



The King's Ransom

Matthew 20:28

Text

Matthew 27:11-26

Topic

Pontius Pilate is stunned when the Jews demand he release to them the notorious criminal bar-Abbas instead of Jesus

Title

"Notorius B.A.R."

Introduction

"I am Spartacus!" is one of the truly memorable moments in movie history.

I'm not referencing the more recent TV series, which I have not seen. I'm talking about the 1960 film, starring Kirk Douglas as the Roman slave, a gladiator, who leads other gladiators in a rebellion against Rome.

1 of 16

Matthew 27:11-27

"Notorius B.A.R."

The rebellion fails and, in the end, the Romans say they will release their captives, instead of crucifying them, and kill only Spartacus, if he will identify himself.

As he is standing to surrender himself to save the others, two of his fellow slaves stand with him, and shout, "I am Spartacus!" Then, one-by-one, all the thousand or so captive slaves say the same - identifying with him as their leader.

There is a hilarious viral-video, by the way, in which a customer at a local Starbucks orders a latte and gives "Spartacus" as his name. When the barista calls out his name, by prearrangement, a troop of actors in the shop start shouting out, "I am Spartacus!," and they continue until a guy in a Roman slave costume comes in and says, "No, I *am* Spartacus!," and takes the coffee.

We haven't read our text yet, but most of you are already familiar with the historical figure, Bar-Abbas. He's the notorious insurrectionist and murderer, condemned to be crucified, who is instead released by Pontius Pilate.

Knowing what you do about Bar-Abbas, would anyone have stood up for him, and said, "I am Bar-Abbas!"?

One did. It was Jesus.

He didn't shout, "I am Bar-Abbas!" But He certainly took his place that day.

You might think it wasn't His decision; but it was. He had come into the world for just that moment - to take the place of Bar-Abbas and die instead, as his substitute.

Not just for Bar-Abbas:

Heb 2:9 ... Jesus... was made a little lower than the angels, for the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that He, by the grace of God, **might taste death for everyone.**

Everyone? That's what it says - making Bar-Abbas an illustration to us of the whole human race.

As we work through these verses, let's think about two things: #1 You Are Bar-Abbas And Deserve To Die, and #2 You Are Bar-Abbas For Whom Jesus Died.

#1 You Are Bar-Abbas And Deserve To Die

(v11-19)

Bible doctrine can be hard to get a handle on. For example the Bible teaches what theologians call the substitutionary atonement of Jesus Christ.

What's that? The Scriptures teach that all men are sinners (Romans 3:9-18, 23). The penalty for our sin is death; Romans 6:23 reads, "For the wages of sin is death..."

Jesus Christ died in our place when He was crucified on the Cross. We deserved to be the ones placed on that Cross to die because we are the ones who are sinners.

But Christ took the punishment on Himself in our place - He substituted Himself for us and took what we rightly deserved. "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (Second Corinthians 5:21).

As a result, our sins are atoned for; we are "at-one" again with God.

Those few comments merely scratch the surface regarding the doctrine. But to cement the overall concept in our spiritual understanding, the Bible give us the illustration of a substitute in the case of Bar-Abbas.

Jesus *literally* took his place on the Cross. I say that Bar-Abbas, then, represents the human race. **I** am Bar-Abbas; **you** are Bar-Abbas; the **entire human race** is Bar-Abbas.

Mat 27:11 Now Jesus stood before the governor. And the governor asked Him, saying, "Are You the King of the Jews?" Jesus said to him, "It is as you say."

I mentioned last week that Jesus had a total of six trials - three before the Jews, and three before Romans.

Pilate, after a preliminary hearing of the case and upon learning that Jesus was from Galilee, as a friendly gesture, sent Him to Herod, who was in Jerusalem at the time. Herod, after encountering complete silence from Jesus, sent Him back to Pilate to be judged.

We're picking up the story at Jesus' third and final Roman trial.

The Jews had told Pilate Jesus was guilty of three political offenses: 1) That He was a revolutionary; 2) That He told people to not pay taxes to Rome; and, 3) That He claimed to be a King.

Matthew concentrates on the kingship of Jesus because he was originally writing for a Jewish audience, and Jesus had come offering them the Kingdom of Heaven on the earth.

Jesus answers in the affirmative. He was, and is, the King of the Jews.

