

The Preacher's Kid

Luke 23:18-25

Manuscript and Discussion Guide for October 27, 2024

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The story of the gospel hinges with the cross. But one of the most profound illustrations of the gospel occurred just an hour or two before the cross, when a prisoner swap occurred between Jesus and a murderer named Barabbas. In fact, while we often say that Jesus died on a cross meant for all of humanity, in a literal sense, His cross was intended for Barabbas. But Jesus took his place, demonstrating the power of his substitutionary atonement.

In the last century, several prisoner exchanges took place, either to de-escalate rising tension between countries, or to facilitate peace deals or aide diplomatic relations between countries. Sometimes the only incentive was an attempt to save some prisoner's life.

In 2006, an Israeli soldier was captured by Hamas and held for more than five years. His capture became a high-profile case—an emotional and public issue. A national outcry arose for his release; his status was constantly in the news.

Eventually, this captured Israeli soldier was exchanged for 1,000 Hamas soldiers who'd been captured over the years. The exchange sparked global controversy due to the unequal ratio and the potential harm that could come from these released Hamas soldiers. But Israel remained firm in its response that one Israeli soldier was worth that kind of prisoner exchange.

Even though this event was headline news for more than five years, the world has since moved on. Does anyone even remember it now?

Well, I can guarantee you someone does! That one Israeli soldier! He will never forget the day of his prisoner exchange.

I was curious about him, now 15 years later. He has chosen to live a relatively quiet life. According to the news source I used—called ChatGPT—this retired soldier has refused

any public or political role in society. He's now married, raising a family out of the public eye; he's simply happy to be alive.

There's another prisoner exchange that occurred in Israel, and to this day, it has never been forgotten. In fact, God didn't want us to forget, because He had it recorded in all four Gospel accounts.

It's the prisoner exchange between Jesus and a man known as Barabbas, who is about to become a living illustration of the gospel.

The apostle Paul writes in **1 Timothy 2:6** that Jesus Christ ***gave Himself as a ransom***. That word Paul used for ransom was the standard word used for money that was paid to have a prisoner of war released from bondage.

Geoffrey Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Eerdmans, 1985), p. 545

Now to set the stage for this prisoner exchange, let's go back to ***Luke's Gospel account, chapter 23***, where we last watched Pilate work himself into a political jam.

In our last study, we noted from history that Pilate is currently under investigation by Rome for his inability to rule over the Jewish people in this region. He's caused too much political unrest and none of it has settled well with the emperor. Because of that, Pilate can't afford another riot on his hands.

At the same time, he sees through the religious leader's accusations of Jesus. He's already said three different times that Jesus is innocent of any guilt worthy of death.

Matthew's Gospel account adds that Pilate even knew "that it was out of envy that they had delivered Jesus up" (Matthew 27:18).

Even Pilate's wife added more pressure to this political hot potato by sending Pilate a note that she'd had a dream about Jesus and that he was a righteous man; she warned Pilate to let Jesus go at all costs.

But now to do that, it'll probably cause a riot. And Pilate can't afford to have that on his performance review.

So, with that as a backdrop, Pilate comes up with a stroke of genius. He happens to be holding a Jewish criminal who's been a burr in Rome's side for quite a while.

John's Gospel refers to him as a ***robber (John 18:40)***. This word referred to a dangerous criminal. Today, his photograph would have been pinned up at the Post Office and underneath would be the words, "Armed and extremely dangerous."

Mark's Gospel account called him a ***murderer***. So, Barabbas isn't some pick-pocket or a petty thief; he's killing people who get in his way.

Luke describes him in chapter 23 and verse 19:

[He was] a man who had been thrown into prison for an insurrection started in the city and for murder.

Luke 23:19

This is an important description because it not only tells us that Barabbas was guilty of murder, it also tells us who he was guilty of murdering.

He was a member of an ever-present threat to the Roman government; he was a zealous Jew who was involved in guerilla warfare in a desperate attempt to remove Rome from the land of Israel.

