

A Foretaste of Freedom

Christmas Choices – Part III

Matthew 27

Introduction

I received an email the other day regarding Thomas, a young man from our church who is enrolled at The Master's Seminary in Los Angeles. He had been witnessing to some of the homeless people that lived around the Los Angeles library, but had not made much progress.

One afternoon, around 1:00, he walked out of the library and noticed, in broad daylight, a gang of young toughs beating up on an old homeless man. Thomas went over to them and told them to stop – which they did.

A few moments later, as Thomas was standing there on the sidewalk, one of the gang came up behind him and hit him in the head with a brick. It severely cut his ear and knocked him down. The other young guys jumped on him and began to beat him. It was only when the already injured homeless man crawled on top of Thomas to protect him from their fists that these gang members ran away.

An ambulance was called. The emergency personnel thought Thomas was just another gang member and did very little to help him. In fact, they told him to stop complaining about his ear, which they promised would never heal completely. When he got to the hospital, they refused to see him until he became unconscious. After having twenty-eight stitches in his ear, he was released. However, because his wallet had been stolen, along with his computer and cell phone, he had no money and no way to get back to school. A staff member at the hospital gave him ten dollars and a cab took him back to seminary. There he was given proper treatment by a doctor who belonged to Grace Community Church.

The gentlemen who sent this email to me added a line at the bottom saying that the homeless in that area will probably listen to Thomas now. I bet they will.

Thomas is currently doing some mission work in Honduras, so I called his mother to ask how he is doing. She said he is recovering.

I read recently that one of our soldiers in Iraq actually sacrificed his life for the four other soldiers

riding in the back of an army truck. A live hand-grenade was thrown into the truck by militants. There was hardly enough time to think, much less escape. However, one of the soldiers, still in his teens, jumped toward the grenade, covering it with his body just as it exploded. He was instantly killed, but his comrades lived.

There is something about a story of sacrifice and risk for someone else's life; of suffering for a total stranger who is unable to offer anything in return; of giving life in order that others may live.

Without a doubt, the greatest illustration of sacrifice – death for life; physical harm in exchange for physical freedom – is often overlooked in our rush through the narrative of Christ's life. The story of Christmas is idealized and sanitized for consumers who want a little Christmas cheer, but do not want to bother with the reality of the incarnation.

The Christmas story is not really all that pretty. It commenced in a dug out animal shelter filled with the smell of manure and animal feed as a peasant girl cried out in labor. It culminated on a blood-soaked cross where that child grew up to give His life. It climaxed in a borrowed tomb that was abandoned by the resurrected Lord. It is a story of sacrifice – one life for many.

Paul wrote to Timothy and put it this way,

For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all . . . (I Timothy 2:5-6a)

The word "ransom" (antlutron) was used by the Greeks to refer to paying money to release someone. It was used to refer to paying a ransom to have prisoners of war released, or paying the ransom price to have slaves released.¹

Jesus Christ used the word Himself, as recorded in Matthew 20:28, when He announced to His disciples,

. . . the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.

Jesus' life would be the payment that would allow prisoners of sin to be released.

By the way, the ransom price was not paid to the devil, for the devil did not demand payment. God owed the devil nothing. God the Father was owed everything. It is against Him that we sin. It is the Father who demands payment for the penalty of sin. The Father's wrath must be satisfied against the sin of the world. Jesus Christ will pay the ransom price to the Father.

This theological truth; this choice of the Triune God; this incarnation purpose was graphically illustrated in the life of one man who occupied a unique place in the incarnation saga – one man who literally was set free as Jesus Christ died in his place on his cross. To me, there is hardly a better chapter in this divine drama than that of the exchange of the two prisoners – the release of one called Barabbas and the sentence of the other to death row.

Turn with me to the gospel by Matthew to the scene which so wonderfully illustrates the purpose of Christmas to begin with; the reason Christ was born in the first place.

The Prisoner Exchange

In Matthew chapter 27, there are four prominent parties involved in this prisoner exchange:

1. Pilate;
2. Jesus Christ;
3. Barabbas;
4. the crowd.

Matthew 27:2 informs us that Jesus was bound and delivered to Pilate the governor.

Pilate became a rather prominent political leader in first-century Israel. While Galilee was still under the authority of Herod Antipas – the same Herod who will have John the Baptist beheaded – Pilate was appointed governor of Judea.