One thing to notice, however, is that this didn't seem to trouble Pilate in the least. He understood that Jesus was no political King, not at His first coming anyway; and, therefore, He posed no threat to the Roman government.

Mat 27:12 And while He was being accused by the chief priests and elders, He answered nothing.

Mat 27:13 Then Pilate said to Him, "Do You not hear how many things they testify against You?"

Mat 27:14 But He answered him not one word, so that the governor marveled greatly.

Jesus wasn't there to answer accusations. He didn't need to defend Himself. He was on His way to the Cross, innocent and sinless, to die for the sins of the world.

Once the Jewish leaders officially rejected Jesus as their King, the promised kingdom was put on hold. Jesus will still establish it - a real, earthly, one-thousand year Kingdom of Heaven on the earth. But it will have to wait for His Second Coming.

Pilate "marveled greatly." Remember that Jesus had been beaten by the Jews before they brought Him to Pilate. It was clear He was being falsely accused. Yet He had no malice towards the Jews. He was not looking to be vindicated. He was still willing, in fact, to own up to being their King.

Who would want subjects like them? Or, for that matter, followers like me, or you? I'm not saying that to put us down; but it's true - we are mostly less than stellar subjects of our Lord. Yet He has promised to complete the work He has started in each of us; and to present us faultless, and beautiful, to our Father in Heaven.

Mat 27:15 Now at the feast the governor was accustomed to releasing to the multitude one prisoner whom they wished.

Mat 27:16 And at that time they had a notorious prisoner called Bar-Abbas.

I'm guessing they usually released a less dangerous prisoner. From the various Gospel accounts, and statements in the Book of Acts, we gather that Bar-Abbas was an insurrectionist who had committed murder in a failed rebellion and was due to be executed. He was a terrorist with blood on his hands.

He likely was not popular with the Jews. After all, Pilate hoped that the crowd would ask him to release Jesus, *not* Bar-Abbas - so he obviously wouldn't bring out someone they liked, or who he thought had any chance of being picked over Jesus.

Mat 27:17 Therefore, when they had gathered together, Pilate said to them, "Whom do you want me to release to you? Bar-Abbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?"

Mat 27:18 For he knew that they had handed Him over because of envy.

Pilate was no dummy. He was a shrewd, and history says, cruel, governor. He was playing what he thought to be a masterful hand. Surely they could not prefer Bar-Abbas to Jesus; no rational person would make that choice.

Pilate believed he had won. Man, was he in for a surprise!

Mat 27:19 While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent to him, saying, "Have nothing to do with that just Man, for I have suffered many things today in a dream because of Him."

Pressure from the little misses. It all points to Jesus' absolute innocence. Should He go to the Cross, to be crucified, it would be the death of an innocent man in place of a guilty man.

And that's just what was about to unfold.

A couple of very interesting things about Bar-Abbas. First of all, Bar-Abbas doesn't really seem to be a name. It literally is "bar," *son of*, "abbas," *the father*.

It's ambiguous. This guy is a son of some father. Now the local Jews, and the Romans, knew who he was; but he has this totally generic name.

He's John Doe; he's every man. That's the point: **He represents every man.**

You say, "Wait a minute! Every man isn't a murderer." We kind of are:

1. For one thing, in His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus established that if we are even angry in our heart, it is as sinful as murder. We are all angry in our hearts, because we find we have, residing in us, a sin nature. It's inherited from our original parents, Adam and Eve.
2. For another thing, until we are Christians, we are in the devil's kingdom, and he is called a "murderer from the beginning" in

the Gospel of John (8:44). Even if we do no actual murder, we are at enmity with God, in our natural state; we are His enemies. We are spiritual insurrectionists.

Here is something enormously interesting. It's also a little unusual, so I'll quote a solid source.

Bar-Abbas was also known as **Jesus** bar-Abbas, according to the New Revised Standard Version, based on a Greek textual variant of Matthew 27:15-18 found in a few manuscripts.

The verse reads, "At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Jesus Bar-Abbas. So after they had gathered, Pilate said to them, 'Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus Bar-Abbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?'" (NRSV).

It is thought by some that the criminal's full name was "Jesus Bar-Abbas," but that some later copyists dropped the "Jesus" in his name out of respect for our Lord Jesus Christ.

Another source says:

Many textual scholars believe the double name "Jesus Bar-Abbas" was the original reading. They suggest that "Jesus" was omitted from several Greek manuscripts of Matthew out of reverence. The church father Origen (d. 254) said, "In the whole range of the scriptures we know that no one who is a sinner [is called] Jesus."