Matthew's account called him a ***notorious prisoner***. The word notorious means to be marked. We would say today that Barabbas was a marked man.

The Roman government has been searching for him and for members of his gang, and they finally caught him, and two other men along with him.

Barabbas wasn't just a problem to Pilate; he was a problem to the Jewish Sanhedrin—the religious leadership—who didn't want trouble with Rome.

As we've already learned, the office of high priest was effectively purchased from the Roman governor, given to a Jewish leader who could keep the people under control. Rome would leave them alone as long as they left Rome alone.

So, the Jewish leaders were happy with peaceful coexistence and Barabbas was a threat to all of that. In other words, Barabbas was the last guy that Rome and Israel would want back on the street.

So, here's Pilate's stroke of genius. It's Passover season and he remembers this unique tradition among the Jewish people.

Matthew's account fills in what happens next in chapter 27 at verse 15:

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 Barabbas. So when they had gathered, Pilate said to them, "Whom do you want me to release for you: Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?"

Matthew 27:15-17

The Mishna, a commentary on Jewish life, described this tradition as a way to illustrate the sacrifice of the Passover lamb giving its life for the freedom of someone in prison.

This custom went all the way back to the Book of Exodus, to the original Passover when the Israelites were released from their captivity in Egypt.

So, as a way of remembering their release from bondage, on every Passover season, the nation Israel would illustrate their deliverance by allowing one guilty prisoner to be set free.

Now you can imagine that each year some small-time operator—some first time offender—would be chosen, someone grateful to be freed who would pose no further threat to society.

But that's not Barabbas. He was public enemy number one! He was guilty of treason, insurrection and murder.

Charles R. Swindoll, *The Darkness and the Dawn* (Word Publishing, 2001), p. 68

And the Roman government had finally caught him.

Mark's Gospel informs us that Barabbas had been imprisoned with some other men who had also committed murder in their rebellion against Rome.

One commentator writes that this verifies that the two men who were crucified on either side of Jesus were partners in crime with Barabbas.

Ibid

Which also confirms that the middle cross from which Jesus will hang was intended for Barabbas. Jesus will literally and physically take his place.

Now let's take a closer look at Barabbas. First, you need to know that Barabbas isn't really a name, it's more like a nickname.

You could call this his popular name that had been picked up by the public who, frankly, would have admired him. To them, he was more like a first century Robin Hood, risking his life for the sake of national Israel, carrying out secret attacks on Rome, their hated oppressor.

The average Jew on the street would have secretly applauded every news item about Barabbas.

But this nickname—Barabbas—is an Aramaic term that referred to his father. The first part of the name is “Bar” which means “son” and the last part would typically indicate the name of someone's father.

You might remember Jesus calling Simon Peter, “Simon Bar-Jonah” which means, “Simon, the son of Jonah (or John).”

If we followed that custom today, I would write my name as “Stephen bar-Keith,” which would have made kindergarten even more difficult!

But for Barabbas, “Bar” means “son” but “abbas” (from “abba”) typically means “father.” “The son of a father” would be a strange nickname.

William Barclay pulls from history the fact that during the first and second centuries, a custom developed where the most well-known and most well-respected rabbis were called abbas.

Quoted in Swindoll, p. 66

Sort of like the apostle John, as an old man, eventually became known throughout the church simply as the Elder (2 John 1). Everybody knew “the elder” was John the apostle.

Well, everybody knew Barabbas was the son of a famous rabbi, and since everybody knew who that rabbi was, Barabbas became known simply as that famous rabbi’s son.

We would call him today, “The Preacher’s Kid.” Barabbas had grown up in the home of a rabbi—a preacher and teacher and expositor of the Old Testament.

How faithful he was to the Word of God we don’t know. But what we do know is that somewhere along the way, Barabbas had rejected his father’s teaching he’d grown up under, and he’d turned to a life of crime, becoming a murderer and a thief and a leader among a gang of men who now had Roman blood on their hands.

Now, we still don’t know his first name.

