

B&L Bible & Life

BIBLE TEACHING NEWSLETTER

BIBLICAL DOCTRINE & NEW TESTAMENT ASSEMBLY LIFE

Vol. 14. No. 4

Sept. 1, 2007

Barabbas' Freedom: A Picture of Salvation

by David Dunlap

"They had a notable prisoner, called Barabbas...Pilate said unto them 'whom will you that I release unto you? Barabbas, or Jesus which is called the Christ'...they said 'Barabbas.' " Matt. 27:15, 21

Many Christians believe in a cross that is far too small, one that has lost some of its grandeur, majesty, and power. The cross of Christ is made small by the distance of time, tradition, and the lack of a love for Christ. However, the cross looms larger when we know more of its cost, power, and reality in our lives. Some of that reality is gained when Christ's sufferings are viewed from the vantage point of the guilty criminal sentenced to death. As we stand in the place of the condemned and watch Jesus Christ suffering for the accused, it is then that we realize the awful cost of His death. We begin to truly understand the importance of this substitutionary atonement when we go to Calvary and there see the Just One suffering death, while the guilty go free. The New Testament tells us of such a man, one who, through Christ's death, would experience this freedom, forgiveness, and joy. This man is Barabbas, the insurrectionist and murderer. The account of Barabbas, which appears in all four gospels, is not merely a chapter in a larger story, but is recounted carefully so that we might better appreciate our salvation in Christ. Truly, Barabbas' freedom is a picture of our salvation.

Barabbas Condemned to Die

When Barabbas was condemned to die, no one questioned the justice of his sentence. He was an insurrectionist against Roman rule, a robber, and a murderer. And now, that outraged law had laid its strong hands upon him, and he lay bound in a Roman cell, under the sentence of death. He was not awaiting trial, but execution. Just before him lay, as his only prospect, the awful death of crucifixion. He knew what that meant—long hours of unspeakable agony, the hands and feet torn by great nails, the wrist and shoulder joints dislocated by the downward drag of his body. Each quivering nerve was a separate torture through tension and a burning, unquenchable thirst, while all around stood a jeering and taunting mob. All of his earthly hopes, ambitions, and dreams now lay in rubble at his feet. All the prospects he once sought would now end on a cross. The only question was, *when?*

"One notable criminal was at that time in custody; his name was Barabbas. Significant name! Translated it means, "the son of the father." The Syriac version adds another name, "Jesus"... Who was he? He was a murderer and an insurgent."

Arno C. Gaeblein
(1861-1945)

The sound of workmen's voices on the hill outside his jail-cell window began to answer this question. The jailers were preparing three large wooden crosses, while the other workmen were cutting three sockets in the hard rock of Golgotha, the skull-shaped hill nearby. He knew that one of those crosses would be for him? The thought produced in him a sense of suffocation, of something clutching at his heart. A cruel Roman guard shouted to him, "You are to suffer in the morning." There were two other criminals who were to die with him, but since he was the greater criminal, he was to have the prominence and to die on the middle cross.

Barabbas Set Free, Christ Crucified

It was difficult to sleep that night because of both worry and unusual disturbances in the prison. The confused noises, outcries, and the tramping of soldiers' feet on the stone pavement outside broke the stillness of the night and penetrated the prison's thick walls. Everyone in the prison recognized that something unexpected was taking place. Barabbas sat up for a moment to consider what all this might mean. Perhaps there was another insurrection, such as the one he had raised against the majestic and inflexible Roman law. But the night wore on, and finally, the first rays of daylight shone into the prison—the light of his last day. Then he heard soldiers' footsteps and the jailer's key grinding in the lock; the prison door swung open; but as he braced himself for the suffering that would await, then he heard the joyful words, "Go free! Go free, Barabbas; another takes your place! Another is to die on your cross between the two malefactors."

As Barabbas emerged into the free, glorious Judean sunshine, the crowd was already surging out toward, "Golgotha", the place of the skull. Then, if not before, the desire must have arisen to know the man who had been condemned to die in his place. One can easily imagine how Barabbas followed the throng, striving eagerly to see the One who was to die on his cross. Perhaps it was not until the sound of the hammer driving the nails had ceased and the cross—Barabbas' cross—had been reared up, bearing its awful burden, that Barabbas saw the Sufferer. We may well believe that, moved by a strange desire welling within, Barabbas pressed his way through the howling mob until he stood looking up into the face of Jesus.

Barabbas knew of Him, of course. His substitute in agony was the teacher out of Galilee, the Man who spoke as never a man spoke, the Man whose life had been lived absolutely without sin. Adam was the first to sin, but then, so did Abraham, Moses, David, and all the prophets who followed; but not this Man. Moreover, He was able to heal lepers and the paralyzed with just a word or a touch. One day, when the crowd was hungry, He miraculously produced enough food for five thousand men (not to mention women and children) out of five loaves of bread and a few small fishes. Because of these mighty works of God, Barabbas may have wondered if this Jesus were, indeed, the Messiah, the Son of God. But he had not become His disciple because of his sin.

