

Thanksgiving Service

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- [0 : 00] Let's turn for a moment to both of those passages in turn that we read. First we'll look at John chapter 18.
- And we'll look at the very end of that chapter that we read from verse 38 down to verse 40. John 18 at verse 38, What is truth, Pilate asked.
- With this he went out again to the Jews and said, I find no basis for a charge against him. But it is your custom for me to release to you one prisoner at the time of the Passover.
- Do you want me to release the king of the Jews? They shouted back, no, not him. Give us Barabbas. Now Barabbas had taken part in a rebellion.
- As we read the Bible, our attention should be heightened when we read in all the four gospel accounts of an individual or an event that occurs.
- [1 : 08] Because not many events and not many individual encounters are recorded by each of the four gospel writers. Very often, Matthew, Mark, and Luke write and record some of the same events.
- But John often looks at the person of Jesus from a slightly different angle. Recording some of the sayings that weren't recorded in some of the other gospels.
- Recording some of the miraculous events. But when you have a harmony among the four concerning certain details. For example, the miracle, the feeding of the 5,000 is included in each of the four gospels.
- So you have to ask yourself, there must be something significant concerning this miracle. Concerning the person of Jesus. Concerning the people of God. And so too, this character that's before us just now.
- This man called Barabbas. Each of the four accounts mentions him. We read from John just now. We read just previously from Matthew. Mark, if you want to look up in your Bibles.
- [2 : 13] Mark 15 and verses 6 and 7. Says, Now it was the custom at the feast to release a prisoner whom the people requested. A man called Barabbas was in prison with the insurrectionists.
- Who had committed murder in the uprising. Luke recorded the verdict in this way. He said, With one voice they cried out, Away with this man.
- Release Barabbas to us. Barabbas had been thrown into prison for an insurrection in the city. And for murder. So we have a very short biography of Barabbas.
- We're told his name. It means literally the son of the father. It's a very general name. We're told a bit about his crime. And there seems to be no contradiction concerning this.
- That here was an insurrectionist. Here was a rioter. And here was a murderer. So the little that we know about Barabbas gives us quite an insight into his character.
- [3 : 14] Here's a dangerous man. Here's a man that stirs people up. And here's a man that takes people's lives. And this was the man that Pilate put before the crowd.

Now as we go back to John's Gospel, you'll notice at the very end of that chapter, there were two questions that Pilate asked. One question he asked that remained unanswered.

And the other question that he asked was answered unanimously. And maybe you're coming here tonight and you're wondering, what is this all about?

And you're in good company because that's exactly where Pilate was 2,000 years ago. What is this all about? Who is this man Jesus? What is he talking about?

Why is this prisoner unlike any other prisoner he had ever seen? Why is this courtroom scene unlike any other scene that Pilate had ever witnessed? Why is Jesus speaking in a way that no convicted or condemned man ever spoke?

[4 : 15] And that prompted the first question of Pilate to say, what is truth? And maybe you're asking the same question tonight. Maybe you're not satisfied with some of the answers that you've been given.

Because we live in an age today where your truth is personal. It's relative. It's individual. So that you can believe anything you want to believe.

And I can believe anything I want to believe. And I can live my life however I wish. The problems, of course, occur when your freedom or your truth and my truth interact or conflict or contradict.

Is there any way of resolving that tension? Is there any way of answering that question? Is there such a thing as truth absolute? Is there such a thing as something that is always true no matter when it is said?

No matter where it is said? No matter where it occurs? So Pilate asks a great question. And a question that might draw your attention in tonight. What is truth?

[5 : 22] Jesus, of course, answered that question a few chapters earlier in John's Gospel. John chapter 14 and verse 6. Where he said, I am the way, the truth, and the life.

We often think of truth as an abstract question or quality. But Jesus makes it personal. He said if you want the answer to that question, you must come to him for the answer.

Because he is the answer. But this existential philosophical question was spoken. But you'll notice no answer was given. The events were taking charge of the situation.

And Pilate then asks a second question. He asks the question more specifically. He's not philosophizing now. But he says, do you want me to release the king of the Jews?

