

Sunday, February 2, 2024 | Holy Week

Week 18 | Luke 23:13-25 | “Barabbas”

Last week, Jesus was hauled before Pilate, the Roman governor over Israel, and Herod Antipas, the king over the Galilean region. Like a shepherd confronting wolves, the Lord did not back down. We saw the King of Kings reason with a Gentile and stonewall, one of the most powerful men in the country. Despite what everyone at the time thought, the Lord was not the one on trial; they were.

READ: Luke 23:13-25 (ESV)

¹³ Pilate then called together the chief priests and the rulers and the people, ¹⁴ and said to them, “You brought me this man as one who was misleading the people. And after examining him before you, behold, I did not find this man guilty of any of your charges against him. ¹⁵ Neither did Herod, for he sent him back to us. Look, nothing deserving death has been done by him. ¹⁶ I will therefore punish and release him.”

¹⁸ But they all cried out together, “Away with this man, and release to us Barabbas”— ¹⁹ a man who had been thrown into prison for an insurrection started in the city and for murder. ²⁰ Pilate addressed them once more, desiring to release Jesus, ²¹ but they kept shouting, “Crucify, crucify him!” ²² A third time he said to them, “Why? What evil has he done? I have found in him no guilt deserving death. I will therefore punish and release him.” ²³ But they were urgent, demanding with loud cries that he should be crucified. And their voices prevailed. ²⁴ So Pilate decided that their demand should be granted. ²⁵ 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.

Substitution is the act of *replacing* one person or thing for another, and unsurprisingly, substitutes are common in our world. In school, a substitute teacher is called in for the day when an instructor gets sick. In baseball, a pinch-hitter can replace a teammate at a critical point. If an actor can't perform, their understudy fills the role.

Likewise, the idea of substitution plays a pivotal role in Christian theology via a doctrine called “penal substitution.” The term “penal” refers to a “penalty;” the word is most often used in the judicial system—e.g., penal system, penal code, penal colony, etc. So, “penal substitution” refers to a *punishment* given to someone other than the guilty party. This concept is one of the core beliefs of Christianity. Instead of an individual paying for their own sin, Christ became their

substitute; he was their stand-in, taking God's wrath in their place. And, as we'll see today, Jesus' substitutionary role didn't begin on the cross; it started at his trial when he took the place of a man called "Barabbas."

I want you to notice **two** things:

i. Vs. 13-17 – The messiah is **exonerated** by a corrupt politician.

Luke tells us, "Pilate then called together the chief priests and the rulers and the people and said to them, "You brought me this man as one who was misleading the people. And after examining him before you behold, I did not find this man guilty of any of your charges against him." This is the second time Pilate, a governor of dubious morals, has defended Jesus. That such a man as him would come to the Lord's defense is evidence of how genuinely bogus the charges were.

But even more remarkable is that just as Pilate didn't find any fault in Jesus, "neither did Herod." This is evidenced by the Galilean King "sent [Jesus] back." This means had Herod Antipas found anything that would've made Jesus worthy of death, he wouldn't have returned Jesus to Pilate; he likely would've done far more severe than simply dressing him up in a costume to mock him (cf. vs. 11). Pilate even tells the crowd, "Look, nothing deserving of death has been done by him." Dressed up as he was, the Lord wasn't intimidating; he'd become a laughingstock. For Pilate, this charade had run its course; he wasn't about to execute a man who had clearly done "nothing" deserving of capital punishment!

But Pilate could see that the crowd wouldn't be happy if he flat-out released Jesus. So, before releasing him, he promises to "punish" him. The punishment was "*fustigatio*"—i.e., "flogging."¹ Those subjected to this would be beaten with clubs, given a stern warning, and then released. This is not to be confused with scourging, which was the form of punishment administered to those headed for crucifixion (cf. Matt. 27:26; Mar. 15:15). Interestingly, though Luke doesn't mention it, Jesus was flogged (cf. Jn. 19:1). This means the Lord was beaten at least twice before being crucified.

