

In my place

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Date: 02 April 2021

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[0 : 00] Tonight we've listened to the incredible events on the day that Jesus died. Matthew in his Gospel records what happened on that day in Jerusalem in the early 30s AD.

But as well as reporting how Jesus died, Matthew, who is a Gospel writer, also wants us to understand what it means. And so tonight I'd like us to focus on one part of the narrative because it gives us an amazing picture of what the death of Jesus means.

In the Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, the account of Jesus' death has got lots of characters. And one character comes up in them all and he's called Barabbas.

And it's as if he has a walk-on part because he appears from nowhere and then he disappears again. But his minor role illustrates the major meaning of the cross, the cross on which Jesus died. Because there's a swap, there's an exchange, and it takes place between Jesus and Barabbas. A substitution where Barabbas is set free and Jesus is crucified in his place.

[1 : 17] And so the day began, as we read at the beginning of Matthew chapter 27, with the Jewish religious leaders wanting to execute Jesus. They couldn't kill him, so they handed him over to the political leader, who was Pilate, because he could kill Jesus.

But Pilate knew Jesus was innocent and so wanted to release him. And just like today, politics and public pressure prevail, and Pilate, the Roman governor, caved in to the angry mob.

And it's in the middle of all of this that we are introduced to Barabbas. His name means son of the father. Bar means son.

Abba means father. Bar, Abbas, son of the father. Bar. Matthew gives his full name as Jesus, Barabbas.

And he was a notorious prisoner. Elsewhere, he's described as an insurrectionist and as a murderer. Barabbas was basically a terrorist, guilty of a capital offense.

[2 : 27] And that's why he was locked in a Roman prison awaiting his execution. But there was a custom. The custom of releasing a prisoner chosen by the people.

Pilate wanted to release Jesus, and so he gave the crowd a choice. Surely expecting that they would choose Jesus over Barabbas.

But his plan backfired. The religious leaders persuaded the crowd to release Barabbas and have Jesus executed. So Pilate asked them a second time, Which of the two do you want me to release to you?

Barabbas, they answered. And then so Pilate asked again, What shall I do then with Jesus, who is called the Messiah? They all answered, Crucify him.

So Pilate asked, Why? What crime has he committed? But they shouted all the louder, Crucify him. Now while all this was going on, Can you just imagine what it was like for Barabbas?

[3 : 39] His day began in his prison cell, And he was awaiting execution. He was getting the death sentence that he deserved. And there was no way back for him.

He didn't know when his crucifixion would be, But he knew it was coming. And I wonder, I wonder if he could hear an angry crowd outside shouting, Crucify him!

Crucify him! Perhaps he even heard his name being mentioned. And then his cell door suddenly swung open. So was that it for him?

Crucifixion. But instead of being sent to his death, Barabbas was released to the crowd. He must have been stunned at being set free.

But while Barabbas was released, Jesus was flogged. And that's what the Romans did to condemned criminals. Before they were crucified, They would be flogged.

[4 : 45] They would use the flagellum, Which was a whip, Laced with leather straps, That had bits of bone and metal in them. And when the prisoner was whipped, The straps would stick into their

flesh, And rip off chunks of their body.

I wonder if Barabbas watched as Jesus was flogged. And did he watch as Jesus was being crucified On the cross that was meant for him?

However it played out for Barabbas, He was well aware that Jesus died in his place. Jesus swapped places with him as his substitute.

Barabbas could literally say, Jesus died for me. In my place condemned, He stood, Sealed my pardon with his blood.

Jesus, who was innocent, Was crucified as if he were guilty. While Barabbas, who was guilty, Was released as if he was innocent.

[5 : 56] Barabbas, which means son of the father, Was set free, While Jesus, The true son of the father, Went to his death.

And it's an astounding exchange. And it expresses for us, What is at the very heart, Of the gospel message. It is a wonderful exchange, Where Jesus, The real son of the father, Gave up his life on the cross, In exchange for guilty sinners, Like us.

And so we should never think, That the death of Jesus, Has got nothing to do with me. By standing back as it were, As an onlooker, Watching at this event, In history, Even walking past the cross, Or the message of Jesus, Or the message of Easter, Every single year, Thinking and believing, This has got no relevance for me.

But it does. That's why Barabbas illustrates perfectly, The position that we are all in. And so while we may not be a murderer, Like Barabbas, None of us can claim to be innocent, Before God.

The Bible tells us, That we are all guilty. And deep down, We know it. And the problem is, That because of our guilt, And our sin, We stand condemned, Before God.

[7 : 30] We sin against God, By what we do, And in what we fail to do. And yet our crime, Goes even deeper still, Because in our hearts, We are all insurrectionists, Like Barabbas was.

Which means we all, Rebel against God's authority, Over our lives. We all reject, Our rightful ruler. And that's why, We deserve to be punished, For our sin, And rebellion against him.

We have got a death sentence, And if we're not pardoned, Then we must face, God's punishment. Which is separation, From him, Forever in hell.

And there's nothing, Absolutely nothing, We can do, To set ourselves free. We're trapped, As it were, In a spiritual prison, Enslaved to our sin, Just waiting, For the day, When we must face, God's judgment, And accept, The punishment, That we deserve.

That's why, The substitution of Jesus, For Barabbas, Wasn't just good news, For Barabbas, It is good news, For humanity.

[8 : 44] Because what Jesus did, In place of Barabbas, He came, To do for you, And for me. Jesus died, On the cross, For our sins.

He was the perfect, Obedient, Son of the Father, Who willingly, Became our substitute, On the cross. So while the crowd, Chose the wrong, Son of the Father, God had already, Chosen his son, To die in our place.

Paul expresses it, Like this, In second Corinthians, Chapter five, He says, God made him, Who had no sin, To be sin for us, So that in him, We might become, The righteousness, Of God.

And that is the great, Exchange, That is at the very, Heart, Of Christianity. Jesus, Who was innocent, And had committed, No sin, Was treated, As if he, Was a sinner, And bore, God's punishment, On the cross, So that we, The guilty, Might become, Righteous, Before God.

So the good news, Is that when we turn, From our sin, And we place our trust, In our saviour, Jesus, Then we can know, That Jesus died, In my, Place.

[10 : 14] And so it's not just, Barabbas, Who can say, Jesus died, For me. We can say it too. I wonder, If you can say it, Can you say, Jesus died, In my place, So that I, Can be forgiven, And set free, To go and live, For God.

Barabbas gives us, A striking picture, Of what the death, Of Jesus means, And it reflects, For us, The beauty, Of the gospel, Of Jesus Christ.

And so today, We can call it, Good Friday. It's a good Friday, For us, When we know, That Jesus died, In my place, So that I, Can be free.

Thank you.