barabbas and I think it is of value to read each portion and see some of the detail. But we are just going to read here in Luke 22 or 23 for now. Luke 23 beginning with verse 22. It says... well, let's go on up to verse 18.

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.<sup>4</sup>

So no detail of this story is left to chance. That is true of this story. It is true of history which I always like to refer to as his story. All of history is his story, Christ's story. And everything that was done here, even here in Pilate's hesitation, but then in his ultimate delivering him up, none of this was left to chance. God ordained his sovereignty in all of

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<sup>1</sup> Jon 18:38.

<sup>2</sup> John 18:39.

<sup>3</sup> John 18:40.

<sup>4</sup> Luke 23:18-25.

the Scriptures permeates all of these writers to show us that even though we look at it. And it is true what Pilate said. He said:

“I find in him no fault.”<sup>5</sup>

That as the truth. The Scriptures, God found no fault in his Son. But sin was laid upon him. It was as a sin bearer. He had to be free of sin. There could be no fault in him. But as the sin bearer laying that iniquity on him, he then bore the curse of his people and that is clearly seen there.

But this substitution, because that is really... when we talk about substitution, I am a visual person. I have got to see it. So here is a visual of substitution. If you wonder about the truth of substitution, it is Christ in the sinner's place. And it is the sinner going free. It is just that simple.

If someone said to me, “Boil it down. What is the gospel declaring?” It is that. It is that God the Father was pleased to take the sin of a people and put it to the account of his Son and punish his Son in those sinners' place. That is simple.

And then upon completion of that work there remained nothing because so complete was that death that he accomplished, there remained nothing but righteousness to impute to those for whom he died. When Barabbas... it doesn't say that Barabbas walked free. Do you see how it was put? He was released. That is a legal term which means that there wasn't any... we are talking about seditious. We are talking about a robber. We are talking about a murderer. But based upon a law and a custom, that law being satisfied, Barabbas, he didn't just walk free, he was released. And the law could no longer condemn him based upon who he was and what he had done.

I can't think of a better picture of substitution. And that is what we see here epitomized and what is true of every blood bought sinner whom the Spirit has sought and taught. They are brought to see in the cross, in the death of the Lord Jesus Christ, the substitute.

Do you know what the name Barabbas means in the original? It is a simple name, but it says a lot, son of the father. That is what it means, Barabbas. There are sons of the father that looking at Barabbas' record, we are no different, but whom God has purposed to set free. And not just looking the other way, but they are actually being a death, there actually being a substitution. See, Barabbas was worthy of death. But now we see Christ dying in his stead that he go free. That is the picture that we see here. We see a guilty son and I have to say that is what I am, being released and the innocent son, perfect son being crucified.

So this is really the essence of the gospel that is boiled down here in a nutshell.

So first of all, I would like to coming back here to John 18 verse 38 just look at a couple of matters for our consideration before we partake of the Lord's Table. But we see this

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<sup>5</sup> John 18:38.

truth of substitution depicted in what is called here the custom of the day. Do you see that?

“But ye have a custom.”<sup>6</sup>

See, Pilate even being the wimp that he was, the compromiser still understood the need for justice. He couldn't just release Christ. He even spoke there, well, let me chasten him. Let some judgment be on him. But that wouldn't have been to God the Father's satisfaction. There had to be death. And without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sin. And we are talking about the shedding of blood unto death. Either Barabbas had to die or Christ had to die. There wasn't any wiggling out of this matter to anybody's satisfaction or the satisfaction of law. If it got back to the Roman government that Pilate was down there just turning loose thieves and robbers and seditionists, you know, that would have been his head. He had accountability in this matter. There had to be satisfaction. If it ever came back, why did you turn Barabbas loose, there was one who died in his place. And such is the accusation. Why a robber? Why a {?}? Why a Ken that should be released when all these others are sent to hell and pay the condemnation? There is one who died.

That is what Paul said in writing there in Romans chapter eight, you know, that God justifies sinners by that one death of his Son. So here we see this word, a custom.

