

## We Are All Barabbas

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When Jesus died, a condemned man went free. His pardon serves as a metaphor for the rest of us, who must choose how we will use our own freedom.

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*“And at that time they had a notorious prisoner called Barabbas. Therefore, when they had gathered together, Pilate said to them, ‘Whom do you want me to release to you? Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?’ But the chief priests and elders persuaded the multitudes that they should ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus. The governor answered and said to them, ‘Which of the two do you want me to release to you?’ They said, ‘Barabbas!’ . . . Then he released Barabbas to them; and when he had scourged Jesus, he delivered Him to be crucified” (Matt. 27:16-21, 26).*



Matthew calls Barabbas “a notorious prisoner.” Luke and Mark identify his crimes as murder and rebellion (Lk. 23:19; Mk. 15:7), while John adds that he was a robber (Jn. 18:40). These brief descriptions tell us everything we need to know about Barabbas. He was a man without scruples, a social misfit who deserved the punishment coming his way. He languished on death row, awaiting a gruesome death on a Roman cross.

So when the Jews, appealing to an annual Passover tradition, demanded that Pilate crucify Jesus and release Barabbas, the governor was shocked. At worst, Jesus was a harmless crackpot,

certainly not in the same league with a hardened criminal like Barabbas. By every measure of justice, Jesus should have been released, and Barabbas put to death. But the people were adamant that Barabbas be set free, and Jesus be crucified. So rather than preside over a riot, Pilate did the politically expedient thing and yielded to their demand. Jesus was “destroyed,” and a convicted insurrectionist/murderer/thief was released back to society.

Barabbas was guilty, condemned, and doomed. His fate was sealed, and he was powerless to escape it. Yet because of developments entirely outside his control, another man was executed in his place, and he was given his freedom. Pardoned. Exonerated. Officially declared “not guilty.” He was a free man!

Did Barabbas have any appreciation for this remarkable turn of events in his life? Neither history nor tradition tell us anything about what he did with his freedom. Did he use this act of mercy as an opportunity to start a new life? Or did he return to his former life of crime, and die on a Roman cross somewhere else for a new set of offenses? A 1961 epic film starring Anthony Quinn depicts Barabbas as a troubled man who, near the end of his life, finally recognized the role that God’s grace had in his life. But that’s pure speculation. We simply don’t know what happened to him.

Perhaps the end of his story is missing because *we* are the ones who must write it. *We are all Barabbas*—guilty, condemned, and doomed to face the wrath of God for our sins. Like Barabbas, with no input from ourselves, Jesus took our place and bore the punishment that should have fallen on us. God “made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us” (2 Cor. 5:21). He paid the price, and we got the freedom.

But what are we doing with that freedom? Has this gift of grace moved us to do something meaningful with our lives? Do we feel any sense of gratitude for the sacrifice that rescued us from divine judgment? Or are we indifferent to God’s mercy, careless of the great debt we owe Him? Are we living our lives as though nothing has changed, and we are still slaves to our passions?

We are all Barabbas—set free but owing so much.

— David King