
Lesson 49

Jesus or Barabbas

The Scripture Lesson

Matthew 27:15-25

After King Herod was finished mocking Jesus, he sent Him back to Pilate. Pilate was not at all happy to see Jesus back in his court. He was afraid of this man. And he was afraid of the people.

While he was trying to think of some way to escape his problem, someone reminded him of the custom that every year, at the Passover, the governor must release to the people a prisoner whom they would choose. Pilate immediately saw that custom as a possible way to win the release of Jesus. He will give the people a choice between two prisoners. He will let them choose between *Jesus* and *Barabbas*, who was the worst criminal that was in jail at that time. Barabbas had been convicted of *murder*. Surely, thought Pilate, the people will *not* vote for a *murderer*.

But as soon as Pilate announced the two names, the chief priests immediately started to move among the people, to persuade them to vote for Barabbas. While they were doing that, Pilate received an urgent message from his wife. She begged him not to condemn Jesus, for, she said, she had suffered much because of a dream she had had about this righteous man. This frightened Pilate even more. He hoped, however, that

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the problem would soon be over, for the people will vote to release Jesus.

But when Pilate returned to the people and asked them to declare their choice, they all cried, “Barabbas!”

Pilate could hardly believe his ears! He asked them, “What shall I do with Jesus?” And they all cried, “Crucify him! Crucify him!”

Did the people know what they were doing? Oh, they could not see as plainly as we can that Jesus was the Son of God. But they knew that Barabbas was a murderer. And they knew that Jesus preached the good news of salvation, and that He did many wonderful works that proved that He was sent from God. So they were choosing between God and the world. And they preferred the world.

Would *we* have done that, if we were there? Would we have joined with the crowd in choosing for Barabbas rather than Christ? Would we have been ashamed of Jesus, as many of His followers were? We like to think, do we not, that *we* are better than *they*. But the truth is that we are not. Do we not prove every day that our choice is also so often for the world? If confessing His name, for example, means that people will mock us, do we not keep silent, as if we do not even know Him?

Isaiah, when he prophesied of the Messiah, said, “He is despised and rejected of men; ... and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not.” Yes, by nature our choice is also for Barabbas. That, in fact, is exactly why Christ came into the world — to take on Himself the sins of His people, who, in themselves, prefer the world.

The Scourging and Mock Coronation

John 19:1-12

To Pilate’s complete surprise, the people had voted to have Barabbas, rather than Jesus, set free. This was not at all what *Pilate* wanted, but since he himself had given the people this choice, he figured that he now had to give them what they wanted. So he ordered his soldiers to go and let Barabbas, the murderer, out of prison.

But the people also wanted *Jesus to be killed*. And Pilate had not yet said he would do *that*. He decided to try one more thing to get them to agree to have Jesus set free too. He will have Jesus scourged (or whipped) by the soldiers. So, right in front of all the people those soldiers beat Jesus till His back was all cut and bleeding.

That was a terrible thing. It was terrible also that the people *enjoyed* seeing it. But do you know that even this was a fulfillment of prophecy? Isaiah had foretold that the Messiah would give “his back to the smiters.” Isaiah also told *why* that would happen. He said, “With his stripes *we* are healed.” Jesus suffered all of this for *us*. When we see how much Jesus suffered, therefore, we should learn to hate our *sins*. It was our sins that made it necessary for Jesus to suffer so.

After Jesus was beaten, the soldiers led Him into the Praetorium. There they made a mockery of Him. So you are a king? they sneered. Well, then, let’s have a coronation ceremony. We will crown you king. So they took an old, red soldier’s coat and put that on Him for a kingly robe. They put a stick into His hand for a scepter. And they made a crown of some twigs that had thorns in them, and pressed that onto His head. *Now*, they said, You are a king. Then they passed before Him and bowed the knee, saying, Hail, King of

the Jews; and they took the stick from His hand and hit Him, and spit in His face.

After all of this terrible, terrible treatment of Jesus, Pilate went out to the people and, pointing to Jesus, he said, “Behold the man!” You would think that the people would have felt sorry for Jesus; but they did not. They only cried out the more, “Crucify him, crucify him.”

Again Pilate said, But I find no fault in Him; according to Roman law, this man is *innocent*. Then the chief priests answered, *Our* law says He must die, because He made Himself the Son of God.

That made Pilate even more afraid. What terrible thing might happen to him for treating the *Son of God* the way he did? So Pilate led Jesus back into the Praetorium, and asked Him where He had come from. Pilate wanted to know if Jesus was really from heaven, or if He was only a man like everyone else. But Jesus did not answer him. Pilate became angry and asked, How do you dare not to answer my question? Don’t you know that I have power to kill you or to save you alive? Then Jesus said to him, That isn’t true; you have *no* power over Me except that which is given to you from *God*.

