

light from the *past* / Dewayne Bryant, M.A.

Who are you?

He sat in a dark prison cell, awaiting his impending execution. He could hear the mob gathering outside. At first, he smiled. Clearly, the people were upset. Soon the rancorous mob tuned itself into a single, unified message. Crucify him. Confusion crept across his face. "I've spent my life working for them. They looked up to me, wanted their sons to be like me. Some of them wanted to be me! I've given them my life, and this is my reward?" An excruciating death is all the thanks he would get for trying to help his people.

He jumped as keys rattled in the lock on the prison door. Two Roman guards stood ready to escort him outside. He slowly rose from his seat, his iron shackles clanking together. He took a deep breath and made his way into a dim hallway. A flood of sunshine poured into the hall as the guards opened the prison door. As his eyes adjusted to the bright sunlight, he saw Pontius Pilate seated with his wife. He had been in constant trouble with both his superiors and his subjects. Pilate was a cruel man who embodied everything he opposed in Rome.

He noticed another man, standing opposite him. It seemed someone had taken a particular dislike to this one. He looked exhausted. His eyes were bloodshot, his face swollen and bloodied. Curious. He didn't appear to be anyone special.

Pilate asked the crowd, "Whom do you want me to release for you: Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?" The crowd called for Barabbas. "Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?"

Crucify Him.

Barabbas looked over at the man who was about to take his place. The justly accused peered intently at the unjustly condemned. They had never met and would never meet again.

We don't know very much about Barabbas other than what is provided by the gospel accounts. He was an insurrectionist, a zealot who fought against the Roman government. Some have suggested that he might have been a kind of terrorist. He violently resisted the Roman government and was condemned to die for it. The downtrodden Jewish people saw him as a freedom fighter. The Romans saw him as a criminal of the state.

Pilate never scored well in political opinion polls. He began his governorship of Judea by angering the priestly aristocracy and their fellow Jews in Jerusalem. He brought imperial customs into the city and built an aqueduct using funds from the Temple treasury. In the gospel accounts, he follows the custom of releasing one prisoner, but he was not

required by Roman law to comply. He may have done so simply to avoid any further irritation of local Jewish officials.

Lessons from Roman Law

There were two kinds of acquittal under Roman law. The first was *indulgentia*, pardoning the condemned. What Pilate seems to have had in mind was *abolitio*, acquitting the accused before judgment. The governor seems to have no particular interest in condemning Jesus. The "crimes" with which Jesus was charged would have fallen on deaf Roman ears. He would have much preferred condemning Barabbas, who had been involved in armed conflict against Roman authorities as an insurrectionist. Sadly, the mob chose the real world revolutionary over the eternal Redeemer.

Christianity has maintained that Christ offered a *substitutionary atonement* on the Cross. Under the sacrificial system in ancient Israel, the faithful would offer an animal as a sin offering on his behalf. The worshipper would place his hand upon the head of the animal, symbolizing the transfer of guilt to the beast. The animal would then have its throat cut, and be burned on the altar. There was no question in the mind of the worshipper what the penalty of sin was. The animal was taking the penalty he rightly deserved: death.

Jesus Christ did more than just take the place of one man. He paid the price of sin from Adam until present day—for all who would become His followers.

We live in a culture where Christians have forgotten what it means to have been bought with a price (cf. 1 Corinthians 6:20). Church attendance is seen as the equivalent of righteous living. Good deeds are done as long as they aren't too difficult. Some congregations are little more than religious social clubs. The noble title of "Christian" has become void of any personal commitment. Even more disturbing is the lackadaisical attitude taken toward vital issues. God is no longer the Creator of Heaven and Earth, but merely the "big guy upstairs." Christians bear an "Oh what a friend I have in Jesus" attitude where God's Son is demoted to being a pal or buddy. Sin is little more than a mistake, a slip-up, or an accident. For many, the Bible is still the Good Book, but too few can explain why.

What if the voices of the first and second century martyrs could speak today? Christians lived for God and were murdered for it. They helplessly watched their family members die. Believers took precautions to hide from the authorities and avoid detection, which meant a swift

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trip to prison, then to the executioner. They would be ashamed of 21st century cupcake Christians.

If we truly understand the nature of Christ's sacrifice, it should motivate us to action. Nowhere in the New Testament does saving faith exist apart from deeds. James talks about a dead faith that does nothing but sit on the couch. He asks, "Can that faith save him?" (James 2:14b). The obvious answer is no. Simple intellectual consent, the kind of faith that the demons have (cf. 2:19), is not enough. Only a faith that is willing to express its devotion in deed is true. Otherwise, it is merely dead orthodoxy.

True faith will recognize what Christ accomplished on the Cross. Jesus said, "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends" (John 15:13). Then He went out and did exactly that. His humiliation began not on the night of His arrest, but with His very incarnation. The Son of God lived a life of servitude, with His own creation treating Him with contempt. But what have we done for Him? It all begins with recognizing who we are, what He did, and how we should act in response.

The Greek philosopher Socrates taught that the unexamined life isn't worth living. It is advice every Christian would do well to heed. Take a close look in the nearest mirror. It won't take long to find the insurrectionist within. It isn't hard to see the revolutionary who sins in defiance of God, whose place was taken by Christ on the Cross two thousand years ago. In the immortal words of the cartoon character Pogo, "We have met the enemy, and he is us."

Call me Barabbas. ▲



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