

## Barabbas and the Two Thieves

On what we think was Friday April 3, 33 A.D., there were three men sentenced to death by Rome, condemned to die by what they called the extreme penalty: death by crucifixion. We don't know the names of two of the men; we only know them by the description given of them: criminals. We know the name of one of the men sentenced to die: Barabbas. The story of what happened to those three men on that day is a fascinating historical tale in itself. But it is more than that. Because each of these three men had some kind of encounter with Jesus of Nazareth that day. Each one responded differently. Each one gives us a response to Jesus.

There are no accidents in how things fall out. On that day when Christ was crucified, there were not four crosses, or six, or only two. There were three. Three who were supposed to be there, one who was let off, and two who responded to Jesus in opposite ways. You couldn't have a more appropriate picture of the Gospel. Because the cross of Christ is the centre-point of history, and all humans will respond to Jesus in one of the three ways represented by these three men.

### I. The Man Who Used Jesus

All four Gospels mention Barabbas. Barabbas was likely just his surname; it simply means son of the father. Some traditions say that he actually had the same first name as Jesus, that he was also Yeshua.

What do we know about Barabbas?

Rome didn't crucify just anyone. They had other forms of execution. Roman citizens were usually put to death by beheading, and were not allowed to be crucified. Thieves were not crucified, unless some kind of rape or murder had accompanied their theft. Middle and upper class people could not be crucified. Crucifixion was so humiliating, so distasteful, so obnoxious, that only the poor, the slaves, the rebellious from other nations could be crucified. The Roman statesman Cicero called it "the most cruel and disgusting penalty".

This means that Barabbas and the two men, who quite likely were companions or associates of Barabbas in the same crime, were guilty of some kind of rebellion against Rome. In fact, we know that because Luke 23:19 tells us Barabbas "had been thrown into prison for a certain rebellion made in the city, and for murder."

Mark 15:7 adds "And there was one named Barabbas, *who was* chained with his fellow rebels; they had committed murder in the rebellion.

The word John uses for Barabbas in John 18:40 is translated *robber*, which is also used to describe the other two men. The Greek word *listis* could mean a thief, but also a highwayman, a bandit. Very importantly, it also meant a revolutionary, an insurrectionist, a guerilla fighting against some political power. Josephus, the first century historian uses this word to describe the Zealots, the Sicarii, who were political revolutionaries dedicated to assassinating Romans and overthrowing Roman rule. One of Jesus' 12 apostles had once been part of that group – Simon the Zealot.

So Barabbas and his two companions are actually murderers, men who rebelled against Rome. That means he no doubt had plenty of sympathisers among the Jews of Jerusalem. He was likely famous as a wild and brave revolutionary. Matthew 27:16 says <sup>16</sup> And at that time they had a notorious prisoner called Barabbas.

Barabbas and his two companions were set to die on Passover, as an example to the Jewish people. On a high holiday, three rebels to Rome would suffer what Roman historian Tacitus called “the extreme penalty”.

But Pilate had a yearly tradition on Passover of pleasing the crowd by releasing some prisoner, commuting his sentence, and giving him his freedom. In the middle of the kangaroo court of the trial of Jesus, Pilate invoked this custom to see if some in the crowd would call for the release of Jesus, and overcome the prejudice of the Sanhedrin.

<sup>6</sup> Now at the feast he was accustomed to releasing one prisoner to them, whomever they requested. <sup>7</sup> And there was one named Barabbas, *who was* chained with his fellow rebels; they had committed murder in the rebellion. <sup>8</sup> Then the multitude, crying aloud, began to ask *him to do* just as he had always done for them. <sup>9</sup> But Pilate answered them, saying, “Do you want me to release to you the King of the Jews?” <sup>10</sup> For he knew that the chief priests had handed Him over because of envy. <sup>11</sup> But the chief priests stirred up the crowd, so that he should rather release Barabbas to them. <sup>12</sup> Pilate answered and said to them again, “What then do you want me to do *with Him* whom you call the King of the Jews?” <sup>13</sup> So they cried out again, “Crucify Him!” <sup>14</sup> Then Pilate said to them, “Why, what evil has He done?” But they cried out all the more, “Crucify Him!” <sup>15</sup> So Pilate, wanting to gratify the crowd, released Barabbas to them; and he delivered Jesus, after he had scourged *Him*, to be crucified. (Mark 15:6–15)

Instead of Jesus being released, the crowd called for the political revolutionary, the murderer, Barabbas. Pilate was no doubt displeased by this; he had certainly been the one to try and sentence Barabbas to death for insurrection and murder. And now, a true political enemy of Rome, a genuine rebel was going to be set free, very likely to go and organise more murderous rebellion against Rome.

