

Who was Barabbas in the Bible?

Barabbas is mentioned in all four gospels of the New Testament: Matthew 27:15-26; Mark 15:6-15; Luke 23:18-24; and John 18:40. His life intersects that of Christ at the trial of Jesus.

Jesus was standing before Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor who had already declared Jesus innocent of anything worthy of death (Luke 23:15). Pilate knew that Jesus was being railroaded and it was “out of self-interest that the chief priests had handed Jesus over to him” (Mark 15:10), so he looked for a way to release Jesus and still keep the peace. Pilate offered the mob a choice: the release of Jesus or the release of Barabbas, a well-known criminal who had been imprisoned “for an insurrection in the city, and for murder” (Luke 23:19).

The release of a Jewish prisoner was customary before the feast of Passover (Mark 15:6). The Roman governor granted clemency to one criminal as an act of goodwill toward the Jews whom he governed. The choice Pilate set before them could not have been more clear-cut: a high-profile killer and rabble-rouser who was unquestionably guilty, or a teacher and miracle-worker who was demonstrably innocent. The crowd chose Barabbas to be released.

Pilate seems to have been surprised at the crowd’s insistence that Barabbas be set free instead of Jesus. The governor stated that the charges against Jesus were baseless (Luke 23:14) and appealed to the crowd three times to choose sensibly (verses 18-22). “But with loud shouts they insistently demanded that he be crucified, and their shouts prevailed” (verse 23). Pilate released Barabbas and handed over Jesus to be scourged and crucified (verse 25).

In some manuscripts of Matthew 27:16-17, Barabbas is referred to as “Jesus Barabbas” (meaning “Jesus, son of Abba [Father]”). If Barabbas was also called “Jesus,” that would make Pilate’s offer to the crowd even more spiritually loaded. The choice was between Jesus, the Son of the Father; and Jesus, the Son of God. However, since many manuscripts do not contain the name “Jesus Barabbas,” we cannot be certain that was his name.

The story of Barabbas and his release from condemnation is a remarkable parallel to the story of every believer. We stood guilty before God and deserving of death (Romans 3:23; 6:23a). But then, due to no influence of our own, Jesus was chosen to die in our stead. He, the Innocent One, bore the punishment we rightly deserved. We, like Barabbas, were allowed to go free with no condemnation (Romans 8:1). And Jesus “suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God” (1 Peter 3:18, ESV).

What happened to Barabbas after his release? The Bible gives no clue, and secular history does not help. Did he go back to his life of crime? Was he grateful? Did he eventually become a Christian? Was he affected at all by the prisoner exchange? No one knows. But the choices available to Barabbas are available to us all: surrender to God in grateful acknowledgment of what Christ has done for us, or spurn the gift and continue living apart from the Lord.