Whether or not Bar-Abbas was "Jesus" Bar-Abbas, it's clear that Matthew's intention is for us to see Jesus Christ, the Son of God, taking his place as a Substitute.

In doing so, it represents Jesus taking *my* place, and *your* place, and the place of *every* human being ever conceived.

I already quoted the verse in Hebrews that says Jesus tasted death for every man. I'm fond of quoting John 12:32, where Jesus promised, "if I be lifted up I will draw all men unto Myself." The lifting-up He was talking about was His death on the Cross.

What I'm saying is that His substitutionary atonement was sufficient for all men; for everyone. It is unlimited in its scope.

As First John 2:2 says, "He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world" (NIV).

First Timothy 2:4 says that "God desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth," and the following verses continue, "For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time (First Timothy 2:5-6).

We are told elsewhere, "the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 11:10), "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" (First Timothy 1:9), "the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world" (First John 4:14), God is "the Savior of all people" (First Timothy 4:10), Jesus is "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29), who "died for the ungodly" (Romans 5:6), and "died for all" (Second Corinthians 5:14-15) when "in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them" (Second Corinthians 5:19).

Are all men, therefore, saved by His substitutionary atonement? No, of course not. As we read in First Timothy 4:10, He is the Savior of all men - *especially* those who believe.

One doctrinal statement I read puts it like this:

Out of love, God sacrificed His only Son for the world so that those from the world who trust in Jesus and his atoning sacrifice will benefit from that atoning sacrifice and be saved while those from the world who reject that atoning sacrifice in unbelief will not benefit from it but remain condemned and perish.

His atoning death on the Cross is sufficient to save all who will believe in Him.

This unlimited atonement is illustrated for us a little later, at His crucifixion. You remember that Jesus was crucified between two thieves? It is probable that they were colleagues of Bar-Abbas and that all three were going to be crucified together.

Commentators point out that the word for "thieves" can mean insurrectionists; and, since Rome did not crucify thieves (it wasn't a capital crime), these guys were most likely just like Bar-Abbas.

Jesus was substituted for Bar-Abbas. Because Jesus was "lifted up" on the Cross, one of the thieves believed, and was saved; one did not believe, and remained lost and damned.

Could the second thief have been saved? *Of course!* Jesus' death as his substitute was sufficient. But he was **not** saved, because he did not believe.

The fact that we are sinners means that we deserve to die. We deserve the eternal punishment of the Lake of Fire. But Jesus was delivered up for our offenses. He was crucified for our sins.

He was Bar-Abbas' Substitute. He was everyone's Substitute, because we all deserve to die.

#2 You Are Bar-Abbas For Whom Jesus Died

(v20-26)

Are you ready to say, "I am Bar-Abbas?" Donald Grey Barnhouse said, "Bar-Abbas was the only man in the world who could say that Jesus Christ took his physical place. But [all who are Christians] can say that Jesus Christ took [their] spiritual place."

Mat 27:20 But the chief priests and elders persuaded the multitudes that they should ask for Bar-Abbas and destroy Jesus.
Mat 27:21 The governor answered and said to them, "Which of the two do you want me to release to you?" They said, "Bar-Abbas!"

All you can say about this is **zugzwang**.

It's a German word for a situation found in chess and other games, where one player is put at a disadvantage because he must make a move when he would prefer to pass and not to move.

The fact that the player is compelled to move means that his position will become significantly weaker.

A player is said to be "in zugzwang" when any possible move will worsen his position.

Mat 27:22 Pilate said to them, "What then shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" They all said to him, "Let Him be crucified!"

He never, in the proverbial million years, expected the crowd to ask for Bar-Abbas. The governor was losing his composure. He was a fool to ask the crowd a question; it only showed weakness, and kept him back-peddling.

Mat 27:23 Then the governor said, "Why, what evil has He done?" But they cried out all the more, saying, "Let Him be crucified!"

Not that we need it, but this is more testimony to the absolute innocence of Jesus.

Mat 27:24 When Pilate saw that he could not prevail at all, but rather that a tumult was rising, he took water and washed his hands before the multitude, saying, "I am innocent of the blood of this just Person. You see to it."

