

Exchanged for Criminal and Then Beaten Like One

Matthew 27:15-31

Mark Vroegop

15 Now at the feast the governor was accustomed to release for the crowd any one prisoner whom they wanted. 16 And they had then a notorious prisoner called Barabbas. 17 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?" 18 For he knew that it was out of envy that they had delivered him up. 19 Besides, while he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, "Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered much because of him today in a dream." 20 Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus. 21 The governor again said to them, "Which of the two do you want me to release for you?" And they said, "Barabbas." 22 Pilate said to them, "Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" They all said, "Let him be crucified!" 23 And he said, "Why, what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Let him be crucified!"

24 So when Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves." 25 And all the people answered, "His blood be on us and on our children!" 26 Then he released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, delivered him to be crucified.

27 Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole battalion before him. 28 And they stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, 29 and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on his head and put a reed in his right hand. And kneeling before him, they mocked him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" 30 And they spit on him and took the reed and struck him on the head. 31 And when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him and led him away to crucify him (Matt 27:15-31).

The Old Testament hints at what we see very clearly in Matthew 27: a suffering messiah. Looking back it seems so clear and obvious. Through the lens of history, we can see the parallels and the fulfillments, and this is what Matthew wants us to see. Listen to Isaiah 53:3-6.

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 wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. 6 All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

We have seen Jesus in agony as he prays in the garden. We have seen him experience great injustice at the hands of a friend and the entire justice system. And last week we saw the role

that Judas and Pilate played. But now the focus shifts to show us the extent of Jesus's suffering with a view toward the concept of substitution – the spiritual center of the gospel where Jesus, even though he is innocent, takes the place of those who are guilty. Two rich but horrific streams are converging here: the suffering of Jesus and the substitution of Jesus.

This is the beginning of the fulfillment of what was written in Isaiah 53, and we will see how far the Messiah will go and how much he will suffer in order to make a satisfactory substitution for the penalty of sin. We will observe tragic and horrible things that Jesus will endure as he makes his way to the cross. In other words, we will see how Jesus receives what he doesn't deserve so that we can receive what we don't deserve.

Exchanged for the Guilty

The setting for our text is Friday morning, the day of Jesus's crucifixion, and the religious rulers have brought Jesus to Pilate. They charged him with blasphemy through his claim to be the King of the Jews (27:11) with the hope that Pilate will view his actions as seditious so that Jesus can be executed. However, Pilate is a shrewd governor, and he knows that there is something else going on here.

As we learned last week, Pilate is likely in a tough political position because he is on thin ice with Rome, there are thousands of Jewish pilgrims in the city of Jerusalem for the Passover celebration, and he cannot afford an uprising or riot. Pilate is looking for an exit strategy – to appease the Jewish mob, preserve the principle of justice, and keep the peace.

Therefore, Pilate tries to throw the mob a bone. He devises a strategy to pressure the religious leaders to release Jesus through a pardon. Therefore he can appear to be just and appeasing by appealing to a tradition where Rome would release a Jewish prisoner during the Passover - "Now at the feast the governor was accustomed to release for the crowd any one prisoner whom they wanted" (Matt 27:15). Roman law allowed an imperial magistrate to acquit a prisoner who was not yet condemned or to pardon one already condemned.¹ Ironically a tradition developed that the governor of Judea, in keeping with the theme of Passover deliverance, would release a prisoner. The Mishnah – a written record of the oral tradition of the Jews during Jesus's day – said "they may slaughter {the Passover Lamb} for one whom they have promised to bring out of prison."² Pilate hopes to use this tradition to his advantage to solve the crisis.

Verse 16 tells us that the Roman garrison held a "notorious prisoner called Barabbas." The word "notorious" means that Barabbas was well-known or infamous. He is no ordinary prisoner. Mark 15:7 and Luke 23:19 paint a picture of a man who was more than a thief; he was an insurrectionist, and his actions had caused others to die.

¹ D.A. Carson, Matthew – Expositors Bible Commentary, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing,) 568.