The other Gospel writers make it clear that he presented a clear choice. And we, in the Bible, are given clear choices to make.

[6 : 24] The governor who has authority said, here's one prisoner and here's another. Here's Barabbas and here's Jesus. You've got a choice. One can go free and one will be crucified.

He gave the choice and the answer was crystal clear. It was unanimous. The large crowd spoke with one voice.

They said concerning Jesus, no, not him. Give us Barabbas. What a bizarre choice. Think of the two characters.

Think of the two individuals. Barabbas, the insurrectionist and the murderer. The man who took life. The man who harmed people. The man who encouraged others to do the same.

That's why, as an insurrectionist or a rebel, he was so dangerous. Not only was he dangerous for what he did, but he was dangerous for the influence he wielded on other people.

[7 : 25] And then on the other side of the equation, let's look at Jesus for a moment. What did Jesus do? Well, Jesus fed the hungry. Jesus gave sight to the blind. Jesus enabled paralyzed people to walk.

He enabled deaf people to hear. He enabled sick people to be restored to health. He enabled those who were possessed by evil to have the evil cleansed from them and to be able to live normal lives.

He even raised the dead back to life. So here's a man who never harmed anyone. Never did anything wrong. And as far as we can tell about Barabbas, here was a man who never succeeded in doing anything right.

And the choice was given. And the choice was made. No, not him. Not much has changed in 2,000 years. When people are presented with Jesus, the answer in one way or another very often is the same.

Not him. Not Jesus. Not now. Not in my life. Maybe for you, but not for me. Because when you actually look at Jesus and you consider who he is and you consider what he says, if you give him an honest assessment, this man is quite demanding.

[8 : 42] This man demands your allegiance. This man demands your faith and your trust. This man demands to be the center of your life and the center of your heart. He refuses to take second place.

He refuses to be on the periphery of your life, on the sidelines. He wants to be at the center of your life and your decisions. He makes demands about your time. He makes demands on your money.

He makes demands on your skills and upon your abilities. And he says that life isn't just for you. It's not just what you can get from life. It's not just what you can do for yourself.

But he says you have a responsibility to God first and you have a responsibility to others second. And only after those two responsibilities are fulfilled do you have time then to deal with your own needs or responsibilities.

So you see, when people say no to Jesus, if they say no from a background of knowledge, it's not surprising that they say no. This man is too challenging.

[9 : 43] This man is too demanding. This man is too difficult. Doesn't he understand what life is really like? Doesn't he understand that I have to make choices and make decisions? Well, he does understand.

And that's why he presents to you the whole picture. He tells you about himself. He tells you about his life. He tells you about his death. He tells you about his resurrection. And he says, this is what's on offer tonight.

That you can have life everlasting. But he sets the terms. And he makes the conditions. He says if you want him, you can have him. But you must have him on his terms.

Yes, the gift of salvation is a free gift. But following Jesus is costly. Because when you follow Jesus, there are times when you'll naturally want to say yes.

But following Jesus means you have to say no. And there are other times you'll naturally want to say no. But following Jesus means you say yes. He's demanding.

[10 : 42] He's challenging. He requires our hearts, our minds, our souls, our lives. He demands everything about us. He doesn't accept anything less.

Barabbas, on the other hand, makes no demands. Has no terms. Has no conditions. So even though he doesn't have much to offer in the way of moral uprightness or goodness or love or mercy or peace or any of that, he won't make any demands on you.

When you vote for this kind of person, then you can do like he did. He lived life his own way. He defined life by his own terms. He didn't care what the Roman authorities or the Jewish authorities said.

He did what he wanted to do. And it wasn't surprising that a character like this would draw people to himself. Would draw others of a like mind so that not only was he rebelling against the government, but others were joining with him in his rebellion.

So you see, 2,000 years have passed, and the choice that you have to make has not really changed all that much. You have Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews, the Son of God, who has come into this world to demonstrate that good triumphs over evil, that right defeats wrong, that God is more powerful than the evil one.

[12 : 05] And he is drawing people to himself, and he's saying to you and to me that we can choose, we can follow, we can trust. But Barabbas and his followers will say there's also a choice involved here.

