

# I Am Barabbas

by Staff

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The convicted and condemned murderer, also notorious for sedition and robbery, sits dejectedly in his filthy cell, watched closely by Roman guards. He cannot help but ponder how excruciatingly painful his encounter with crucifixion will be. He has seen many of these hellish nightmares of Roman justice as he walked the roads of Judea and Galilee, conspiring with other rebels willing to resist—and even kill—the hated Roman occupiers. But this time, the Romans had caught their man and justly sentenced him to be executed on the stake.

The Romans were infamous for how they cruelly lined their roadways with crucifixes—their manner of warning would-be enemies of the State to mend their ways. This slow death was designed to torture the condemned for up to three agonizing days! Criminals punished in this way usually died of asphyxiation, no longer able to lift their chests one more time for another searing breath. The pain of crucifixion was so intense that it gave its name to extreme agony: *excruciating*, which derives from Latin words meaning "the pain one experiences while being crucified."

This convicted murderer dreads the next few days. Sleep is impossible. He fidgets as his mind races, imagining the worst.

His name is Barabbas. We know him as the "lucky" man who received Pilate's Passover pardon in AD 31, allowing him to skip his just appointment with the crucifix.

As Pilate finishes his interrogation of Jesus, he can find no fault in Him—he has even begun to like Jesus. His wife sends a message, late in the proceedings, warning her husband of a dark dream she has had concerning this innocent Man. Moreover, Pilate has figured out that the Jewish leaders are really just jealous of Jesus' popularity and are afraid He could cause them to lose their positions of authority. To appease the restless mob—and save himself some trouble with Caesar should the Jews decide to appeal to him—he is willing to shed the blood of a sacrificial lamb, the innocent Jesus, and let Barabbas go free.

The story is told in Mark 15:6-15:

Now at the feast he was accustomed to releasing one prisoner to them, whomever they requested. And there was one named Barabbas, who was chained with his fellow insurrectionists; they had committed murder in the insurrection. Then the multitude, crying aloud, began to ask him to do just as he had always done for them. But Pilate answered them, saying, "Do you want me to release to you the King of the Jews?" For he knew that the chief priests had handed Him over because of envy. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd, so that he should rather release Barabbas to them. And Pilate answered and said to them again, "What then do you want me to do with Him whom you call the King of the Jews?" So they cried out again, "Crucify Him!" Then Pilate said to them, "Why, what evil has He done?" And they cried out more exceedingly, "Crucify Him!" So Pilate, wanting to gratify the crowd, released Barabbas to them; and he delivered Jesus, after he had scourged Him, to be crucified.

Each of the four gospels gives an account of Barabbas' part in Jesus' trial (see Matthew 27:15-26; Luke 23:18-25; John 18:39-40). Matthew 27:16 says Barabbas was a notorious prisoner; John 18:40 calls him a robber. Many find the whole story little more than a curiosity, an interesting detail of the whole sordid affair. But is that all it?

### **Me? Like Barabbas?**

Barabbas, a condemned murderer, robber, and insurgent. Guilty as charged. The Romans had gotten their man, and he deserved his punishment.

Do we ever identify with Barabbas, the murderer? Perhaps we should.

We have also been found guilty of murder. How? On the day of Pentecost after Jesus' death, Peter explains that we *all* have killed the Christ (Acts 2:36). We all, by requiring His blood be spilled to cleanse us of our sins, are really the ones who crucified Him. As surely as the Jewish mob agitated for His condemnation, as surely as the Roman lictor tore His flesh with his whip, as surely as the Roman soldiers pounded nails into His hands and feet, as surely as one ripped His side open with a spear, we caused the death of the innocent Son of Man, the very Son of God. Yes, the shed blood of the Innocent drips from *our* hands.

By the standard Peter uses in Acts 2, we should be considered convicted murderers. This also means each of us should also have a date with the executioner—unless somehow, some way, someone can pass over our sins too.

We know that Jesus is the Lamb of God, who came to take away the sins of the world (John 1:29). He *is* our Passover (I Corinthians 5:7). Jesus took on Himself all the sins of all time and paid the penalty for all who will receive Him as Lord and Savior (I Timothy 2:6; Hebrews 2:9; 9:12; I John 2:2; etc.). So now, we can stand before God without condemnation, for "there is now no condemnation to those who are in Christ, who . . . walk . . . according to the Spirit" (Romans 8:1). Even this sin—of murdering the Christ—is washed away forever.

After we repent and accept Jesus as our personal Savior, God regenerates us and brings us into His Family by His Spirit (John 3:5-6, 8; I Peter 1:23). God is building a growing Family! The author of Hebrews 2:11-12 says Jesus is not ashamed to call us His brothers. Spiritually, God sees neither male nor female, so of course God is forming sons and daughters (II Corinthians 6:18). Paul writes:

For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by which we cry out, "Abba, Father." The Spirit itself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together. (Romans 8:15-17)

Jesus tells Mary Magdalene, after His resurrection at the garden tomb, something earth-shaking at the time: "I am ascending to My Father *and your Father*, and to My God and your God" (John 20:17). He wants it to be crystal clear to her—and to all of us—that His sacrificial death and resurrection allows us to call God *our* Father. We are His very children!