Once more Pilate went out to the people to tell them that he wanted to let Jesus go. But the people shouted, If you let this man go, when you know that He says He’s a king, then you’re no friend of Caesar.

This was exactly what Pilate was afraid of. He was afraid that the people might say bad things about him to Caesar, and then Caesar would put him out of his job. And Pilate was not willing to lose his job to save Jesus. So he decided at last that Jesus must die.

Memory Work

Group A

Isaiah 53:5 “But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.”

Group B

Isaiah 53:5b “The chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.”

ACTIVITIES

This paper has been prepared in the hope that it will be used by students of all ages. The activities are designed so that the oldest will be challenged, and the youngest will find some of it within reach. Parents should encourage their children to attempt only what they can handle without frustration. For some that will be much, for others little.

DO YOU AGREE?

If you do, write Yes; if you do not, write No.

- _____ 1. There was a custom in Judea at this time that every year, at the Passover, the governor would release a prisoner of the people's choice.
- _____ 2. Pilate's wife urged him to give the people what they wanted, so that they would not make trouble for Pilate in the future.
- _____ 3. Pilate was disappointed that the people, in their choice between Jesus and Barabbas, voted for the release of Barabbas.
- _____ 4. When Pilate then asked the people what should be done with Jesus, they cried, Let Him be crucified.
- _____ 5. After scourging Jesus, the soldiers led Him into the Praetorium and held a mock coronation ceremony.
- _____ 6. They put a reed into His hand for a scepter and placed on His head one of Herod's old crowns.
- _____ 7. Then they bowed the knee before Him in pretended worship, and, to show their utter contempt, spit on Him.
- _____ 8. The people did not feel sorry for Jesus when they saw Him bloodied and bruised, but they continued to demand that He be crucified.
- _____ 9. When Pilate resisted, the leaders finally brought up their real charge against Jesus, namely, that He claimed to be the Son of God.
- _____ 10. Being an unbelieving Gentile, Pilate was not at all concerned about that charge.

_____ 11. Jesus warned Pilate that his guilt was greater than that of the Jews, because he alone had to make the final decision.

_____ 12. When Pilate again sought to release Jesus, the Jews charged him with disloyalty to Caesar, if he would let this man go.

QUESTIONS FOR YOUNGER READERS

1. What custom at the Passover did Pilate use to try to get the people to agree to Jesus' release? Can you tell why Pilate made a man like *Barabbas* one of the two choices?
2. What did the leaders of the people do as soon as Pilate announced the two names?
3. While that was going on, Pilate was given an urgent message from his wife. What was that message? How did that message affect Pilate?
4. Whom did the people choose for release? Did they understand what they were doing?
5. The people made a very wicked choice. How do we show every day that we are no better than they?
6. How did Pilate use the scourging of Jesus as another attempt to win His *release*? What prophecy of Isaiah was fulfilled by that scourging?
7. What did the soldiers do to Jesus in the Praetorium?
8. When the people saw Jesus bleeding and bruised, what did they say?
9. What new charge did the leaders bring against Jesus when they saw Pilate still resisting their will? Why did Pilate then take Jesus back into the Praetorium for more questioning?
10. What did Jesus explain to Pilate in the Praetorium?
11. What did the people mean when they said to Pilate, "If thou let this man go, thou art not Caesar's friend"?

COMPLETING SENTENCES

1. With Jesus back in his court, Pilate continued to look for ways to persuade the people that Jesus should be set free. He found another opportunity in connection with the custom of releasing to them at the time of the Passover one _____, whomsoever they _____. Pilate decided to nominate Jesus, along with the worst criminal in custody, and then let the people choose between them. It happened that there was a man named Barabbas in prison, for having made _____ and for having committed _____ (Mark 15:6-8). Surely, thought Pilate, with a choice like *that*, the Jews could not possibly want freedom for a *murderer*. So he confidently put the question to them: “Whom will ye that I _____ unto you? _____, or Jesus which is called _____?” (Matt. 27:17).

2. It seems that there was a short interval granted for the people to consider the option. And during that time Pilate received an urgent message from his _____, who warned, “Have thou nothing to do with that _____ man; for I have _____ many things this day in a _____ because of him” (Matt. 27:19).

3. During that interval also, the chief priests and elders circulated among the people and _____ them that they should vote for the release of Barabbas and to _____ Jesus (Matt. 27:20).