So, what's the takeaway? Wrong is wrong even when everyone says it's right.

READ: Isaiah 5:20 (ESV)

Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!

¹ Bock (1996), p. 1828.

ii. Vs. 18-24 – The messiah is **exchanged** for a convicted murderer.

The religious leaders were not about to let Jesus go. So, Luke tells us, “They all cried out together, “Away with this man, and release to us Barabbas.”” Such a response might, at first, seem unusual. But the other three gospels explain that, at the time, Pilate would release a Jewish prisoner during Passover (cf. Matt. 27:15; Mar. 15:6; Jn. 18:39). Though there is no extant evidence for this practice, there is very little reason to doubt it. The NT is itself a first-century document that testifies to the practice. Also, we should not expect an itemized list of policies from a Roman-occupied province that was destroyed in 70AD. Lastly, releasing a Jewish prisoner during the most important Jewish holiday of the year just makes sense; it’s a show of good faith, helping to keep the Jewish populace in line.

Who was Barabbas? Luke explains that he was a “man who had been thrown into prison for an insurrection started in the city and for murder.” Thus, this man was not a petty thief, as some translations might lead you to believe (e.g., Jn. 18:40 - KJV - “robber”), but a murderous insurgent. Ironically, Barabbas is guilty of the very thing the Jews accused Jesus of.

But the last thing Pilate wanted was to trade a harmless rabbi for a known insurrectionist. So, the governor “addressed them once more, desiring to release Jesus.” But the crowd did not want to listen, shouting at the top of their lungs, “Crucify, crucify him!” We’ll talk more about crucifixion next week, but suffice it to say it was a brutal form of capital punishment. It was so cruel and unusual that it was reserved for those who were enemies of the state. Rome wanted to make a statement regarding rebels, and the cross was a powerful tool that helped discourage revolt.

Pilate tried to set Jesus free for a third time, saying, “Why? What evil has he done? I have found in him no guilt deserving death. I will therefore punish and release him.” Why did someone like Pilate, who had no love for Jews, work so hard to release a Jewish teacher? By this point, we know the governor has talked with Jesus a second time wherein he asked the Lord if he was one of the children of the gods (cf. Jn. 19:7-11), and his wife, Claudia Procula, has sent him word during the trial saying, “Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered much because of him today in a dream” (Mat. 27:19). Being from a polytheistic culture made Pilate superstitious. Hearing that Jesus might be a demigod and getting an otherworldly message had the man spooked. And so, the longer he contemplates his current situation, the less he feels comfortable with killing Jesus.

But Pilate’s **reluctance** could not compete with the crowd’s **malice**. Luke says the crowds were even more “urgent, demanding with loud cries that he should be crucified.” Things had been

heated before, but they had reached their boiling point. As such, Luke tells us the “voices” of the homicidal crowd “prevailed.”

According to John, they succeeded in convincing Pilate through intimidation. John 19:12 states that while “Pilate sought to release him,” the Jews began to shout, “If you release this man, you are not Caesar's friend. Everyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar.” Though the phrase “Caesar's friend” could hold a generic connotation, given how the term was used in the first century, this is very likely a reference to *amicus Caesari* (Latin for “friend of Caesar”). This was an official honorific title for “someone who enjoyed the patronage of the emperor and who may have benefited by an imperial appointment, e.g., to the lucrative position of provincial governor.”²

Historically, Pilate, who was not of noble blood, only became governor because he was the protégé of Lucius Aelius Sejanus, the chief officer of the praetorian guard and a man who held significant influence in court circles.³ But in AD 31, Sejanus (as well as many others) was executed after a failed coup d'état, and, as such, Pilate was in a delicate position with Tiberius. So, the last thing the governor would want to do would be to jeopardize whatever goodwill he still had with the emperor.