Pilate established a reputation as a merciless man who cared little for the Jewish people he governed. He was married to Caesar Augustus's daughter, which obviously gave him political clout and quite a bit of arrogance. He had been warned already on one occasion by Rome, not to stir up the religious sensitivities of the Jews; to keep the peace.

Notice the encounter Pilate now has with Jesus Christ, in Matthew 27:11-12,

Now Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor questioned Him, saying, "Are You the King of the Jews?" And Jesus said

to him, "It is as you say." And while He was being accused by the chief priests and elders, He did not answer.

In other words, Jesus refused to defend Himself against His accusers – fulfilling the words Isaiah had written of Him centuries earlier,

He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He did not open His mouth; like a lamb that is led to slaughter, and like a sheep that is silent before its shearers, so He did not open His mouth. (Isaiah 53:7)

At some point, in the midst of this mock trial, Pilate's wife got a message to him, saying, according to Matthew 27:19, "Don't do anything to this Man; I've had a dream and He is a just Man."

In other words, "He's telling the truth."

He's telling the truth about what?!

John's gospel informs us that the chief priests told Pilate that Jesus must be condemned because He said He was the Son of God. (John 19:7)

Luke's gospel adds that Pilate heard the people condemn Jesus because Jesus claimed to be the King. (Luke 23:2)

Now Pilate gets a message from his wife informing him that she had had a dream that Jesus was innocent, so perhaps these claims were true.

The Romans were incredibly superstitious, which only made matters worse. They were given to placing great value on premonitions, soothsayers and dreams. They were never secure with their pantheon of gods; they were always afraid of offending them.

Pilate's wife knew well her grandfather's special fear of thunder and lightning. I have just finished reading the biography of Caesar Augustus by Anthony Everitt, in which he recounts that Augustus always carried with him a piece of sealskin as a good luck charm – like a rabbit's foot – against thunderstorms. On one occasion a flash of lightning scorched his carriage and killed a slave who was walking just ahead of him, carrying a torch. In thanks for this narrow escape, Augustus built the magnificent Temple of Jupiter Tonans (the god of thunder), in the capital city of Rome; he visited there often.ⁱⁱ

Pilate did not really want to mess with Jesus. The question was how he could keep the people from rioting and let Jesus go at the same time.

Matthew 27:15-16 gives his clever solution.

Now at the feast the governor was accustomed to release for the people any one prisoner whom they wanted. At that time they were holding a notorious prisoner, called Barabbas.

This was a stroke of courtroom genius.

A custom was carried out at Passover by the Jews. The *Mishnah*, a Jewish commentary on customs, informs us that this practice was to illustrate their deliverance from bondage in Egypt by the blood of the Passover lambs that died in order to protect their homes from the death angel.

The Jews were effectively saying, “As we celebrate the death of the lambs and our former deliverance, we will allow one prisoner to be released, illustrating that the ransom for his release has been paid in the blood of the lamb.”

Can you believe this? What irony. No, what incredibly meaningful planning by God.

Jesus, the Lamb of God, will be killed and He will physically represent the deliverance of one prisoner who will be released by the ransom of His blood. In this, there are both spiritual and physical illustrations of a ransom being paid and a prisoner being set free.

Pilate expected people to allow Jesus to go free. However, they surprised him with their choice. Look at Matthew 27:21-23.

. . . the governor said to them, “Which of the two do you want me to release for you?” And they said, “Barabbas.”

Pilate said to them, “Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?” They all said, “Crucify Him!”

And he said, “Why, what evil has He done?” But they kept shouting all the more, saying, “Crucify Him!”

The irony of this scene is all the more dumbfounding and at the same time deeply moving when you understand a little more about Barabbas.

Barabbas is really not a name – it is an Aramaic term. The first part of the expression, “bar,” simply means “son,” and the last part of the expression, “abbas,” means “father”.ⁱⁱⁱ

Perhaps you remember reading in scripture similar terms, like “Simon Barjona” in Matthew 16:17. This tells us that Simon was the son of Jonah.

If we followed this custom today, my sons would be Benjamin Barstephen and Seth Barstephen, which

would really sound strange at graduations. My name would be Stephen Barkeith because my father’s name is Keith.

