

THE SCROLLS

Meeting The Messiah | Mark 15:1-15

Life Lesson

The account of Barabbas reveals the Gospel's core message: salvation through substitution. Humanity stands guilty before a holy God, deserving the judgment that sin warrants. Still, in God's sovereignty and grace, Jesus Christ stepped into our place and endured the punishment we earned. The cross was not just a tragic injustice but part of God's divine plan of redemption. When we understand that the cross, which was for us, fell on Christ, it should lead to deep humility, genuine repentance, and a life characterized by gratitude and surrender to the King who willingly took our place.

Examine Scripture

1 As soon as it was morning, having held a meeting with the elders, scribes, and the whole Sanhedrin, the chief priests tied Jesus up, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate. **2** So Pilate asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" He answered him, "You say so." **3** And the chief priests accused him of many things. **4** Pilate questioned him again, "Aren't you going to answer? Look how many things they are accusing you of!" **5** But Jesus still did not answer, and so Pilate was amazed. **6** At the festival Pilate used to release for the people a prisoner whom they requested. **7** There was one named Barabbas, who was in prison with rebels who had committed murder during the rebellion. **8** The crowd came up and began to ask Pilate to do for them as was his custom.

The Great Exchange

There are moments in Scripture when we are invited not just to read the text, but to stand before it with reverence and trembling. Our passage is one of those moments. Here, we are drawn into the early morning hours of the most unjust set of trials in human history. The religious leaders have already condemned Jesus in their hearts. Now they bring Him before the Roman governor, hoping to secure His execution. At first glance, the scene may seem to be nothing more than political manipulation and mob justice. A corrupt religious establishment, a hesitant Roman governor, and an easily swayed crowd come together to condemn an innocent man. Yet beneath these human actions lies something far deeper and more profound. What appears to be a tragic failure of justice is actually the unfolding of God's sovereign plan of redemption.

Standing before Pilate and the crowd are two men. One is Barabbas, a violent revolutionary and murderer awaiting crucifixion for his crimes against Rome. The cross has already been prepared for him. His guilt is clear, and his execution is imminent. The other is Jesus of Nazareth, the sinless Son of God. He has healed the sick, preached the kingdom of God, and lived in perfect obedience to the Father. There is no legitimate charge against Him. Yet in one of the most shocking moments in human history, the crowd will demand the release of the guilty man and the execution of the innocent one.

Barabbas will go free. Jesus will go to the cross. This exchange is more than just a tragic mistake in justice. It is a vivid picture of the core of the Gospel. In this moment, the doctrine of penal substitution is shown in real time: the guilty person goes free while the innocent is condemned. In many ways, Barabbas represents every one of us. We stand guilty before a holy God because of our sin. The sentence against us is just, and the penalty is death. Yet the message of the Gospel is that another has taken our place. Jesus is our substitution.

Mark 15 invites us to carefully observe this moment to see the cruelty of human sin, the weakness of human justice, and above all, the sovereign grace of God, who ordained that His Son would be

9 Pilate answered them, "Do you want me to release the king of the Jews for you?"
10 For he knew it was because of envy that the chief priests had handed him over.
11 But the chief priests stirred up the crowd so that he would release Barabbas to them instead. **12 Pilate asked them again, "Then what do you want me to do with the one you call the king of the Jews?"** **13 Again they shouted, "Crucify him!"** **14 Pilate said to them, "Why? What has he done wrong?" But they shouted all the more, "Crucify him!"**
15 Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them; and after having Jesus flogged, he handed him over to be crucified.

- Underline "as soon as it was morning" in (v. 1) to reiterate the illegal nature of the trials of Jesus.
- In the margin, write "3 religious trials" and "3 civil trials."
- Bracket "Jesus still did not answer" and write "Is. 53:7" above it.
- Circle "Barabbas" in (v. 7) and write "I am Barabbas" in the margin to remind you that Jesus was your substitute.
- Circle "crucify Him" in (v. 13 and 14).
- Underlined "flogged" in (v. 15). Write (Is. 53:5) in the margin.