4. So successful were the Sanhedrists that, when Pilate at length asked the people, “Whether of the _____ will ye that I _____ unto you?” (Matt. 27:21), they cried out all at _____, saying, “_____ with this man, and release unto us _____” (Luke 23:18).

5. The people could not at that time have had a clear understanding of Jesus’ deity. But they did know that Barabbas was a murderer. And they did know that Jesus proclaimed the gospel of the kingdom of heaven and had done many won-

ders, which testified that He was approved by God. And now, as they stand before God’s question, “What will you do with My Son?” the people choose *for* the world and *against* God. For when Pilate asked, “What shall I do then with _____ which is called Christ?” they _____ said unto him, “Let him be _____!” (Matt. 27:22, 23).

6. Pilate was beginning to see that he could _____ nothing, and that, rather, a _____ was made. He remained, however, afraid of Jesus, and wished therefore publicly to shift responsibility for a death sentence from himself to the people. A dramatic moment it was in the court when this judge took _____, and washed his _____ before the _____, saying, “I am _____ of the blood of this _____ person; see _____ to it” (Matt. 27:24).

7. Thus did Pilate vainly try to keep from his own hands the stain, the guilt, of Jesus’ blood. Incredibly, the Jews had no qualms about taking on themselves all of the responsibility. “His blood be upon _____,” they say, “and on our _____” (Matt. 27:25). And indeed such would be the case. In another 40 years thousands of Jews would perish in the destruction that came upon their nation, many of them being crucified within sight of Jerusalem. But it will be, finally, in the great day of Judgment that that blood will be required of those Jews, as it will be required also of the millions of others who, in one way or another, reject the Christ of God.

8. Pilate then gave the order for the release of Barabbas (Matt. 27:26). But he apparently did not yet abandon all hope of freeing Jesus too. For he returned once more to the idea of having Jesus scourged — in the hope that this cruel abuse of Jesus would satisfy the bloodthirsty Sanhedrists. The scourging itself seems to have taken place in full view of the multitude. But then, no doubt under Pilate’s orders, the _____ led Jesus back into the hall called the _____ (Mark 15:16). There

the soldiers were allowed to show their contempt of this man who thought He was a king. They _____ Him, and put on Him a _____ robe — likely just an old, faded soldier's coat. Then they made a crown of _____ to press on His head, and put a _____ in His right hand for a scepter. Then they proceeded to bow the _____ before Him, saying, "_____, King of the _____!" Not satisfied with that, they _____ upon Him, and grabbed the _____ and used it to smite Him on the _____ (Matt. 27:28-30).

9. Pilate then himself went out to the people and said, "Behold, I bring him forth to you, that ye may know that I find no _____ in him" — whereupon Jesus was led out of the Praetorium, wearing still the crown of _____ and the purple _____, bloodied, bruised, and covered with spit. "_____ the _____," Pilate said (John 19:4, 5).

10. It was not necessary for Pilate to elaborate. For one thing, the pathetic figure of Jesus seemed enough to arouse pity in the hardest of hearts. For another, anyone who could be spat upon at will was a threat to the position of no one in this world. "Behold the man!" The leaders of the Jews, however, were no more sympathetic than was Pilate. And the truth is that they knew very well that Jesus had no political ambitions. They hated Him for what He *was*. And the sight of Him served only to rekindle their rage against Him. They therefore cried out again saying, "_____ him, _____ him!" (John 19:6). And they were apparently able again also to sweep the mob right along with them.

11. Totally frustrated, Pilate replied, "Take _____ him, and _____ him, for _____ find no fault in him." The chief priests, recognizing this as irony, were afraid for a moment that Pilate's irritation with them was making him tougher. Afraid of losing their prey, they felt compelled to renew their attack against Jesus.

But what to say? Pilate had already three times declared Jesus innocent before Roman law. As a last resort they are driven to their own law — to the charge, on the basis of which they themselves had condemned Jesus: "We have a _____, and by our law he ought to _____, because he made himself the _____ of _____" (John 19:6, 7).

12. Pilate had already been afraid of Jesus; and when he heard _____ saying of the Sanhedrists, he was even _____ afraid. Though the wicked refuse to acknowledge Jehovah as God, they do nevertheless know Him, and are afraid. And now Pilate faces the question: What will you do with the *Son of God* — if He stands in the way of your own political ambitions? Pilate was afraid. He therefore went again into the _____ hall and asked Jesus, "_____ art thou?" (John 19:8, 9).