"Father" was a title by which the greatest of Rabbis were known; it may have been that Barabbas was the son of an ancient and distinguished family of Rabbis who kicked over the traces and embarked on a career of magnificent crime."

Wm. Barclay

Author and former N. T. Greek Professor

Barabbas' Theology of Christ's Death

Whatever the case may have been, on that day Barabbas, though not a trained theologian, nevertheless, began to understand the biblical doctrine of salvation as never before. Christian writers, preachers, and commentators have noted that Barabbas' knowledge of the atonement contained many of the essential elements. John McNeill, the great Scottish preacher has well said: "My brethren, let me commend to you Barabbas' theory of the atonement. It is a good theory to preach on, pray on, sing on, and die on. Do you know any other theory that will stand these tests?" Let us examine the tenets of Barabbas' theory of "salvation."

First, He knew that he was a guilty sinner, sentenced under the righteous condemnation of the law (Luke 23:25). In these two respects, Barabbas was representative of all men (Rom. 3:10-20). For the Scriptures tell us that, "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23).

Secondly, Barabbas knew, as he looked at the Sufferer hanging on the center cross, that this man had done no sin (John 8:46, John 19:4). He might echo, like the thief on the cross, "...seeing thou are in the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our sins, but this man has done nothing amiss" (Lk. 23:40-41). The Savior of the world was holy and just.

Thirdly, He knew that Jesus was, for him, a true substitute. Jesus died in his stead, so that he could go free. Whoever might question whether Christ's death was truly liberating and substitutionary, Barabbas would never question this fact (2 Cor. 5:21). For Jesus' dying on the cross was the means of his freedom.

Fourthly, He knew that he had done nothing whatsoever to merit the marvelous death of Jesus Christ in his place. Whatever may have been the reason for it, he knew it reached him as an act of pure grace (Eph. 2:4-9). All who are saved, whatever their standing in life, must acknowledge that it is only through and because of the unmerited grace of God.

BARABBAS	JESUS
Name Meaning: "Son of the Father."	"Son of the Father"
Insurrectionist, murderer	Sinless and holy
Set Free	Crucified
Received Grace	Received Judgment
Guilty of all charges	Innocent of all charges

"He knew that Jesus was dying verily and actually in his place; an innocent and holy Being bearing the very penalty which the law had justly decreed to him, Barabbas."

C. I. Scofield
(1843-1921)
Author and theologian

FORWARDING SERVICE REQUESTED

September 2007

• INFORMATION •

Bible and Life is published periodically and sent out free of charge and is supported entirely by the free will offerings of the Lord's people. checks should be made out to "Bible and Life Ministries, Inc."

Correspondence should be sent to:

BIBLE & LIFE Newsletter
c/o David Dunlap
3116 Gulfwind Drive
Land O' Lakes, FL 34639
(813) 996-1053

e-mail
daviddunlap@earthlink.net
web site
www.bibleandlife.org

Fifthly, Barabbas knew Christ's death for him was perfectly and fully sufficient. The only question before Pilate was whether Christ should die or Barabbas. When it was decided that Christ should die, Barabbas was set free. There was, therefore, nothing for him to add to it. Just because Christ was dying, he was living. His assurance of "salvation" was complete the instant that his Substitute said "It is finished" and gave up the spirit (John 19:30, Eph. 1:7).

The Two "Sons of the Father"

After that day on Calvary's hill, Barabbas, whose name means "son of the father", would never be the same again. For it was there that the Christ, "the anointed of the Father" died on his cross. Two "Sons of the Father": One sentenced to die for crimes of which he was certainly guilty; the other sentenced to die for crimes of which He was entirely innocent. One walked across the pavement, a newly-freed man, while "the other gave His back" (Isa. 50:4) to the Roman scourge. One went out of the prison to be exonerated of all his crimes, while the other silenced all who watched Him carry a rough Roman cross upon His bloodied back. One received mercy without wrath, while the other received wrath without mercy. One was granted life, although he deserved death. The other received death, although He deserved life, and was hastily buried in a borrowed tomb, His death scattering all His friends. Two "Sons of the Father," one of whom died to set the other free. Thank God that, so many years ago, the innocent One died, that all the rest of mankind could be set free by believing in Him. Thank God for our Lord Jesus Christ, the "Lord of Glory" (1 Cor. 2:8), who willingly stood in the place of the condemned, who suffered the scourging due the sinner, who endured the excruciating pain of the cross—in place of Barabbas...in place of me...in place of you. "All we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned each one to his own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all" (Isa 53:6).

Editorial Note: Some editorial license has been undertaken in fleshing out the details surrounding the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus Christ and the trial of Barabbas. In these details we have attempted to be faithful to both Scripture and New Testament history.