But Pilate now had no choice: he had invoked the custom, made the offer, and could not now take it back. The man who would have been crucified in the middle of three crosses was Barabbas, and now he was set free, and Jesus would take his place.

Barabbas was probably set free to shouts and screams of elation and joy. Here was a hero to many people; here was the sort of man some of them wanted in a messiah: violent, aggressive, proud, indomitable. Barabbas was free, and could lead them again in resisting Rome. Taking his place would be Jesus, who had never spoken a word of rebellion against Rome.

Barabbas was a man who used Jesus. Jesus took his place. Jesus substituted for Barabbas. Where Barabbas was supposed to be, Jesus ended up. Jesus died, and Barabbas lived. Barabbas used Jesus.

Yes, it is true that Barabbas had no say in the matter. He did not ask for Jesus to take his place. But once Jesus did, presumably, Barabbas went his way, and counted himself lucky. We know nothing more of Barabbas in the New Testament. Had Barabbas come to believe in the One who had taken His place, we almost certainly would have heard about it in Scripture. But instead, he went on to live his life unto himself, glad that Jesus had died instead of him.

There are some people who think that that is what the Gospel means: Jesus dies for me, so I don't have to. Jesus takes my place, and I get to go on living the way I did. Jesus swaps places with me, He does all the dying, and I do the living.

Maybe you've heard someone preach a “just use Jesus gospel”. “You don't want to go to hell, do you?”

“No, I don't”.

“Do you know Jesus died on the cross in your place, so you don't have to?” “Okay...”

“So just accept that. Accept He died for you and then you'll go to Heaven.”

Now they're not wrong about Jesus dying in your place. They're not even wrong about the need to accept Christ. But what's missing? Repentance! Embracing Jesus not merely as your fire-escape, but as your Shepherd and King and new life! The gospel is not “use Jesus so you don't have to go to hell.” That's the gospel of Barabbas.

How did the second man who was condemned respond to Jesus?

## II. The Man Who Refused Jesus

Matthew's Gospel tells us more about this man. 41 Likewise the chief priests also, mocking with the scribes and elders, said, 42 "He saved others; Himself He cannot save. If He is the King of Israel, let Him now come down from the cross, and we will believe Him. 43 "He trusted in God; let Him deliver Him now if He will have Him; for He said, 'I am the Son of God.'" 44 Even the robbers who were crucified with Him reviled Him with the same thing. (Mat 27:41-44)

Perhaps this companion of Barabbas had hoped to have their leader Barabbas there in the middle of them, the three of them facing death grimly and defiantly, hating Rome to the bitter end. But instead, his leader had been set free, and here instead was Jesus, a man who had claimed to be Messiah but had apparently never killed a single Roman, never fought a single soldier, never trained in the martial arts of the Sicarii.

But worst of all, this man Jesus had promised to save Israel, promised people that he would deliver them. What kind of salvation was this?

So this man joined the crowd in mocking Jesus. He ridiculed the idea of Jesus as a Saviour. He ridiculed the idea of Jesus preaching trust in God, because it looked as if God had abandoned him. What a strange sight- a man dying, his life draining out of him, but even with his dying breaths, he wants to be part of the crowd, fit in, not stand out. He hears what others think of Jesus, and decided to adopt it. He didn't find out for himself.

How irrational! These are his last hours on earth. I am a dying man, but I am still going to go with what most people say about Jesus.

But notice the next thing the man did.

32 There were also two others, criminals, led with Him to be put to death. 33 And when they had come to the place called Calvary, there they crucified Him, and the criminals, one on the right hand and the other on the left. 34 Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do." And they divided His garments and cast lots. 35 And the people stood looking on. But even the rulers with them sneered, saying, "He saved others; let Him save Himself if He is the Christ, the chosen of God." 36 The soldiers also mocked Him, coming and offering Him sour wine, 37 and saying, "If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself." 38 And an inscription also was written over Him in letters of Greek, Latin, and Hebrew: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS. 39 **Then one of the criminals who were hanged blasphemed Him, saying, "If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us."**

Luke calls what this man did, blasphemy. He maligned God in the flesh. He treated what is sacred as common. He dragged truth through the mud.

How so? This man wants deliverance. He wants to be saved from his cross. So he mingles sarcasm with a taunt and a challenge. If you are the Christ, save yourself and us.