Personal Notes

condemned so that guilty sinners could be set free. As we read this passage, we must recognize something deeply personal: the cross that Barabbas faced is the same cross Jesus carried for us.

Vs. 1-5

After the three religious trials, which were completely illegal, Jesus was handed over to the Roman government for a civil trial. Before examining Jesus being delivered to Pilate, it is important to see how far the chief priests, scribes, and the rest of the Sanhedrin went to falsely implicate Jesus. The religious trials broke Jewish laws and customs for several reasons. Although there were many illegal and conflicting aspects of these trials, here are some of the most notable ones. First, the arrest and trials took place at night. According to the Mishna, capital cases had to be tried during daylight hours. Second, the trials occurred on the eve of the Sabbath and during Passover, which Jewish law forbids. Third, there were significant conflicts of interest, as the arresting officials, high priests, and scribes also served as judges. Additionally, the witnesses' testimonies were inconsistent. Finally, the sentencing and execution went against Jewish laws. Death sentences required a full day between conviction and execution to allow for reflection and mercy. Moreover, death sentences could only be publicly pronounced in the official "Chamber of Hewn Stone" on the Temple Mount. Instead, Jesus was judged and convicted in private residences.

After Jesus was found guilty in the religious trials, He was tied up and taken to Pilate to face the three civil trials before the Roman authorities. In our passage, Pilate asked Jesus two questions. First, he inquired, "Are you the king of the Jews?" (v. 2). This was the charge the religious leaders brought against Jesus, claiming He was inciting rebellion against Rome. However, Pilate knew this was not true. Still, he asked the question, and Jesus simply responded, "You say so" (v. 2). Such a brief response to an incredible truth! The next question Pilate asked was, "Aren't you going to answer? Look at how many things they are accusing you of!" (v. 4). Jesus remained silent, not defending Himself or clarifying His identity. He stayed silent, fulfilling the prophecy in (Isaiah 53:7): "He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth. Like a lamb led to the slaughter, and like a sheep silent before her shearers, he did not open his mouth." This astonished Pilate, who saw strength in Jesus' silence.

Vs. 6-14

After speaking with Jesus, Pilate found no reason to convict Him, so he devised a way to wash his hands of the situation. Following the Passover custom, Pilate would release one prisoner chosen by the people. It was an effort to gain goodwill from the people of Israel.

Personal Notes

Standing before them were two men. One was Barabbas, a rebel, an insurgent, and a murderer. He was the kind of man Rome feared. His life had been filled with violence and rebellion. His crimes were undeniable, and his punishment was deserved. Barabbas was already condemned. The cross outside the city was meant for him. The name Barabbas is deeply ironic. In Aramaic, Barabbas literally means “son of the father.” Some older manuscripts of the New Testament even record his full name as Jesus Barabbas, meaning “Jesus, son of the father.” Whether or not this longer form was original, the irony remains striking.

The other person standing before them was Jesus, the sinless and only Son of the Father. He had healed the sick, opened blind eyes, cast out demons, and preached the good news of God's kingdom. He had done nothing deserving death. Pilate himself recognized His innocence. Yet the crowd faced a choice: Barabbas or Jesus.

From a logical perspective, the decision should have been clear. One was guilty, and the other was innocent. One had taken a life, while the other had given life. Yet, the crowd yelled, “Release Barabbas!” and then, with even more fervor, they shouted of Jesus, “Crucify Him!” This moment exposes something deeply troubling about the human heart. The crowd chose a violent rebel over the Prince of Peace. They rejected the One who came to save them and embraced the one embodying the brokenness of their world. However, the scene also shows something profoundly beautiful about the gospel. Barabbas walked free because Jesus took his place. The cross prepared for Barabbas was given to Jesus. The guilty man was released, and the innocent man was condemned. Without realizing it, Barabbas experienced the core of the Gospel: substitution. Barabbas deserved the cross, but Jesus did not. Yet Jesus took the cross anyway.