Some ancient Syriac and Armenian manuscripts provide a first name, which will be later ignored.

Grant Osborne in his exegetical commentary writes that Barabbas’ first name was most likely dropped from manuscripts and any reference in church tradition primarily out of reverence for the name of the Lord.

Grant R. Osborne, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Matthew* (Zondervan, 2010), p. 1017

And that’s because Barabbas’ first name was Yeshua, or Jesus.

Now understand that Jesus was a common name, the New Testament counterpart to Joshua, which means deliverer.

Lots of little boys running the streets in these regions in and around Jerusalem would have been named in honor of Israel’s valiant soldier, Joshua.

It would be the desire of any Jewish couple that their son would grow up to be a godly man, standing for God and for truth as well as loyal to the nation Israel.

So, this rabbi and his wife have a little boy and they're so devoted to their people and their land and their God that they name their little boy Yeshua, in the Greek language: Iesous. Jesus!

Kent Hughes writes in his commentary that the church father, Origen, writing in the late 2nd century, said that this criminal leader's name was Iesous Barabbas.

R. Kent Hughes, *John: That You May Believe* (Crossway, 1999), p. 426

So here this boy grows up in a home where his father is becoming a famous Rabbi. Yeshua grows up to become equally as loyal to his nation as his father.

But as he ages, you can imagine the heated debates that grew in their home. His father was all about protecting Jewish tradition and the status quo and peaceful coexistence with Rome.

- But what about the injustice of Rome?
- What about the murderous acts of Pilate who murdered unsuspecting Jewish people for simply voicing their dissent?
- What about Israel's subjugation to the Roman Empire?

At some point Barabbas begins to live out the meaning of his name in a violent manner. He will do his part to overthrow Roman rule; he will spill blood if necessary, and it was evidently necessary in his mind.

Is it not time for another Joshua, another deliverer, to arise? Something has to be done! He will become that deliverer; he will be a Messianic figure in the history books of Israel.

Pilate thinks this is his way out of the mess he's in. And this is why he makes this careful distinction.

Again, Matthew records it in chapter 27 and verse 17:

"Whom do you want me to release for you: Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?"

Matthew 27:17

One ancient manuscript reads, "Whom do you want me to release for you: Yeshua Barabbas, or Yeshua Christ?"

Swindoll, p. 67

In other words, do you want Jesus, the son of that famous rabbi, or Jesus the Christos—the anointed Messiah?

Here's the question, and we understand it even more bluntly: "Who do you want me to get rid of, the son of the Rabbi, or the Son of God?"

In the most staggering prisoner exchange in human history, the crowd unanimously shouts for Barabbas to be released, and for Jesus Christ to be crucified.

Let me tell you, Barabbas was the kind of Messiah they were hoping for. They wanted a Messiah who was willing to kill; they didn't want a Messiah who was willing to die.

And that same decision is being made to this day, beloved, in a thousand different ways, but they all spell the same thing.

- We want a Messiah who will give us what we want.
- We want a Messiah who will let us live the way we want.
- We don't want a Jesus who died for our sins, because that means we must admit we're sinners.
- We don't want a Jesus who was judged in our place because that means we deserve the judgement of God.
- We don't want a Jesus who will make life more difficult instead of more comfortable.
- We don't want a Jesus who thinks He can direct our lives and tell us what to do and what not to do.

We don't want that kind of Jesus.

Well, this crowd didn't want Him either.

Now, facing a potential riot on his hands—unable to get Jesus off the hook, so to speak—Pilate makes this prisoner exchange.

Luke records in chapter 23 and verse 23:

But they were urgent, demanding with loud cries that he should be crucified. And their voices prevailed. So Pilate decided that their demand should be granted. He released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, for whom they asked, but he delivered Jesus over to their will.

Luke 23:23-25

We're not give any details of Barabbas' release from his cell there in the nearby Fortress of Antonia. He would have heard the crowd chanting his name. But he wouldn't have known why.