Do you remember the last time when someone said to Jesus “If you are the Son of God” then do

this? It was Satan, during His temptation. Satan said, if you are the Son of God, turn these stones into bread. If you are the Son of God, throw yourself off the Temple.

Here is the same accusatory tone and attitude. Prove yourself to be the Christ with some kind of sign, and then when you've done that, release me from my punishment.

This is refusal until proven otherwise. I refuse Jesus until He intervenes in my life, fixes things for me, to my satisfaction.

If you had asked that man, do you want to be saved?, he would have replied, yes. But what did he mean by saved? He meant, Get me off the hook. Subvert the justice of Rome. He wanted to be saved from the consequences of his sin. He wanted to be saved from the death that shortens his opportunity to sin some more. He wanted to be saved from that circumstance which was preventing him from living his own life a little longer.

You meet people who feel entirely justified in rejecting Christ, because they want Him to jump to their tune, fix their lives, solve their problems, and then they'll consider Jesus, they say. Fix my life, and I'll think about admitting Jesus into my life.

This is at the heart of refusing Jesus. I want Jesus a certain way, and if He won't provide that, then I am not interested.

Notice the silence from Jesus. There is no response from Jesus to this man. Such unbelief, such manipulation, such unshaken selfishness gets no response from Jesus. Because of course, there is no answer to this. Had Jesus miraculously freed the man from the cross, he would not have been free from his selfishness and sin. He would have been relieved, but not repentant, happy, but not humbled. So it is with those who refuse Jesus.

So we come to the third man that day.

### **III. The Man Who Received Jesus**

This man began exactly as the other man did.

Matthew 27:44 says it clearly: Even the robbers who were crucified with Him reviled Him with the same thing.

32 "Let the Christ, the King of Israel, descend now from the cross, that we may see and believe." Even those who were crucified with Him reviled Him. (Mar 15:32)

So this criminal was also a man-pleaser, a crowd-follower, happy to pick up second-hand statements, happy to believe gossip, happy to repeat untruths, happy to join in with ridicule if it made him seem to be on the right side.

He too, was a dying man, condemned to death. He was worthy of death in the eyes of Rome, and worthy of death in the eyes of God.

But then something changes. We don't know when it happened. We don't know what the Holy Spirit used to grab, grip, and change his heart.

Perhaps, it was in those slow, lingering hours between 9am and 12pm when he saw how Jesus

responded to the insults and the hatred. He threw insults across at Jesus, and in those brief moments when Jesus looked at him, he didn't see hatred in Christ's face. He didn't see malice or vengeance. Jesus seemed to be absorbing it. He seemed to have a nobility about him that took this abuse without it causing him to lash out or retreat in shame. It was as if He was pure and strong humility.

And then he heard Jesus say something that no crucified man had said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Perhaps those words pierced this criminal's heart like a spear. Here was Jesus not praying against His enemies, but praying *for* them. He was asking His Father to be merciful to them, to not count their sins against the Son as spite towards the Father. He was asking His Father to consider how ignorant they were of all they were doing, and to let that mitigate their judgement. In the middle of hatred poured on Him from every side, Jesus was loving.

Somewhere in those hours, with nowhere to go, nothing to do except think on truth, the Holy Spirit did a work of opening his eyes. Here's the first step: **repentance**.

Brokenhearted repentance set in, as he began to think of how he had wasted his life. The anger and sense of injustice he had had just a few hours ago was replaced with a sad sense of resignation. He deserved this. He had ended up on this cross by his own hand. His life had been sin and more sin, and now he was getting his wages.

And then it began to hit him, what about when I die, in just a few hours? I thought of myself as a great Zealot for Israel, a great revolutionary for the kingdom. But now I see I have lived in high-handed rebellion against God. What will I say to Him when I see Him? What will I say to someone as holy and righteous, as this man Jesus next to me?

At that point, the mocking words of the other criminal began to sound more and more arrogant and more and more offensive. What he had begun parroting now seemed to him so offensive. Until eventually it reached a boiling point, and he was willing to shout across, past Jesus, in the full hearing of all the other mockers.

But the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, "Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? "And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong." (Luk 23:40-41)

This man sees more than the fact that he is a criminal on a cross. He is seeing something only the Holy Spirit can show a man – the sinfulness of sin. He is seeing sin as ugly, sin as punishable, sin as deserving of death. He has changed sides, from the team of Adam which blames others and even God for our sin, to the side of God, agreeing, we are sinners, being punished. He knows that mocking Christ only adds to your guilt.