² Ibid

7 And among the rebels in prison, who had committed murder in the insurrection, there was a man called Barabbas (Mark 15:7).

It is likely that Barabbas was scheduled for execution because of his crimes that very day, and that the other two men who were crucified next to Jesus were co-rebels with Barabbas.³ The word translated as thief in Matt 27:38 & 44 means more than a petty thief. They were more the kind of people who stole money while working towards revolution and subversion.⁴ Crucifixion was not the normal punishment for common thieves. But it was common guerilla fighters who started riots.

Pilate's strategy is to present the mob with a choice between two prisoners, hoping that the people will choose Jesus. He doesn't believe that Jesus is guilty, and he receives an ominous message from his wife while he is deliberating the case. So he asks the mob to make a choice.

17 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?" 18 For he knew that it was out of envy that they had delivered him up. 19 Besides, while he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, "Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered much because of him today in a dream" (Matt 27:17-19).

Matthew wants us to see the innocence of Jesus from multiple angles. The reader knows that he has done nothing wrong from the totality of Matthew's gospel. Pilate knows he is not guilty. And even Pilate's wife attests to the unlawful nature of this moment. Matthew wants you to see the overwhelming evidence – from the O.T. Law, from Roman courts, and from cosmic realms – of Jesus's innocence. He goes to great lengths to highlight the contrast between Jesus and Barabbas. Jesus is clearly innocent; Barabbas is not.

Meanwhile the religious rulers are making their way through the crowd, and they prompt the crowd to request the release of Barabbas instead of Jesus.

20 Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus. 21 The governor again said to them, "Which of the two do you want me to release for you?" And they said, "Barabbas" (Matt 27:20-21).

The tragedy of injustice reaches its climax when Pilate questions the crowd. His statement is filled with irony as he asks what he should do with the one who is called "the chosen One" – the Christ. And it is terrible to hear the crowd's response in verse 22: "And they all said, "Let him be crucified." Pilate tries for a second time to determine what crime Jesus has committed (v 23): "Why what evil has he done?" But the crowd is only interested in his death. "They

³ Carson, 569.

⁴ N.T. Wright, Jesus and the Victory of God, (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg Press, 1996), 420.

shouted all the more, "Let him be crucified" (v 23b). And with that, Pilate washes his hands of the matter, and the crowd takes the responsibility for Jesus's death. Everything about verses 24 and 25 are remarkable:

24 So when Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves." 25 And all the people answered, "His blood be on us and on our children!"

But it is verse 26 that serves as the main point for us today: **"Then he released for them Barabbas and having scourged Jesus, delivered him to be crucified."** The people chose a rebellious, murdering, insurrectionist over their own Messiah. Jesus, while completely innocent, was exchanged for guilty man. Barabbas the rebel is set free, and Jesus the Son of God takes his place. The guilty is released; the righteous is condemned.

We see here a model that will be fully realized spiritually on the cross, and something that will become the central piece of the gospel: the substitution of Jesus for the guilty.

Punished while Not Guilty

Do you remember what Isaiah 53 said? The picture is of a Messiah who suffers.

But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed (Is 53:5).

Jesus has suffered betrayal and injustice already, but now he endures a physical treatment that is, frankly, terrible. Verse 26 makes a very simple statement: "...and having scourged Jesus, he delivered him over to be crucified."

Scourging by the Romans was a terrible punishment. The Jews punished people by whipping criminals, but it was limited to the prescribed 40 lashes according to Old Testament law (see Deut 25:3). The Romans, using their ingenuity, made "improvements" on whipping as a punishment. Their whip was the dreaded flagellum, and it was made by taking long strips of leather and braiding in pieces of bone or lead.⁵ The criminal was then tied to a post, stripped naked, and beaten as long as the Roman soldiers wanted. In severe beatings "the flogging not only reduced the flesh to a bloody pulp but could open the body until the bones were visible and the entrails exposed."⁶ Scourging was preparation for crucifixion, and the punishment was so severe that often the person receiving the punishment didn't survive.