“...ye have a custom.”<sup>7</sup>

And the custom was, as it says, to release unto you one at the Passover. I find that interesting. I don't know where this custom began. I tried to study it and figure it out. I can't find any other record of it than right here. But it is interesting the detail that this would be done at the Passover. Because isn't that what the Passover was about? God said:

“...when I see the blood, I will pass over you.”<sup>8</sup>

Again, all the way back there at the release of the children of Israel from Egypt through the Passover lamb. And here now a custom that one should be released as a result of at the Passover. And, again, the timing of this. Christ our Passover was slain. A release. It makes sense that there should be a release at the Passover. This should be something that has been accomplished by this death. You don't read where anything was required of Barabbas to be released other than the death of Christ. We don't find anywhere where it is stated that they went and tried to reason with him. Now do you really want to... you have got to accept this invitation now. Like preachers today telling sinners you... Christ died, but, you know, to make it effectual... they booted him out. They, you are gone Barabbas. There is one that died.

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<sup>6</sup> John 18:38.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Exodus 12:13.

Such is the satisfaction and I say that in terms of the death Christ died. There is not going to be any where there is double jeopardy. You know, this custom, the custom. You think about what a custom is. It is the law. It is a rule that one be released, you know, and that one die, one be released.

And so we see a great picture here. But there are many examples throughout Scripture and even throughout culture. It was one of the things when I was in Africa trying to find illustrations as I spoke to people of a different culture and many times a different language and custom, find something that they could relate to.

Here was something that these people could relate to teach a lesson of substitution. And we look at it now thousands of years later and think, what a sovereign providence that God would ordain that this should be given us here as an example, lest there be any question as to the nature of the sacrifice which is the Lord Jesus Christ, but also the nature of the ones that he came to save and release.

I remember one time being in a village where all the elders were meeting and there was a man that was seated in the middle that was... there was a big {?} and there had to be a mediator. There had to be a man in the middle between the two warring parties. And the man in the middle was holding a cow's tail. And I remember asking. You know, why is the man holding a cow's tail?

And they said, "Well, that is the evidence that a sacrifice has been made." They don't bring the whole cow back, but they bring the cow's tail back and if they brought the cow's tail back, then that was an indication that a sacrifice had been made and that this man could justly be the mediator then between these opposing parties.

And I can remember using that particular illustration as I endeavored to explain to those to whom I preached there the necessity of a death of a sacrifice, of blood shed. It was something they could relate to. To us it is crazy. You know, a man holding a cow's tail, he could have gone and bought it somewhere. But for them that was the testimony. That was the token. I don't know why not the head. You could probably cut off a tail without the cow dying. You know, so you kind of reason that way. But the whole idea that there had to be a sacrifice was already in the culture. Here was a custom. In that day there that was already established and I think for one reason, to prepare the way so that when it came to this Christ should die and another be released. And you talk about who was released, you know, a seditionist, a rebel, a robber. We look at it and think, well, that is not right. Well, look at yourself. Are you any better?

And, you know, I read this and see myself as being that Barabbas, just like when I read about Jacob. I see myself as being that Jacob whom God loved, no better. I am, you know, we don't know a lot about Barabbas. I know there is a lot of tradition that has surrounded his release. Some believe that he eventually became a disciple of Christ and there is certainly reference to a certain Barabbas in the book of Acts. We don't know whether it was this one or not. But what impresses me more is simply that it didn't

require Barabbas to say or do anything. We are going to get a confession out of him first, before we release him. None of that.

Christ died. Barabbas is released. And I fear preachers that put conditions on sinners in order for there to be almost a double acceptance, like, ok, Christ died, but now we need your signature here to make it effectual. If you don't pray this prayer or if you don't confess first that you are a sinner, then you can't say Christ died for you. I don't see any of that here. I see substitution is the substitute dying, the sinner being released. And so that brings us to the second aspect of this substitution. Not only depicted in the custom of the day, but illustrated in the release of this one at the Passover.

See, all of these words are important.

“Ye have a custom, that I should release unto you...”<sup>9</sup>

In other words, a requirement, one at the Passover.