Several authors pointed out that:

Barabbas *wouldn't* have been able to hear what Pilate was saying to the crowd, ***"Whom do you want me to release?"***

But he *would* have heard them shouting his name, ***"Barabbas!"***

He *wouldn't* have heard Pilate then ask, ***"What do you want me to do with Jesus the Christ?"***

But he *would* have then heard the mob shouting, ***"Crucify him; crucify him."*** And his heart would begin to race in horror and fear.

Adapted from Hughes and Swindoll

So imagine: the next thing he hears are the footsteps of Roman soldiers coming down the corridor toward him. The key turns in a lock and he hears his two friends being grabbed and carted away to their execution. Then the key turns in his cell door.

This was it; he was going to die; it was all in vain.

The Roman warden stands there and says to him, "Get up! That other Jesus who claimed to be the Messiah, He's going to die in your place. You're free—now go."

He evidently ended up living such a quiet, private life that nothing surfaces about him in history, in church tradition, in Scripture, in the writings of early church leaders—nothing.

God evidently wanted the biographical entry of Barabbas to end with simply this fact: Jesus took his place.

There was a prisoner exchange. Jesus died. Barabbas lived.

I can't help but hold up the mirror of the Word and see here that:

- We're like Pilate who wants more than anything to protect himself, his reputation, his slice of power and prestige.
- We're like the crowd of people carried away by the majority opinions of our world.
- We're like the religious leaders who are offended that Jesus would challenge their way of life.

But we are *most* like Barabbas:

- We're guilty.
- We're as good as dead.
- We're incarcerated—bound—to this body of flesh. Paul described it as confined to a sinful heart and mind.
- We're hopeless before the purity of God's discernment who knows us perfectly.
- We deserve His justice and judgment.

But a key in our cell door turns, the door swings open, and Jesus Christ says, "I've paid the ransom for your release: are you interested in a prisoner exchange? My life for yours; my sacrifice for your sin; my redemption for your admission that you're a sinner who needs saving."

Have you responded to Jesus yet?

Barabbas could have said to his jailer: "Look, I appreciate the offer, but I've sinned too greatly; you don't know the half of what I've done. I deserve to die; I don't deserve to go free."

We can *all* say that.

Barabbas could have said, "Okay, but let me stay in here for a few years, I deserve to pay for at least some of my crimes!"

What did Barabbas have to do to go free? Walk out of that cell, the beneficiary of a prisoner exchange. His freedom paid for by the final Passover Lamb, who came to die for sinners like Barabbas—and you and me.

When Jesus began His ministry and preached His first sermon, back in Luke chapter 4, he read from the prophet Isaiah and claimed to be the promised Deliverer who was able **to set the prisoner free (Isaiah 61:1-2)**.

And to this day, His death on the cross, on your cross and mine, is still setting captives free.

I close with this true story written by M. R. DeHaan, the founder of Our Daily Breads ministries.

DeHaan was a converted medical doctor who loved to tell the story of an elderly man who was known around town as Old Man Kline.

Old man Kline was an unkind, self-centered man whom no one loved or wanted to be around. Children made fun of him and people in general tried to avoid him.

One particular Sunday night he was walking down the street past the little church whose members had often invited him to attend. He'd never accepted their invitation.

It was a warm summer night in the 1920s and the windows of this little church building were open and the congregation was singing. The music floated on the wind and down the sidewalk where Mr. Kline was walking.

No one knew it, but he had grown discouraged in life; troubled by his shortcomings in life, filled at times with despair. He knew he had not been a good man, a kind man; he deserved his reputation. Most unsettling to him was the fact that he had no hope beyond the grave.

He stopped walking as the music breezed toward him and circled around him. He stopped and listened. He couldn't believe his ears. They were singing that "Jesus had died for mankind and Jesus died for me."

His hearing wasn't very good at all, so he walked closer to listen, he thought they were singing about him. Sure enough, when the congregation came again to the chorus, "Jesus died for all mankind," he thought they were singing, "Jesus died for old man Kline."