⁵ Carson, 571.

⁶ Ibid

There is nothing about this beating that Jesus deserves. There is nothing about it that is fair. He is innocent; he deserves none of it. Yet, according to Hebrews 5:7-9, his sufferings were a part of the plan for him to become the source of eternal salvation:

7 In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. 8 Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. 9 And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him (Heb 5:7-9).

Jesus is punished even though he is in fact not guilty, but that is not all. He is mocked as the King of the Jews when he is in fact the King of the Jews. The Roman soldiers, after beating him nearly to death, proceed to make a mockery of him.

27 Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole battalion before him. 28 And they stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, 29 and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on his head and put a reed in his right hand. And kneeling before him, they mocked him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" 30 And they spit on him and took the reed and struck him on the head (Matt 27:27-30).

The soldiers move him from the scourging area, and they bring him inside Pilate's compound where they are charged with keeping watch over him prior to crucifixion. Since Jesus has been convicted of being a king, the battalion decides to have some fun with him. This is a raucous, locker-room scene with a cruel horse-play which could have included as many as 600 soldiers if everyone was present.⁷ Think of it like the embarrassing behavior in Abu Ghraib prison in 2004.

They took a robe, which what was likely a part of the Roman uniform, and they draped it around Jesus. Then they found some thorns, formed a crown of thorns and placed it on his head. People of significance, including emperors or winning athletes, were given garlands or crowns for their heads. Finally, they put a reed in his right hand. The combination of this crown, the scarlet or purple robe (Mark 15:18) and the reed were designed to make him like a vassal king. He would have been a bloody mess, and their aim was to show their superiority – even racism – over some alleged Jewish king.

The visual mockery was not sufficient for the soldiers' blood-lust. They probably set him up in a prominent place and began kneeling, paying mocking homage to him. According to verse 29 they said, "Hail, King of the Jews!" which normally would have been a greeting of honor. Other paraphrase translations render this as "Long live the King of Jews" (Good News Bible) or "Hail, Your Majesty, King of the Jews" (Phillips). They concluded their mockery by spitting on him and using the reed in his hand to hit his head, perhaps making it look like he was hitting himself.

⁷ Carson, 572

You can imagine the boisterous shouts and laughs as each soldier tried to outdo the other in his mocking homage of Jesus.

Tragically ironic is the simple fact that Jesus is the King but not just of the Jews; he is the King of Universe. Further, he is completely innocent of any crime or wrong-doing. The soldiers are mocking a man who is powerful beyond their wildest dreams and more innocent than they care to know. Here is one of the clearest pictures of humanity at its worst – beating and mocking the Son of God. It harkens back to what we heard in Isaiah 53:3-4 -

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.

Here is the Son of God who is severely punished and cruelly mocked despite his innocence. Here is the Messiah who was despised and dishonored, a man from whom others hid their faces. He was not only abandoned; he was abused. He was not only betrayed; he was beaten.

Listen to Charles Spurgeon's reflection on this text from a sermon in 1873:

But what an enthronement was accorded to him! See that scarlet robe; it is a contemptuous imitation of the imperial purple that a king wears. See that old chair into which the soldiers have thrust him, so that he may be seated upon a mockery of a throne. See, above all, that crown upon his head. It has rubies in it, but the rubies are composed of his own blood, forced from his blessed temples by the cruel thorns. See, they pay him homage; but the homage is their own filthy spittle which runs down his cheeks. They bow the knee before him, but it is only in mockery. They salute him with the cry, "Hail, King of the Jews!" but it is done in scorn. Was there ever grief like his? It amazes us that such superlative goodness should have been treated with such fiendish malice, that such mercy should have been in such misery, that such majesty should have been reduced to such despising. Truly, he was "despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief" Isa 53:3; and they do not exaggerate who speak of him as the Emperor of sorrow and the enthroned Prince of misery.