The hand-washing was not a Roman custom. It's likely that Pilate was trying to mock the Jews, who did practice ritual hand washing. It was a last-ditch effort to retain some political dignity - a gesture intended to say to the Jews, "you are meticulous about external rituals, like hand washing, while simultaneously committing heinous acts of evil."

In fact, Pilate was committing a heinous act of evil - knowingly condemning a man he had declared to be innocent simply because he wanted to insure his political future.

Here is an amazing factoid. The Greek Orthodox and Coptic faiths canonized Pilate and his wife as saints. June 25 is *Saint Pontius Pilate Day*.

There is a tradition, totally unsubstantiated, that he and Mrs. Pilate were converted at the tomb of Jesus; and that they became closet-Christians.

I'd like to think they got saved but it's just silly to speculate. He bears responsibility for sending Jesus to His death; he was just as guilty as the Jews.

In fact, venerating him only fuels anti-semitism - as if the Jews alone killed Christ. In my humble opinion, canonizing Pilate is a move to shift the blame and guilt totally on the Jews, and to justify anti-semitism.

Mat 27:25 And all the people answered and said, "His blood be on us and on our children."

They had no idea how true that would be. In 70AD, Titus and the Roman legions would siege, then destroy, Jerusalem. The people and their children would bleed and die.

Josephus, the first century historian, claims that 1.1 million people were killed during the siege, of which a majority were Jewish, and that another 97,000 were captured and enslaved.

Quoting him:

The slaughter within was even more dreadful than the spectacle from without. Men and women, old and young, insurgents and priests, those who fought and those who entreated mercy, were hewn down in indiscriminate carnage. The number of the slain exceeded that of the slayers. The legionaries had to clamber over heaps of dead to carry on the work of extermination.

To say nothing of the centuries of dispersion of the Jews throughout the world - mostly the recipients of terrible persecution, leading up to the Holocaust.

Mat 27:26 Then he released Bar-Abbas to them; and when he had scourged Jesus, he delivered Him to be crucified.

The Romans scourged by stripping down the prisoner and tying him to a post. He would be brutally whipped with an instrument that had pieces of lead and sharp bone embedded in the leather. Unlike the more merciful Jewish beating, which only allowed a maximum of forty lashes, the Roman scourging could go on indefinitely. It was often their way of securing a confession.

Donald Grey Barnhouse speculated about Bar-Abbas. Here is what he wrote:

Picture Bar-Abbas sitting in the prison, staring at his hands, which were soon to be pierced by nails, and shuddering at any sound of hammering that might remind him with horror of his own impending crucifixion.

Suddenly he hears a crowd roaring outside the prison. There are angry voices. "Crucify him! Crucify him!" He thinks he hears his own name. Then a jailer comes to unlock the door of his cell.

Bar-Abbas thinks that the time for his execution has come, but instead the jailer tells him that he is being set free. The crowd has called for his release. Jesus of Nazareth is to die instead.

Stunned, Bar-Abbas joins the processional that is making its way to Calvary and watches as Jesus is crucified. He hears the sound of the hammer and knows that the blows that are fastening Jesus to the rough wooden cross were meant for him. He sees the cross lifted high into place and knows that he is the one who should be dying on it.

Jesus cries, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

The centurion who has commanded the execution party exclaims, "Surely this man was the Son of God!" (Mark 15:39).

Bar-Abbas must have been saying, "That man took my place. I am the one who should have died. I am the condemned murderer. That man did nothing wrong. He is dying for me."

Bar-Abbas and Jesus changed places. The murderer's bonds, curse, disgrace, and mortal agony were transferred to the righteous Jesus; while the liberty, innocence, safety, and well-being of the innocent Son of God became the lot of the murderer.

I am Bar-Abbas; you are Bar-Abbas; everyone is Bar-Abbas.

But Jesus took your place, on the Cross. And that leads into the second illustration.

Seeing Him, nailed there, which murderer are you - the one who by believing will be with Him in Heaven and for eternity?

Or the one who will die in your sins and perish in the Lake of Fire?

It's a choice you are enabled to make as the grace of God works upon your heart to free your will to believe in Jesus Christ.

If you are not a believer, the Holy Spirit is here to convict you of sin, and of your need for God to give you His righteousness, in order to avoid the judgment that is coming.

For the majority of us, who are saved, it is always appropriate to remember that,

Col 1:21 [we] who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now He has reconciled
Col 1:22 in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy, and blameless, and above reproach in His sight...