



## **Mark 15:6–15**

6 Now it was the custom at the festival to release a prisoner whom the people requested. 7 A man called Barabbas was in prison with the rebels 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 get Pilate to 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.

## **Reflection**

Pilate, the Roman Governor, the one who was supposed to be in control of Jerusalem, is caught between a rock and a

hard place. He doesn't like it, in fact he detests it, but he's been outfoxed by the chief priests and the teachers of the law. He knows they're playing him. They came to him at the break of day, many of them looked like they hadn't slept no doubt plotting and scheming this nasty turn of events all night. He didn't like them and they didn't like him. Theirs was marriage of convenience. He gave them free reign in the administration of their religion and power in the oversight of the Jewish people and in turn, they kept the people in check. An uneasy peace ensued in which religious uprisings were tolerably infrequent, which kept Pilate in a job. Caesar disliked disruptions to the *Pax Romana*, and would come down heavily on governors like Pilate who were unable to keep their precincts in line.

But Pilate was cornered. This man Jesus was leading no rebellion; it was clear from simply looking at him that he'd never held a sword. This was just some petty religious debate turned ugly. These devious Jews were trying to play him for a fool. And yet they had him. It was the Passover festival. A period in which the population of Jerusalem and surrounds swelled to up to six times its usual size. Zealous Jewish pilgrims would descend upon Jerusalem from the far reaches of Palestine and the Mediterranean to celebrate the Passover. It was a time of high alert. Jerusalem was like a tinderbox just waiting for a spark. Amongst the Jews was a deep-seated hatred of their Roman occupiers who'd taken over their Holy Land. And these feelings were never closer to the surface than at

the Passover, a religious festival that celebrated the deliverance of Israel from slavery to the Egyptians many centuries earlier. That rebellion was led by Moses. And both the Jewish pilgrims and the Roman authorities were on high alert for another Moses to rise up.

Like a tinderbox waiting for a spark. But this man Jesus was no threat to Pilate. The ones with the power to ignite these huge crowds stood before him, hurling open accusations at Jesus and veiled ones at him. Perhaps Luke and John are the clearest. In Luke,

2 ... they began to accuse him, saying, "We have found this man subverting our nation. He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar and claims

to be Messiah, a king.” Luke 23:2

Then in John,

the Jewish leaders kept shouting, “If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar.” John 19:12

They have him and they know it. Both Jesus and Pilate. Their leverage is the Passover festival, great crowds of religious pilgrims, and the tenuous nature of Pilate’s position. They have him. And he doesn’t like it, so he looks for an out.

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This wasn't a bad custom. It was a way to temper these vast crowds. To give them a little so that they wouldn't rise up and take everything. To keep them in check until they returned home after Passover.

“Which one do you want me to release to you: Jesus Barabbas, or Jesus who is called the Messiah?”

Shall I release Jesus Barabbas, the insurrectionist who'd committed murder in a recent uprising, or Jesus who is called the Messiah?

Now Jesus was a common enough name back in these times but there is still some irony as Pilate calls out to the great crowds to ask them which of the two Jesuses they would like released. Jesus means 'God saves'. Will 'God save Barabbas' or his one and only son?

Can you picture this extraordinary scene? In the strange fate of this moment, Jesus' life is given over to the thumbs up or thumbs down of a crowd. Who will they choose? A violent criminal or an innocent man?



The dagger is passed from the chief priests and elders to Pilate and now to the vast crowds. They each have a hand in Jesus' death.

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 get Pilate to 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.

There is no reasoning with them but Pilate tries, despite himself. Not out of any

love for Jesus, but simply out of disgust at having been outwitted by the chief priests and teachers of the law, he's played right into their hands.

14 'Why? What crime has he committed?' asked Pilate. But they shouted all the louder, 'Crucify him!'

Can you hear the crowds? Crucify him, crucify him. They're baying for Jesus' blood. The chief priests and elders have Jesus' blood on their hands. Pilate has Jesus' blood on his hands. And now this huge crowd of Jews have the blood of the son of God on their hands. Barabbas does too and so do we. Jesus died in his place and ours. If we hadn't sinned, Jesus would not have needed to die.

## Think & Pray

Stop for a moment to consider this extraordinary scene. When Jesus dies, Barabbas goes free. And in this way Barabbas represents us all. When Jesus dies, the rebel goes free, the sinners go free, we all go free. What an extraordinary prelude to the death of Jesus! Consider this exchange, a guilty man walks free. You and I walk scot-free because of Jesus. We're guilty. We know it. There is no hope for us outside of his grace; no hope for us outside of his love. And yet this is love, while we were still shaking our fists up and God, he sent his son to die for us. A son who is just like him. A son who loved his enemies enough to die for them. Enemies like us.

This is love: not that we loved God, but

that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. 1 John 4:10

When Jesus dies, Barabbas goes free. When you and I who were calling out with our lifestyles just as loudly as members of that crowd 'Crucify him, Crucify him!' when Jesus died, you and I were set free.

Praise him this morning. Thank him from the depths of your being for what he did for you on that cross. If you're wandering, return to him. If you've never met him, meet him today. If you love him, then show him and others the love you hold for him today.