You can live life as you want to live it. You can set your own agenda. You can make your own priorities. You might run afoul of the authorities.

You might run afoul of the powers that be. But you can live life as you want to live it. Frank Sinatra now passed away, but his signature song was My Way.

He did it his way. And that's a very attractive philosophy. It's very attractive 2,000 years ago. It still is attractive today. It's not challenging.

It doesn't challenge you. But it pampers you. Do what you like. Live as you will. Make your own choices. Live your own life without regard to God, without regard to others.

[13 : 05] But look out for number one. Make sure that you're happy. Make sure that you're satisfied. Make sure that life is what you want it to be. So there's a choice tonight.

We can choose Jesus, or we can choose Barabbas. And you might think to yourself, well, if I'm a Christian, I've already chosen to follow Jesus. I've already made the right choice.

But you know, every time we as Christians choose to indulge ourself, choose to say no when we should say yes, fail to do the good that Jesus calls us to do, we're really choosing the way of Barabbas, the way of the selfish, the way of the self-centered, the way of the self-satisfied.

So you might think that this choice is a choice that Christians have already made, and that if you're not a Christian here tonight, that God is calling you to choose to follow Jesus and choose his way over the way of Barabbas.

But we as Christians can make these same mistakes. We can follow the crowd. When everyone is saying something, no matter what they're saying, it's very easy to echo what others are saying.

[14 : 14] When everyone is doing something, it's very easy to do the same thing. This is true if you're in school. It's true if you're in university. It's true if you're in a job or an employment situation.

It's hard to stand out. It's hard to stand up. It's hard to speak when it's much easier to be either silent and tacitly agreeing with what other people are saying, or actually join your voice with the others and agree with what they're saying.

So the choice of Jesus and the choice of Barabbas is a choice that you and I must make every day. If you're not a Christian here tonight, Jesus presents you his kingdom.

He says, here's the kingdom and the door is wide open. Come, believe, trust, follow, enter into this new and living relationship with Jesus. But if you do, you have to leave the way of the world behind.

You have to leave the standard of the world behind. You have to leave yourself at the center of your life behind. Because Jesus deserves and demands first place in our minds, in our hearts, and in our lives.

[15 : 28] And for the Christian tonight, how easy was it for the disciples to stand up for Jesus when they were with Jesus? How difficult was it for them to stand up for Jesus when Jesus was arrested, when the Romans came, when the Jewish authorities flexed their muscles?

What happened then? Well, we know about Judas. Judas was the betrayer. He sold Jesus out. We know about Peter. He was the denier. Three times he said, I don't know this man.

And the other ten, they were the deserters. They turned and fled. They wanted to get out of there as quickly as possible.

So when the going gets tough, do you get going? In the sense of, when the going is difficult as a Christian, do you find that you are abandoning your Christian commitment?

When you're called to speak, do you find that you're somehow surprisingly silent? When you're called to witness, do you find yourself unusually tongue-tied? It's in those times of critical or crisis moments where Jesus wants his people to stand up, not sit down.

[16 : 38] To speak, and not to be silent. To make their voice heard on the side of what is good and what is right. Because you can imagine the scene. The Roman governor.

These are two prisoners, and you can have one of them today. The good man or the bad man. Everyone said, give us the bad man. Give us Barabbas.

So we can learn today that we are making real choices with our lives. Making real decisions. And those real decisions have real consequences. Because the choice of the crowd effectively tied Pilate's hands.

He tried to wash his hands. He tried to wash his guilt away. But nonetheless, he had placed himself in an impossible position. He knew that he was stuck. He had an innocent prisoner.

And he knew that the crowd was against the prisoner and against him if he did what was right. So what did he do? He knew that his position. He knew that his authority.

[17 : 39] He knew that his privilege was at risk. That if he sided with Jesus, he would no longer be a friend of Caesar. If he sided with Jesus, he would no longer win the favor of the crowd.

So the approval of Caesar and the approval of the crowd meant more to Pilate. And what did Pilate do? If you read in chapter 19, we read the rest of the short account here.

Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. The Jesus he had declared just there to be innocent. The soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head. They clothed him in a purple robe and went up to him again and again.

Hail, King of the Jews. Pilate answered, The Jews insisted, We have a law and according to that law he must die.

Because he claimed to be the Son of God. When Pilate heard this, he was even more afraid. And he went back inside the palace. Where do you come from? he asked Jesus.

[19 : 08] But Jesus gave him no answer. Do you refuse to speak to me? Pilate said. Don't you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you? Jesus answered, You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above.

Therefore, the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin. From then on, Pilate tried to set Jesus free. But the Jews kept shouting, If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar.

Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar. When Pilate heard this, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judge's seat at a place known as the Stone Pavement, which in Aramaic is Gabbatha.

It was the day of preparation of Passover week, about the sixth hour. Here is your king, Pilate said to the Jews. But they shouted, Take him away, take him away, crucify him.

They made their choice. And they had the consequences of their choice. Pilate knew what was right. More than anyone that was there on that day, he knew that the man in front of him was innocent.

[20 : 19] But he condemned the innocent man to death because there was something more important than truth. There was something more important than justice. There was something more important than doing what was right.

And you find that when you say no to Jesus, you are saying that there is something more important. Your reputation, your pleasure, your status, your job, your family, your friends, whatever it might be, but you are saying, when it comes down to it, when Jesus confronts me with his challenges and asks me to make him first in my life, when I say no to him, that means there is something else that is first.

Something that I am not willing to do without. Something that I am not willing to sacrifice. Something that I am not willing to let go. Two thousand years ago, the crowd said with one voice, No, not him.

Give us Barabbas. But you know, Barabbas can teach us another lesson. Because not only does Barabbas teach us a lesson about human nature, which doesn't change, but Barabbas teaches us a valuable lesson about the gospel message itself, which also doesn't change.

Because if you are looking for an illustration of the gospel, you can look no further and you can find none better than Barabbas himself. Because what literally is the gospel message?

[21 : 40] The gospel message is a message of substitution. The good man, Jesus, the perfect man, Jesus, the God man, Jesus, was crucified.

Died the death of a sinner. Died the death of a criminal. Died the death of a bad man. Why? So that bad people can be set free. They can walk because Jesus was punished.

And there, don't you see, that two thousand years ago, that's exactly what happened. There's no question that Barabbas was guilty. There's no question that Barabbas deserved the cross that had previously been reserved for him.

And there was equally no question, certainly in Pilate's mind, that Jesus deserved to go free. But what happened? The guilty man went free and the innocent man was punished.

And that's the good news tonight. You and I, in God's sight, are guilty. We're guilty as charged. Maybe not as obviously guilty as Barabbas was.

[22 : 44] Maybe not as notoriously guilty as he was. Maybe our sin is a more respectable sin. Maybe our guilt is hidden under a layer or a veneer of respectability or hard work.

Or you're a good husband, a good wife, a good citizen, a good worker, a good student. But nonetheless, in our very heart, we have the same heart that Barabbas had.

The heart of an insurrectionist, a rebel against God. The heart of a murderer. The one who speaks and who acts in such a way as to condemn rather than to build up.

And the gospel says that in order for the guilty to be set free, the innocent must be punished. And that's what we read in Matthew's gospel. When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd.

He said, I am innocent of this man's blood. It is your responsibility. All the people answered, let his blood be on us and our children. Then he released Barabbas to them.

[23 : 51] But he had Jesus flogged and handed him over to be crucified. Such a vivid illustration of what we believe. Such a vivid illustration of what you might describe as injustice.

That isn't right. It isn't right that Jesus goes to the cross. And it isn't right that Barabbas goes free. And you know what? You're absolutely right. But it isn't right that you and I can go to heaven.

And it isn't right that Jesus should suffer and die on the cross. Apart from the fact that that is God's plan and purpose. And the only way whereby we could ever get to heaven is at the cost of one who went to the cross.

It might seem unfair. It might seem unjust. It might seem that justice has been turned on its head. But that's what happens at the cross. The guilty, you and I, may be set free.

Because the innocent was punished. He paid the price that we can't pay. But he paid the price for the debt that we ourselves have accumulated. We have built up a debt.

