

SHORT BIBLE STUDY

Heavenly Father, thank you that you are in control of all things and that all things happen according to your purpose. Remind us now, through the words of Scripture, how we are to view the present suffering of the world, and help us to hold fast to the hope we have in Jesus. In the name of Christ, who suffered on our behalf. Amen.

BARABBAS THE BRIGAND

1. This is a short study on one of Jesus' trials before Pilate.

John 18:40

⁴⁰ They cried out again, "Not this man, but Barabbas!" Now Barabbas was a robber.

2. How does John describe Barabbas?

Luke 23:18-19

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.

3. How does Luke describe Barabbas?

NOTE: The word "insurrection" comes from the Latin "to rise up". It describes a public protest showing open resistance to the government or fighting against established authority.

It appears that Barabbas was a notorious criminal and political prisoner who had taken part recently in an insurrection in the city, and was both a robber and a murderer. In our terms, he was a terrorist who was now on death row awaiting execution.

Mark 15:7-15

⁷ A man called Barabbas was in prison with the insurrectionists who had committed murder in the uprising. ⁸ The crowd came up and asked Pilate to do for them what he usually did.

⁹ "Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?" asked Pilate, ¹⁰ knowing it was out of self-interest that the chief priests had handed Jesus over to him. ¹¹ But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have Pilate release Barabbas instead.

¹² "What shall I do, then, with the one you call the king of the Jews?" Pilate asked them.

¹³ "Crucify him!" they shouted.

¹⁴ "Why? What crime has he committed?" asked Pilate.

But they shouted all the louder, "Crucify him!"

¹⁵ Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.

4. Do you know the meaning of v.8? (It was the procurator's custom of granting a Passover amnesty to a prisoner chosen by the people.) Which prisoner did Pilate hope to release (v.9)?

Twice, Pilate had judged Jesus to be innocent of any crime, and saw in this tradition, a way of escape from his personal dilemma. However, the crowd chose Barabbas and foiled his plan!

This is ironic considering that the Sanhedrin, in Jesus' second trial, tried so hard to formulate an accusation against Jesus that could be submitted to the Roman court, believing that Pilate would not be interested in trivial ecclesiastical offenses against Jewish law but only in revolutionary claims that might threaten public security. And yet the crowd opted to release a convicted revolutionary, Barabbas.

Matthew 27:16-26

¹⁶ At that time they had a notorious prisoner called Barabbas.¹⁷ So when they had gathered together, Pilate said to them, “Who is it you want me to release for you—Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Messiah?” ¹⁸ For he knew they had handed Him over because of envy.

¹⁹ While he was sitting on the judge’s bench, his wife sent word to him, “Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for today I’ve suffered terribly in a dream because of Him!”

NOTE: Nothing else is known of Pilate’s wife, a Gentile woman. Matthew is the only gospel writer who mentions her. However, her conviction of Jesus’ innocence stands in contrast to the prejudice of the Jewish crowd.

²⁰ The chief priests and the elders, however, persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to execute Jesus. ²¹ The governor asked them, “Which of the two do you want me to release for you?”

“Barabbas!” they answered.

²² Pilate asked them, “What should I do then with Jesus, who is called Messiah?”

They all answered, “Crucify Him!”

²³ Then he said, “Why? What has He done wrong?”

But they kept shouting, “Crucify Him!” all the more.

²⁴ When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that a riot was starting instead, he took some water, washed his hands in front of the crowd, and said, “I am innocent of this righteous man’s blood. See to it yourselves!”

²⁵ All the people answered, “His blood be on us and on our children!” ²⁶ Then he released Barabbas to them. But after having Jesus flogged, he handed Him over to be crucified.

Footnotes:

- a. [Matthew 27:26](#) Roman flogging was done with a whip made of leather strips embedded with pieces of bone or metal that brutally tore the flesh.

5. Look back at vv.24-25. Again, this is only recorded in Matthew's gospel. What do you think is the theme or message of these verses? (It is about responsibility.)