This criminal is called Barabbas, which means “son of a father,” which is really strange. It does not tell us his father’s name at all and we still do not know what his name was.

What is so significant about this man that he is simply referred to as the “son of a father”?

One biblical historian answered the riddle by pointing out that a custom existed in the first and second centuries in which the greatest and most revered rabbis of the Jewish nation were affectionately referred to as simply “abbas”. They were the “fathers” of the people.

Barabbas was the son of an “abba” – a widely known and respected rabbi. Barabbas was a preacher’s kid.

There is an unwritten volume of grief and sorrow behind the scenes of this man who sits in jail awaiting death.

Mark’s gospel called Barabbas an “insurrectionist” (Mark 15:7). This meant he had joined a growing number of men who hated Roman rule and was passionate about overthrowing the yoke of Rome in Palestine.

Barabbas was zealous for his people, and he was tired of waiting for the One his father had preached long and hard about – the coming Redeemer who would rescue Israel from Rome. He was tired of waiting and thought his dagger could accomplish more than a missing Messiah could. It was time to act.

Mark also informs us that Barabbas was a murderer (Mark 15:7). He had already killed; he had Roman blood on his sword.

Matthew 27:16 adds that Barabbas was “notorious”. This word implies great favor with the people. He was, for many, a hero; a redeemer of sorts.

His name informs us of the heritage that Barabbas had abandoned. The gospel writers inform us of his mission and his passion.

Matthew lets us know that he was finally captured by Rome. Oh how glad they were to finally capture this famous murderer; this insurrectionist; this famous son of a famous rabbi, who had given Rome a great deal of trouble.

However, what was his name?

In some of the oldest versions of the Syriac and Armenian translations of the New Testament, his name was given. It was a name that was later dropped, more than likely out of a desire to dissociate that precious name from a notorious criminal. Why? Because his name was “Insous,” or Jesus.

Included in Origen’s writings, from the late second century, this criminal leader is named “Ἰησοῦς,” or Barabbas.^{iv}

In Matthew’s account, it is interesting that Pilate consistently distinguished one man from the other by referring to Jesus as the one who is called Christ.

Why? Because in the days of Christ, Jesus (Ἰησοῦς) was a common name. It was the Old Testament counterpart for Joshua and meant “redeemer; deliverer”.

Lots of little Jewish boys were named Jesus. It was the hope of the parents that their little boy would grow up and be a deliverer – a strong godly leader.

So when this faithful rabbi and his wife had a little boy, they were so thrilled at God’s goodness and their hopes were so stirred for their son’s future that they decided to name him “Yeshua,” or Jesus – deliverer.

So Pilate is asking the people, “Who do you want released – Jesus, the one who is called Christ, or the one who is called ‘the preacher’s son’?”

Imagine the irony of the question, “Which Jesus do you want to keep – the son of the rabbi or the Son of God?”

I agree with one commentator that Barabbas was probably a hero among the Jews. He was their Robin Hood; a patriot who had already succeeded in killing Roman soldiers. He was the kind of Jesus they were waiting for; he was the kind of Messiah they wanted.

Pilate shot himself in the foot. He now had to release this famous outlaw leader of insurrection and hand over to the mob the One he knew was innocent of any wrong.

A woman was doing her last-minute Christmas shopping at a crowded mall. She was tired of fighting the crowds. She was tired of standing in lines. She was tired of fighting her way down long aisles looking for a gift that had sold out days before.

Her arms were full of bulky packages when an elevator door opened. It was full. The occupants of the elevator grudgingly tightened ranks to allow a small space for her and her load.

As the doors closed, she blurted out, “Whoever is responsible for this whole Christmas thing ought to be arrested and shot!”

A few others nodded their heads or grunted in agreement.

Then, from somewhere in the back of the elevator, came a single voice that said, “Don’t worry. They already crucified Him.”^v

What kind of Jesus do you want? Who have you chosen to be king of your life?

Can you imagine Barabbas in his cell?

The Praetorium is no more than 1500 feet from the Tower of Antonia where Barabbas is being held. If you recall the conversation between Pilate and the crowd, Barabbas may have been able to hear the crowd, but he would not have been able to hear Pilate.