Thus, the Jews were making a not-so-subtle threat that if the governor didn't consent to their demands, they'd go straight to Caesar, something they had successfully done once before.⁴ Pilate knew such an action would likely be the end of his career.⁵ Tiberius wouldn't respond kindly to anyone seen defending a man claiming to be a king, especially if the defender in question was one of his own governors, a man who just so happened to be a close associate with a failed insurrectionist who had died not two years prior.

² Barnett, Paul, *Finding the Historical Christ*, (Grand Rapids, MI; Eerdmans Publishing, 2009), p. 143-144.

³ Carson (1991), p. 607, quoting the Roman historian Tacitus, “The closer a man's with Sejanus, the stronger his claim to the emperor's friendship (*Annals* VI. viii).”

⁴ Keener (2003), 2:1128, “When [Pilate] had wished to set up votive shields in Herod's palace in Jerusalem, the leaders of the people (i.e., the sort of priests he now confronted) reportedly asked if he had letters from Tiberius requesting this behavior. They implied that if he did not, he lacked authority for the act; and if he claimed to have such authority, they would appeal the matter directly to Tiberius. Fearful of trouble, Pilate quickly backed away from *part* [emphasis added] of his plan... when the Jewish leaders considered his response inadequate and did appeal to Tiberius, Pilate was reportedly humiliated by the Emperor (*Philo Embassy* 304-305), undoubtedly providing him grounds for more caution by this point.”

⁵ In AD 36, Tiberius removed Pilate from office after reports had reached the emperor that the governor had slaughtered many Samaritans on the slopes of Mt. Gerizim. Since the people killed were doing nothing more heinous than a religious pilgrimage, his actions were deemed too extreme, even by Roman standards.

Luke summarizes this scene in two powerful sentences: “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.” I want you to notice two things:

First, Luke highlights Pilate’s **impotence**. Luke says the governor agreed to “*their demand*,” he gave them what “*they asked*” for, and yielded to “*their will*.” As powerful as Pilate thought he was (cf. Jn. 19:10), the governor was a puppet, doing the crowd's bidding.

Second, Luke highlights Pilate’s **incompetence**. Pilate “released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder.” The very man tasked by Caesar to prevent rebellion let a rebel walk free.

So, what’s the takeaway? A **sinless** Messiah was the **substitute** for a **sinful** mankind.

READ: Isaiah 53 (ESV)

¹ Who has believed what he has heard from us? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? ² For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. ³ He was **despised** and **rejected** by men, a man of **sorrows** and acquainted with **grief**; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was **despised**, and we esteemed him not.

⁴ Surely he has borne **our** griefs and carried **our** sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. ⁵ But he was pierced for **our** transgressions; he was crushed for **our** iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with **his wounds we are healed**. ⁶ All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid **on him** the iniquity **of us all**.

⁷ He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth. ⁸ By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people? ⁹ And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.

¹⁰ **Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him**; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand. ¹¹ Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, **make many to be accounted righteous**, and he shall bear **their** iniquities. ¹² Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; **yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors.**

So, what's the takeaway? A **sinless** Messiah was the **substitute** for a **sinful** mankind. **[INSERT YOUR NAME]** is Barabbas.

Peter, quoting from this very passage, “[Jesus] himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed” (1 Pet. 2:24). And, later in the same book, the Lead Apostle says, “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God” (1 Pet. 3:18). In a similar fashion, Paul said, “For our sake [God] made [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:17).

Jesus paid the penalty for every evil stray thought, wicked word, and vile deed from the beginning of time to the end. As mentioned in the introduction, this is called “penal substitution”—i.e., Jesus took the place of every sinner, receiving the punishment for sin on our behalf. Rather than God's wrath falling on humanity, the Lord stood in our place. To be clear, this was not cosmic child abuse, for since God the Father and God the Son are one, then it was God who satisfied his own justice (cf. Rom. 3:26).

Video Description:

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SPEAKER: Ben Hyrne, Pastor

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