[24 : 54] And he has paid the price. We deserve punishment. And he takes the punishment. So not only does Barabbas teach us about human nature. And the way in which human nature in 2,000 years doesn't really change.

And in fact, it was George Bernard Shaw who was writing on Barabbas. And he put it this way. He said, after 2,000 years, maybe we need to conclude that the way of Barabbas has not worked.

Maybe we need to realize that his way and his purpose and his character, which has been tried and found wanting for 2,000 years, has not satisfied the human heart.

And maybe for those who might be hardened to the message of Jesus, maybe it's time now to consider the way of the Nazarene. The way of Jesus. The way of self-sacrifice.

The way of placing God first and others second. But tonight, let's consider the substitute that Barabbas was. That Barabbas received a substitution.

[25 : 56] He received the blessing because Jesus took the punishment. There was a minister. Many of you might be aware of James Montgomery Boyce or Philip Ryken.

These were both ministers in the 10th Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. But before Ryken and before James Montgomery Boyce was a man called Donald Gray Barnhouse.

And he preached a sermon on Barabbas. And in speaking of Barabbas, he spoke of him in this way. He said, Barabbas was the only man in the world who could say that Jesus Christ took his physical place.

But I can say that Jesus took my spiritual place. For it was I who deserved to die. It was I who deserved that the wrath of God should be poured on me.

I deserved the eternal punishment of the lake of fire. He was delivered up for my offenses. He was handed over to judgment because of my sins. Christ was my substitute.

[26 : 59] He was satisfying the debt of divine justice and holiness. That is why I say that Christianity can be expressed in three phrases. I deserved hell.

Jesus took my hell. There is nothing left for me but his heaven. Hell, separation from God.

Punishment, wrath, anger. That's exactly what happened on the cross. Heaven, a place of reward, a place of blessing, a place of glory that is set apart for the righteous, for the good and for the pure.

And that is exactly what Jesus deserved. But he willingly and purposely took hell so that you and I can graciously receive his gift of heaven. That's what Barabbas teaches us.

He shows us the gospel in one person's life. Because he, the guilty man, walked free. Because Jesus, the innocent man, was punished.

[28 : 02] The interesting thing is we don't know the rest of the story. We don't know what happened to Barabbas. Was his life changed? Or did he continue as he had been?

We don't know. There's conjecture. There's stories or traditions that you could quote from the early church. But they're just that. They're just traditions. They're just stories. And one thing I can't tell tonight is what the rest of the story is for you.

I can tell you what the Bible says. I can tell you how Barabbas illustrates the gospel message. But what you do now, I can't determine. I don't know the rest of the story.

But the question is, how do you respond to this man Jesus? Do you see him for who he really is? That he's innocent. That he's pure. That he's without guilt.

That he's without stain. And that he deliberately placed himself in that place of pain. In that place of abuse. In that place of harm. In that place of death.

[29 : 03] So that people just like you and just like me. Can be set free. Free from guilt. Free from shame. Free from punishment. And that we can be given the great gift that we could never earn.

That we never deserve. So there on the cross. The guilty man goes free because the innocent man was punished. There the innocent man was punished. So that I, the guilty man, can go free.

You've heard the message of Jesus. Jesus. You've seen through the Bible's eyes. The story. The account. Pilate. Jesus. Barabbas. The crowd. Do you join your voice with the crowd saying, no.

Not him. Give us Barabbas. Or are you willing to stand up tonight and say, I don't care what anyone else says. I don't care what anyone else thinks.

But this is the one I need. And he's the one I want. And he's the one I trust. So I place my faith in him. And I accept what he has done. I, like Barabbas, should have gone to the cross.

[30 : 06] But Jesus has taken that punishment for me. So all that remains now for me is the glory that Jesus himself deserves. That's the great exchange.

That's the great gospel message that we have. And maybe tonight we can learn something from Barabbas. That he can point us in the direction of Jesus. And that he can testify that Jesus set him free.

Can Jesus set you free tonight? That's your story. And that's your testimony. And only you can answer that question. Let us pray. Let us pray.