I suppose typically the custom was just picking one that they desired. It is like the president on turkey day. You know, he pardons a turkey. That turkey goes to a farm some where and that is it. But in Barabbas' case it wasn't just releasing him. It is that one should die in his place.

Do you see there the illustration? God isn't just releasing sinners from their obligation to the law or to holiness or to his justice. There is a requirement that to be released one die. So in this case, particularly, it is unique. He didn't just say, “Release Barabbas.” He put it before them. Either Christ or Barabbas.

And they say, “Crucify him.”

All the while accomplishing their purpose and their desire. They were accomplishing the will of God.

Now the key word here in verse 39, then, is the word release. Not only Passover, each of these you could spend a whole message on, but to release. It depicts what happens when there is an effectual substitution. The word means to acquit. One, it is a legal term. It means to acquit one who is accused of crime and to set them at liberty. They are released. It is to release a debtor. In other words, not to press one's claim against him. It is to remit his debt.

And when you think about in terms of who we are and what the Lord Jesus Christ has accomplished for sinners such as we are, the picture is clear. Think about it. Had Christ been set free, it would have meant certain death for Barabbas. If Christ had not died on that tree, it would have meant certain death for every one of us sitting in this room. There would be nothing but condemnation. But the reason on the other hand that we can even sing as we have sung to this point and read and have a hope that our sin has been put

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

away it is because Christ died. It is because the substitute paid the debt. Thanks be to God that Christ would not be released. You know, he was that sacrificial lamb who was to be bound and he did so willingly. He was the perfect lamb laid upon that altar and slain in order that sinners such as we might be set free. It was ordained of God that he should pay the debt. Innocent and righteous though he was, that the sinner go free.

And this is the message that we find throughout the Scripture. That word release as pertains to salvation, it is the same word in the original to forgive. Forgive means to loose. And that is the glory of what Christ accomplished, not just turned loose, but forgiven. And not just forgiven, but pardoned. But even in human terms, legal court, if a man has on his record that he was pardoned, there is always still assumed guilt. I don't know as we have a word that we can identify with that shows the completeness of the death of Christ on behalf of sinners to where God looking upon that sinner sees nothing but righteousness, just as if he had never sinned, just as if he had always obeyed.

It has to be that way before God, a holy God, the very righteousness of his Son. But that is the Word, to release unto you, one at the Passover.

You know, there is a lot... as you consider... continue to break these down here where you see the truth of substitution illustrated, you know, my mind rests on the phrase, "At the passover."

There is a lot of argument today as to when sinners were justified. There is no confusion in my mind. And I know the Lord purposed it from eternity. These things were purposed from eternity, but I am talking about when was it accomplished? When could God be just to declare righteous those sinners that he purposed to save? One place, one time, at the Passover. It was at the cross. Christ our Passover is slain.

You know, anything other than that becomes vain philosophy, philosophizing and a dangerous doctrine. If we ever lift the anchor from the cross we are going to be set afloat into all kinds of error and heresy. You know, as the Lord sets it forth in Scripture from eternity God purposed it. In time Christ accomplished it. And in time the Spirit reveals it.

You say, "How do I know?"

I am one of these Barabbases for whom Christ died. Well, it is not some general hope. Well, he died for everybody, like you hear people say. No, it is the spirit revealing it to the heart of the sinner. I can't speak for you. I can't even speak for Christ. I just know what he has been pleased to reveal to this poor heart. And herein is my hope. My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness. I dare not trust the sweetest frame. I get up tomorrow feeling like a child of God and within an hour I feel like a son of the devil. You know, it is certainly worthy of it in my own nature. But that is not what is determining my salvation. You know, I dare not trust the sweetest frame, but wholly lean on Jesus' name.

You know that is... there is a lot in that at the Passover that I believe is important for our

consideration. And Barabbas, here, dear friends, is an emblem of those sinners for whom Christ died, an emblem in the state of his nature, you know, being a robber and being a seditionist, a notorious sinner.