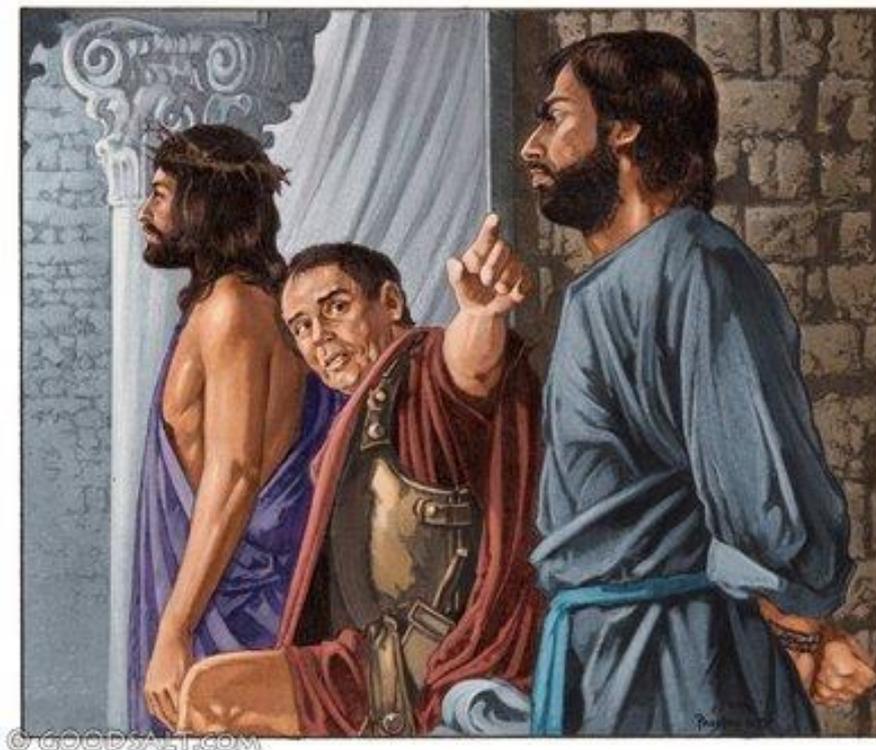
By washing his hands, Pilate disclaimed responsibility for Jesus' death and transferred it to the crowd. While the chief priests and elders had taken the initiative, the people as a whole, carried a corporate responsibility for the death of Jesus.

NOTE: There is no basis for extending this principle to a condemnation of all Jews for all time. After all, Matthew was a Jew and so were all the foundation members of Jesus' church.

Matthew 23:37-38

³⁷ "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. ³⁸ Look, your house is left to you desolate.

As Jesus had predicted, that generation in Jerusalem would carry the responsibility which, in 70AD, found its terrible outworking in the destruction of the city and its temple.



Reflection

- It is hard to imagine Barabbas' incredulity when his cell door was flung open and he was called out, not to execution, but to freedom. He must have stumbled out dumbfounded into the bright sunshine of a spring day. He was not only released but, in a sense, redeemed.
- The one who had given sight to the blind and had laid his hands on little children, was to be crucified, while the murdering terrorist who deserved his sentence, was to go free.
- **Acts 3:14-15**
¹⁴You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. ¹⁵You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead.

Application

- For Christians, the story of Barabbas is a parable of our redemption. Each of us resembles Barabbas, and like him, we deserve death. But like him we have escaped death because Jesus died in our place.

Prayers

- O God, you so loved the world that you gave your Son to die on the cross for us. We acknowledge with shame that our love for you is often poor and weak. Pour your own love into our hearts that we may love you above all things. May your Holy Spirit lead us and bring us to glad obedience today and every day.
- Thank you, heavenly Father, for every blessing you bestow on your people in Christ. Thank you for delivering us from darkness into your kingdom of light, for providing us with the liberty of being your children, and for bestowing forgiveness of sins on us. Help us to trust in Christ, and in him alone, for our salvation.