He then appealed for an appropriate response:

Look at him, and then restrain your tears if you can. Gaze upon him, ye who love him, and who know how fair was his glorious countenance ere it was marred more than the face of any man, and see it all bestained with his own blood, and then let your heart delight if it can; nay, rather let me say, indulge your griefs, and let your sorrow flow in copious streams, for of all spectacles that were ever witnessed by human eyes, this surely is the most grievous.⁸

⁸ Spurgeon's Sermons, Electronic Database. Copyright © 1997, 2003, 2006 by Biblesoft, Inc.

What's the Point of this Pain?

We are left with a nagging question that Matthew doesn't answer for us at this moment: What is the point of this pain? Eventually his gospel will make all of that clear, but for now we have to look back again to Isaiah to see how the punishment and the exchange fit God's redemptive plan.

There is no better summary than Isaiah 53:6 – "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." There are two thoughts that I want to land on your heart today. Two thoughts that are not only central to this text; they are central to the message of the gospel.

1. We are rebels who choose rebellion

When given the choice between the Messiah or a murderer, the people chose Barabbas. This is simply the natural path of human beings. In fact, Isaiah 53 says two things about our rebellion: 1) we have gone astray, and 2) we have turned **everyone** to his own way. In other words, the rebellion against God is a willful rejection of God's rule by choosing our own path.

This is the essence of sin – a pursuit of autonomy. And the problem is not just what we do; the problem is who we are! Rebels will choose rebellion every time if they are given the choice. So don't look at the mob in Pilate's court with self-righteous contempt, as if you would have been the lone voice crying out for Jesus to be released. Their choice of Barabbas instead of Jesus is no different than the countless choices that we've made as we have turned to our own ways as well. Romans 3 give us devastating picture of ourselves, especially as we consider what we've just see in Matthew:

"None is righteous, no, not one; 11 no one understands; no one seeks for God. 12 All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one." 13 "Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive." "The venom of asps is under their lips." 14 "Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness." 15 "Their feet are swift to shed blood; 16 in their paths are ruin and misery, 17 and the way of peace they have not known." 18 "There is no fear of God before their eyes" (Romans 3:10-18)

We should tremble at the mercy of God in reaching out to rebels in their rebellion.

2. Jesus took our place

Central to the Good News of the Bible is the substitution of Jesus for those who are guilty. The hymn, *Hallelujah, What a Savior!*, captures it so well:

Man of Sorrows! what a name
For the Son of God, Who came
Ruined sinners to reclaim.
Hallelujah! What a Savior!

Jesus took the place of Barabbas, but on the cross he will take the place of those who put their faith in him for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus becomes the substitute for sin.

Bearing shame and scoffing rude,
In my place condemned He stood;
Sealed my pardon with His blood.
Hallelujah! What a Savior!

Don't miss the significance of "in my place condemned He stood...sealed my pardon with his blood." You must read the rest of Matthew through this lens because everything that he endures, suffers and experiences is so that he can reclaim ruined sinners. He bears shame and scoffing rude so that he can stand in your place. He bears the beating, the mockery, and (next week) the cross for the purpose of becoming your substitutionary sacrifice. It was your sin, my sin, our sin that caused this horrific moment. Jesus took upon himself the punishment for our sins. He took our place.

Everything that he suffers is for the purpose of fulfilling God's aim of making the forgiveness of sins possible. Everything he endures is for the aim of "bringing many sons to glory" (Hebrews 2:10). This passages show us how ugly and costly our sin truly is. But even more, it shows us how far Jesus would go and how much he would endure in order to purchase the freedom of rebellious sinners. And it is the marvel of this substitution that becomes the ground of obedience and following hard after Jesus. In other words, when you understand the horror of your sin, what Jesus suffered, and what it means for your soul – you have found the bedrock of grace and the wellspring of life!

The awe of what it means for him to take your place in light of what you deserve is life-changing.

Guilty, vile, and helpless we;
Spotless Lamb of God was He;
"Full atonement!" can it be?
Hallelujah! What a Savior!

Yes, Hallelujah! What a Savior!

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