13. Throughout His trial, Jesus had spoken only when it was necessary to clarify matters. Jesus had already told Pilate all that he needed to know. To this further question, therefore, Jesus gave Pilate _____ answer. Pilate, apparently angered by Jesus' silence, asked, "Speakest thou not unto _____? knowest thou not that I have _____ to _____ thee, and have _____ to _____ thee?" This demanded an answer. In the face of Pilate's bold claim to absolute power, Jesus must witness to the sovereignty of *God* in the affairs of men. He therefore replied, "Thou couldest have _____ power at all against me, except it were given thee from _____" (John 19:9-11).

14. Jesus added, "Therefore he that _____ me unto thee hath the _____ sin." Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin had far more knowledge of Jesus and of His ministry than did Pilate. They would be judged by God accordingly. Pilate, however, understood correctly that Jesus was not absolving the governor of all guilt. Pilate, too, would be held guilty before God for his judgment of Jesus. Fear of that verdict must be the reason why Pilate from _____ sought to _____ Jesus (John 19:11, 12).

15. The chief priests and elders, however, knew where Pilate's weak point was. And they were ready to press it. "If thou let this man _____," they said, "Thou art not _____ friend; whosoever maketh himself a _____ speaketh against _____." The implication was clear. Pilate's own loyalty might be called into question were he to declare this man innocent. Pilate's job, and perhaps his very life, were at stake.

QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT

1. Concerning the matter of the release of a prisoner at the time of the Passover feast, we gather that it was the governor who would make a nomination, and that the people (i.e., not the *leaders*, the Sanhedrin, but the common people themselves) would vote for one from that nomination. Concerning this part of the trial before Pilate, consider the following:

a. For Pilate to put Jesus and Barabbas on the same ballot was really outrageous. Do you see why?

b. We read in Matthew 27:20 that the leaders "persuaded the multitude." Can you imagine what arguments they may have used to convince the people that they should vote to have a criminal like Barabbas released?

c. It was for his own ends that Pilate thought to make this wicked nomination. And yet it was God who determined that the people be faced with this choice. Why, do you suppose, did He do that?

d. What the Jews did that day was incredibly, appallingly wicked. How are we today faced every day anew with what is really the same choice as that which Pilate gave to the multitude 2,000 years ago?

2. In preaching to another multitude in the temple, the apostle Peter would later remind the people, "Ye denied the Holy One and the Just, and desired a murderer to be granted unto you" (Acts 3:14). But he added, "I wot that through ignorance ye did it" (Acts 3:17). They had, however, sufficient knowledge so that Peter could before call them, in effect, murderers (see Acts 2:23). Can you tell what they *did* know, and what they did *not* know?

3. "Let him be crucified." That was the cry of the people, at the urging of their leaders. Read John 12:28-33 and Matthew 26:3-5. Do you see how the clamor of the people in Matthew 27:22 is an example of God's fulfilling His will, even *through* the wickedness of men?

4. The message sent to Pilate by his wife was used of the Lord, surely, to impress on Pilate's mind the *innocence* of Jesus. It no doubt also filled him with greater fear. And the fear, though it did not affect the *outcome* of the trial, may very well have affected its *proceedings*. Can you see how the trial might have gone differently, after the people's choice for Barabbas, if it had not been for the dream of Pilate's wife?

5. Pilate washed his hands before the people (Matt. 27:24) in order to reduce his own responsibility for the injustice of condemning Jesus to death. Ordinarily Pilate would have worried not at all about shedding Jewish blood, guilty or innocent. What reasons can you think of for his fear on *this* occasion? Can you explain how the act of washing his hands could have been another attempt on Pilate's part, to turn the people away from their determination to kill Jesus?

6. The wicked Jews were perfectly willing to accept responsibility for Jesus' death. In the judgment day, who, do you think, will be held accountable for Jesus' death?

7. Can you explain how Pilate's having Jesus scourged was also an attempt to gain Jesus' release?

8. Explain as well as you can what was implied in Pilate's "Behold the man!" (John 19:5).

9. The Jews had tried to convince Pilate that Jesus was somehow a *political* threat. Pilate demonstrated that He was a threat to no one's position in this world. Why would that not at all satisfy the Jews?

10. What did Pilate mean by saying to the Jews, "Take ye him and crucify him: for I find no fault in him" (John 19:6)?

11. Can you explain why Jesus did *not* answer Pilate's question in John 19:9, and why He *did* answer Pilate's question of John 19:10?

12. Read Romans 3:1, 2. Does that passage help you understand Jesus' words to Pilate that "he that delivered me unto thee hath the greater sin"?

13. If Pilate was completely persuaded that Jesus was no political threat whatever, why was he so unnerved by the Jews' cry, "If thou let this man go, thou art not Caesar's friend"?