But we have a problem. We are guilty as charged of murder and other sins. We have incurred the death penalty by law—unless somehow, someone will redeem us by paying the death penalty for us,

pardoning our sins and canceling our appointment with the executioner. And just as happened to Barabbas, the One who does these things for us is Jesus Christ, our Savior.

### **What's In a Name?**

So what about Barabbas? Where does he come into this story? It is a moving reminder at Passover time each year that God leaves nothing to chance. Even the man who receives unmerited pardon is in the story for a reason: to remind us what we were and who we are *now*.

Many look at the name "Barabbas" and think it is just a name. Perhaps they realize that it is an Aramaic word. But what does it mean? *Bar* means "son of" and *abba* means "father," with the connotation of closeness and intimacy similar to our "dad," "daddy," or "papa." Therefore, Barabbas is "the son of the father" or "the son of his dear father." That Passover day in AD 31, there was a guilty "son of the father"—Barabbas—and a totally innocent "Son of the Father"—Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

There is possibly even more. Extant ancient texts say that Barabbas' full name was *Jesus* Barabbas. If that is correct—and it may be—then the crowd picked the wrong Jesus to be freed! Is that not typical of human nature? On our own, we too would choose the wrong savior and doom ourselves to bondage to sin and death rather than freedom from sin and eternal life (John 6:44; Romans 2:4).

As individuals, we are whom Barabbas depicted, "the sons of our dear Father" who did not measure up. Each one of us is *that* child of God. When our Elder Brother Jesus Christ stepped up to be crucified for us, though He should have been the one released, having committed no wrong at all, God also released the rest of His children who would call upon the name of Jesus and accept His sacrifice in our stead. Just as surely as Barabbas walked out of that prison—a free man—Jesus gave Himself so each of us can walk free as well.

That day was an agonizing, terrible day for Jesus, the Son of God. Were these not His own people? Some of these now screaming for His death were ones He had often seen, talked with, perhaps even dined with. These were people He knew, and some He knew well. Someday, when those of the house of Judah see the wounds in His hands, they will indignantly ask the Lamb, "Who did this to you?" (Zechariah 13:6). His prophetic reply is tinged with pain: "My wounds happened in the house of My friends." Jesus even calls Judas His "friend" (Matthew 26:50). Those "friends" include Peter, who denied Him; the Roman soldiers who executed Him; Pilate, who condemned Him; Caiaphas the High Priest, the Pharisees and Sadducees, and the Jerusalem mob who schemed and clamored to crucify Him—and His friends include us, those who will form His Bride (John 15:13-15), whose sins made His gruesome, excruciating death necessary.

Jesus is getting married soon. His Bride—the church of God—is bone of His bones, flesh of His flesh, (Genesis 2:23), one body with Him (Ephesians 5:27-32). Jesus gave Himself for her—*for us*. The converted children of God are said to "be in Christ" and to be one with Him. We are His body, and He is the Head of that body of believers.

If Jesus Barabbas was the murderer's name, perhaps Barabbas actually pictures those who are of Christ who are handed undeserved pardon. He may picture those of us who want to take on the name of Jesus but who have fallen short spiritually. We were guilty of sin and earned the death penalty. But the Eternal God saves. The Lord is salvation, which is what "Jesus" means. Thus, just as Barabbas was granted his life and freedom that day, the real Jesus, the real Son of the Father, steps up beside us and lovingly offers to take our place.

## A New Life

We are Barabbas. We have truly become "the sons of the Father" because of what Jesus did in our behalf. We have been released from the penalty of eternal death because our Savior and affianced Husband, Jesus the Christ, died in our stead.

All of this came about when the *true* Son of the Father took the place of Barabbas, who represents us all. As the despised Roman guards marched up to him, he was expecting the worse was about to begin. But instead, they broke off his heavy chains, dropping them to the stone floor with a clang that echoed through the corridors of the prison. Slowly, reality began to sink in: They were letting him go! Before long, Barabbas learned that the innocent Jesus of Nazareth, whom some considered a prophet, had given him a new lease on life—a fresh start, a new life. He was free! No crucifixion awaited this murderous, thieving rebel after all! He undoubtedly could not believe his "luck."

Because of the gracious act of Jesus, the true Son of His dear Father, the iron shackles have been broken from us, and we walk about as truly free men and women. His sacrifice and resurrection make it possible for God to give us of His Spirit, to bring us into His household, the Family of God. We are regenerated to a new life, and made part of the very Family in which Jesus is the Firstborn. The Father invites us to be His Son's Bride, whom Jesus is preparing for the Great Marriage Supper, giving of Himself totally for us, so that we can be totally free of sin as He is. When we pronounce our wedding vows to the King of kings, He will present us faultless, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing (Ephesians 5:25-27; Jude 24; II Peter 3:14).

This year, when we eat of the Passover bread, representing His body broken for us, and drink the wine, symbolizing His blood shed for the remission of our sins, let us remember who we are. We can be even more grateful for Jesus and the liberty and life He has given to each of us (Luke 4:18).

Yes, *we* are Barabbas, sons of our dear Father, children of God. But we are Barabbas *without* the condemnation, for there is no more condemnation when Jesus passed over our sins and paid the ultimate penalty for us. Did Barabbas reform as a result of Jesus' sacrifice of Himself for him? Nobody knows. But we have a say in our future. As Paul admonishes, because of what the Father and the Son have done undeservedly for us, "we should walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:4).