Could it be, he thought. Could that really be true?

He entered that little chapel, sat through the service, heard the simple message of the gospel, and came to learn that Jesus had indeed come to die even for him.

And right then and there he believed that gospel message and He trusted in Jesus as his deliverer.

A prisoner exchange was made that night. Another captive was set free.

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Study Guide

Summary

In this sermon, we explore the profound narrative of the prisoner exchange between Jesus and Barabbas, as recorded in the Gospels. The story is set against the backdrop of political tension and the Passover tradition of releasing a prisoner. Barabbas, a notorious criminal and the son of a famous rabbi, is chosen by the crowd to be released instead of Jesus, the innocent Messiah. This exchange serves as a powerful illustration of the gospel, where Jesus takes the place of the guilty, offering His life as a ransom for many. The sermon challenges us to reflect on our own lives, recognizing our guilt and need for a Savior, and to accept the freedom offered through Jesus' sacrifice.

Key Takeaways:

- The story of Barabbas highlights the concept of true freedom, which is not merely physical release but spiritual liberation. Jesus' sacrifice offers us freedom from the bondage of sin and guilt. This freedom is not earned by our deeds but is a gift of grace, inviting us to walk out of our spiritual prisons and embrace a new life in Christ.
- The prisoner exchange between Jesus and Barabbas underscores the immense cost of our redemption. Jesus, the innocent Lamb, willingly took the place of the guilty, bearing the punishment we deserved. This act of love calls us to reflect on the depth of God's grace and the seriousness of our sin, urging us to live lives worthy of the sacrifice made for us.
- The crowd's choice of Barabbas over Jesus reflects a common human tendency to prefer a savior who aligns with our desires rather than one who challenges us to change. We often seek a Messiah who will fulfill our wants rather than transform our hearts. This narrative invites us to examine our expectations of Jesus and to embrace Him as the true Savior who offers eternal life.
- The transformation of Barabbas from a condemned criminal to a free man illustrates the power of the gospel to change lives. Just as Barabbas was set free, we too can experience new life through faith in Jesus. This message of hope and redemption is available to all, regardless of past mistakes or current circumstances.
- The sermon concludes with a call to respond to Jesus' offer of a prisoner exchange—His life for ours. Like Barabbas, we are invited to accept the freedom and forgiveness offered through Christ's sacrifice. This decision requires humility, acknowledging our need for a Savior, and a willingness to follow Him wholeheartedly.

Discussion Guide

Bible Reading:

- Luke 23:18-25
- Matthew 27:15-17

Observation Questions:

1. What was the political and social context surrounding the prisoner exchange between Jesus and Barabbas as described in Luke 23:18-25?
2. How does 1 Timothy 2:6 describe the concept of ransom, and how is it relevant to the story of Jesus and Barabbas?

Interpretation Questions:

1. How does the choice of Barabbas over Jesus reflect human tendencies to choose what aligns with personal desires rather than what challenges us to change?
2. How does the prisoner exchange between Jesus and Barabbas underscore the cost of redemption, and what does this reveal about the depth of God's grace?
3. What does the transformation of Barabbas from a condemned criminal to a free man tell us about the power of the gospel to change lives?

Application Questions:

1. Reflect on a time when you, like the crowd, chose something that aligned with your desires over what was truly right. How can you make different choices in the future?
2. In what areas of your life do you feel spiritually imprisoned, and how can you embrace the freedom offered through Jesus' sacrifice?
3. Consider the cost of redemption as demonstrated by Jesus taking Barabbas' place. How does this impact your understanding of grace and your response to sin in your life?
4. How can you ensure that your expectations of Jesus align with His true nature as the Savior who offers eternal life, rather than a Messiah who fulfills personal wants?
5. How can you respond to Jesus' offer of a prisoner exchange—His life for yours—with humility and a willingness to follow Him wholeheartedly?
6. Think of someone in your life who might feel undeserving of forgiveness. How can you share the message of hope and redemption with them this week?