I will tell you this. Everyone for whom Christ died is a notorious sinner. If you want to know their name it is sinner. That is it.

Paul spoke of being the chief of sinners. You know, you think of him being a robber and a murderer. Think of how we by nature rob God of his glory and so destroy ourselves. But for his grace. So he is an emblem of those for whom Christ died, but he is also an emblem of those who by Christ's death have been released and set free to where the Scriptures declare:

“There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus.”<sup>10</sup>

I love that. That is the truth of the gospel. Such as Barabbas were deserving of punishment. So are we. And yet at the Passover, again, if Barabbas were to give a testimony walking into his house, there is his family. What happened. There is a man that died. When did that take place? Just a few hours ago.

You know, when people ask me when it was that the Lord saved me, it is not when I saw Christ. That is not when I was saved. I was saved when he died. I am like Barabbas walking into the house and saying, “What happened to you?” Or “Why me?” There is one that died. That is all I know. One that died to the satisfaction of God the Father.

And that is where the Scriptures put our salvation and our redemption, our justification. I have had some preachers argue with me over the years. They say, “Well, just stick to the who and the how. Just don't try to pin it down to the when.”

Well, you might as well take your scissors out and cut the Scriptures out, because the Scriptures say a lot about the when. And when was Abraham's sin debt paid? It wasn't in eternity. It was purposed in eternity. And throughout his lifetime he offered sacrificial lambs but the blood of bulls and goats can't put away sin. That was a covering. Abraham looked to when

Christ said, “Abraham saw my day and rejoiced.” He looked to the cross. And that is where the Scriptures point us. Look in Romans chapter five.

You don't think the Scriptures talk about when? Well, look at verse six.

“For when we were yet without strength, in due time...”<sup>11</sup>

Salvation was accomplished in time. It says Christ died for the ungodly.

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<sup>10</sup> Romans 8:1.

<sup>11</sup> Romans 5:6.



“For scarcely for a righteous man will one die...”<sup>12</sup>

You know, one might understand if Barabbas had been falsely accused, release him, you know? We don't believe you ought to be here. But that wasn't the case.

For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.<sup>13</sup>

That has to be our testimony of we are the Lord's. We can't point to any other hope than that.

And look at verse nine.

“Much more then, being now justified by his blood...”<sup>14</sup>

Not before, but justified by his blood we shall be saved from wrath through him.

“For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son.”<sup>15</sup>

That is where the reconciliation was accomplished, in his death.

“...much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life.”<sup>16</sup>

He ever lives to intercede for those for whom he died.

Look at Hebrews chapter one and verse three, one other portion. If there is any doubt as to when salvation was accomplished and when it was that before God the Father that people representative in Barabbas was released, it was at the Passover. It was when Christ died.

And I am just brought to see it by God's Spirit now if I am one of those for whom Christ died. In time the Spirit draws this poor sinner's heart, shows me that I ma lost and opens my eyes to Christ. But what he causes me to see is that when Christ died, that debt was paid, not my believing. And here, again in Hebrews one and verse three it says:

“Who being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Romans 5:7.

<sup>13</sup> Romans 5:7-8.

<sup>14</sup> Romans 5:9.

<sup>15</sup> Romans 5:10.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Hebrews 1:3.

So from the moment coming back here to wrap it up in John 18. From the moment that the decision was made it was determined that Barabbas should be released. That was the determination. Yes, God the Father has from eternity determined that sinners be released. Yet it was not until Christ had paid the debt that he was released. There had to be one who died. And that is where we find our release.

In John 18 it says there in verse 40.

“Then cried they all again, saying, Not this man, but Barabbas. Now Barabbas was a robber.”<sup>18</sup>

Christ paid the debt. We are who we are, sinners before a holy God. But the fact that Christ paid the debt according to God the Father’s eternal purpose and will, is where our salvation is if we are his. If we are his in time the Spirit is going to cause us to see him and to know him and to rejoice in him and to look nowhere else but to this work that he accomplished for sinners such as we are. I pray the Lord will so direct our hearts.

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<sup>18</sup> John 18:40.