This meant Barabbas heard the crowd scream his name, “Barabbas,” in answer to Pilate’s question, “Whom do you want released?” Then, Barabbas heard the crowd scream the next phrase, in answer to Pilate’s second question, which he may not have heard, “What do you want me to do with Jesus the Christ?” The crowd screamed, “Crucify Him! . . . Crucify Him!”

In his prison cell, Barabbas may well have heard only two things – “Barabbas” and “Crucify Him!” “Barabbas . . . Crucify Him!”

As hardened as Barabbas was, he must have grown faint. He may have stared at the palms of his hands in growing horror of the awaiting agony. He had seen crucifixions. He knew of their agony. [His father had been right all along . . . it was futile to fight the empire of Rome.] But then he heard the sound of the key in the lock, felt even greater terror, and suddenly he was released from his chains and told . . . he was free! [Free!] He was probably in a daze when he emerged into the sunlight. Slowly the truth would unfold for him: Jesus Christ was dying in his place.^{vi}

Donald Grey Barnhouse added his imagination to this scene as he wrote,

Stunned, Barabbas walks nearer to the center of the scene and sees the procession begin toward Golgotha. What must have been his thoughts? He hears the echoing blows of the hammer striking the nails, and looks down at his own hands. He had thought that this would be his day. He had thought that the nails would tear his flesh. And here he is

breathing the air of springtime and looking at the dark cloud that is gathering in the sky. Did he say, "Those hammer blows were meant for me, but He is dying in my place. They crucified [Him] . . . He took my place . . . He died instead of me." ?^{vii}

Conclusion

Ladies and gentlemen, this deliverance of undeserving sinners is being reproduced spiritually every day. This is the gospel. Jesus came to give His life a ransom for many – for those who will believe.

What did Barabbas have to do? Walk out of prison and accept his freedom. That is it!

Why? Because his freedom had been paid by the Lamb who literally hung on his cross.

What an illustration of Christ's redemptive mission this is. And to this day, salvation comes to those who see themselves in Barabbas, as:

- guilty of sin;
- disobedient of the law;
- guilty of crimes and misdemeanors;
- a disappointment of a righteous heritage;
- caught by the law;
- bound to the penalty of sin;
- imprisoned without hope;
- having a death sentence to be served;
- able to receive an unexpected release;
- able to be part of a prisoner exchange;
- receiving a message that another man's death is the ransom note for your life;
- able to choose to accept this message and walk into freedom and forgiveness, released from the guilt of your crimes.

Barnhouse once said that Christianity can be expressed in three simple phrases:

1. We deserved hell;
2. Jesus Christ took our hell;
3. There is nothing left for us but heaven.

In your life and mine, believer, there has been a prisoner exchange.

Matthew 27 is a foretaste of freedom illustrated for all who accept Christ's exchanged life for their own.

This is what Christ chose; this is why He came!

- His death for our life;
- His perfection for our depravity;
- His purity for our guilt;
- His righteousness for our unworthiness;
- His glory for our shame.

What a Savior!

What a Savior!

*"Man of Sorrows," what a name
For the Son of God, who came
Ruined sinners to reclaim.
Hallelujah! What a Savior!*

*Bearing shame and scoffing rude,
In my place condemned He stood;
Sealed my pardon with His blood.
Hallelujah! What a Savior!*

*When He comes, our glorious King,
All His ransomed home to bring,
Then anew this song we'll sing:
Hallelujah! What a Savior!*

Is Jesus your Savior? Will you receive Him today?

Without His cross, Christmas would be meaningless. It would not matter that He had been born if He refused to die.

Would you leave your prison cell of sin and walk into the freedom of His forgiveness which He offers you as a gift? It is a gift for which He paid the price – the ransom price has been paid.

*. . . as many as receive Him, to them He gives
the right to become children of God . . .
(John 1:12 paraphrased)*

Let the prisoner exchange take place for you now – His death for your everlasting life.

ⁱ Geoffrey Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Eerdmans, 1985), p. 545.

ⁱⁱ Anthony Everitt, *Augustus* (Random House, 2006), p. 212.

ⁱⁱⁱ James Boice, *The Gospel of John* (Zondervan, 1985), p. 1301.

^{iv} R. Kent Hughes, *John: That You May Believe* (Crossway, 1999), p. 426.

^v *Homiletics*, vol. 18 (Nov/Dec 2006).

^{vi} Hughes, p. 427.

^{vii} Boice, p. 1303.