Notice, he has gone from not only repentance to recognition. He recognises who Jesus is. Remarkably, in those short hours on the cross, he can tell that Jesus is innocent, Jesus is guiltless, He is an innocent being punished as if He were guilty.

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, (1Pe 3:18)

For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. (2Co 5:21)

And now, he turns to Christ, and prays, asks one of the humblest prayers in all of Scripture.

Then he said to Jesus, "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom." (Luk 23:42)

Here is a man looking over at a physically ruined Jesus, beaten probably beyond recognition, and he calls him "Lord". Now the word translated *Lord* is a Greek word that can mean more than one thing. Sometimes, it simply means *Sir*. It is a polite form of address. It can also mean something like "Master" for those in authority. It can also mean "king", a term reserved for a human or divine lord. So which does he mean? His words tell us: "Remember me when you come into your *kingdom*." What kind of person has a kingdom? A king, a lord over a realm. Who does this man think Jesus is?

He believes Jesus is the Christ, the anointed one, the Messiah. The Messiah is the one who will be prophet, priest, and king, the one who will usher in God's universal and eternal kingdom in time and space. But who would look at bruised, bleeding, broken Jesus and conclude that He will be ushering in a royal, glorious kingdom? This man has remarkable faith – He believes Jesus will rise from the dead, return to the earth, and rule. Through Christ's weakness, he sees the coming King. The other man says, *If* you are the Christ, save me. This man says, *Since* you are the Christ... This is recognition.

But his repentance and recognition have led to a request.

What does he want? What does he request? The other man wanted temporal deliverance. He wanted Jesus to serve as a means to his own selfish ends. But what does this man ask for?

Remember me. What a humble, gentle, broken way of saying, save me. By *remember*, he doesn't mean, call me up in your memory. He is using the word remember the way Scripture often uses it to mean, give help. In Genesis 8:1 it tells us that after the destruction of the Flood, God remembered Noah. That means God set His grace upon Noah. The writer of Hebrews exhorts his readers in chapter 13 to remember those Christians in chains. Paul says the same thing in Colossians 4:18, <sup>18</sup> "Remember my chains." which means show mercy, be gracious.

This man is humbly saying, if there is a place for me in your kingdom, remember me. Notice the completely different attitude to the other thief. The selfish criminal says, I'll accept you if you save me in ways that I want. This one says, will you accept me, in your kingdom?

I'm reminded of when Joshua meets the pre-incarnate Lord before the battle of Jericho, with a drawn sword. Joshua asks Him, "Are you on our side, or on our enemies' side?" The answer is not what Joshua expected. He says, "Neither. I am Commander of the host of the Lord." The Lord essentially says, I am not on your side or on their side. I am on My side. Whose side are you on, Joshua?" Joshua does the right thing and falls to the ground saying, "What does my lord say to his servant."

It's not, "is Jesus on my side?" It's "am I on His side?". Do I want Him to remember me when He comes into His kingdom. Have I accepted that I am sinful and unworthy, and believed Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, the only way to the Father, and have I turned to Him humbly, asking if He will let me be on His side?

This man received Jesus: he repented, he recognised his sin and his Saviour, and he requested salvation.

Now what does Jesus say to this humble faith?

43 And Jesus said to him, "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise." (Luk 23:32-43)

You won't have to wait till that day, Jesus says. You won't have to wait for the day of resurrection.

This very day, you will consciously be with Me in glory. Your spirit and soul will be in the presence of My Father! No extra works for him, no baptism, no good works, no added extras. Like Abraham, like David, like Peter, he had been saved by faith. He had turned from sin, and placed his entire trust in the God-Man, Jesus Christ, and he was saved.

Well, says the presumptuous man, if the thief on the cross could be saved at the last minute, I'll just delay my commitment to Christ until the last minutes of my life, and live how I want! If you can get saved in your last hours, after living a life to yourself, I'll just wait to the end to become a Christian. J. C. Ryle responded to that attitude and said, "One thief was saved that no sinner might despair, but only one, that no sinner might presume."

It is Good Friday again, 1991 years after that Good Friday. We still have people who try to use Jesus, but unsuccessfully. We have people who refuse Jesus, to their own hurt. And then we have people who receive Jesus. Are you in that third category – someone who begins to see the sinfulness of your sin, and repents, grieves, doesn't want it anymore? Someone who recognises who you are, and conversely who Jesus is: the Lord, the Saviour, the sinless substitute? Someone who then makes a humble request: save me. Remember me. Take me with. Don't leave me to my judgement. If that's you, then you have heard the blessed promise from the Saviour's lips – you will be with Him in Paradise.