V. 15

After Pilate gives in to the demands of the crowd, Mark records that Jesus was flogged before being handed over for crucifixion. This brief statement conceals unimaginable brutality. Roman flogging, known as flagellation, was not simply a whipping. It was a calculated form of torture carried out by trained executioners. The instrument used was called a flagrum, a whip consisting of several leather thongs with pieces of bone, metal, or lead attached to the ends. Each strike did more than bruise the skin. The metal fragments would tear into the flesh, ripping it open as the whip was pulled away. Victims were typically stripped naked and tied to a post so their entire bodies were fully exposed. Ancient descriptions of Roman scourging indicate that, after repeated blows, the skin would be shredded and the muscles exposed. In severe cases, ribs or internal organs could become visible. Roman law sometimes limited the number of lashes in Jewish contexts, but Roman soldiers were not

Personal Reflection

1. In what ways do you see yourself in Barabbas, a guilty sinner who is set free because Jesus took your place? How does this strengthen your understanding of the Gospel?
2. The crowd chose Barabbas instead of Jesus. Are there areas in your life where you are tempted to pick the things of this world over Christ?
3. Jesus stayed silent before His accusers, trusting the Father's sovereign plan. How can His example challenge the way you respond when you are misunderstood, criticized, or treated unfairly?
4. Reflecting on the suffering Jesus endured through Roman flogging and crucifixion, how should the cost of your salvation influence your gratitude, worship, and daily obedience to Him?
5. The cross symbolizes the greatest exchange in history: our guilt given up for Christ's righteousness. How should this truth influence the way you live, speak about the Gospel, and share Christ with others?

Commentaries

Exalting Jesus in Mark by Daniel Akin

MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Mark 9-16 by John MacArthur

BECNT: Mark by Robert Stein

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bound by the Jewish limit of forty lashes. Their goal was to weaken the victim to the brink of death before crucifixion. Many victims never survived the flogging itself. This historical reality makes the suffering of Jesus even more profound. By the time He begins the journey to Golgotha, He has already endured a level of physical trauma that would have killed many men.

The brutality of Roman flogging underscores the seriousness of sin and the magnitude of Christ's sacrifice. Scripture repeatedly emphasizes that Jesus' suffering was not random cruelty but the means by which God accomplished redemption. We read in (Is. 53:5): "But he was pierced because of our rebellion, crushed because of our iniquities; punishment for our peace was on him, and we are healed by his wounds." The suffering of Christ must be understood through the doctrine of penal substitution. God's holiness demands justice. Sin cannot simply be overlooked or ignored; it must be judged. At the cross, that judgment falls on Christ. The flogging of Jesus is not merely an example of endurance or moral courage. It is part of the punishment that He willingly bears as the substitute for sinners. Every lash represents the weight of divine justice falling upon the One who stands in the place of His people. The innocent Son of God receives the punishment that guilty sinners deserve.

Like Barabbas, we are guilty before God. Our rebellion against Him sentences us to death. But the Gospel declares that Christ has taken our place. The cross meant for us was carried by Him. The punishment we deserved was endured by Him. The judgment our sin warranted was poured out on Him. Because of this great exchange, sinners can go free. This calls us to humility and gratitude. Our salvation was not bought cheaply; it came through the suffering of the Son of God, who willingly endured both the cruelty of men and the justice of God to redeem His people. So, when we see Barabbas walking free and Jesus heading to the cross, we see more than just a historical moment. We see the gospel. The guilty rebel is set free. The innocent King is condemned. And through that sovereign exchange, salvation is achieved.

The tragedy of the crowd is that they rejected the One who could save them. But the beauty of the Gospel is that even though humanity rejected Christ, He still went to the cross for them. He went to the cross for the crowd. He went to the cross for Barabbas. And He went to the cross for us. The cross that should have been ours became His. The punishment we deserved fell on Him.

The cross is the greatest exchange in human history. The guilty are pardoned; the innocent is condemned. The sinner is released; the Savior is crucified. And because of Jesus, our answer to the question "Barabbas or Jesus?" can be different from the crowd that day. We can choose the King who chose the cross for us.