

Barabbas

Matthew 27:15-26

Let me remind you of the big picture this afternoon as we continue on in our study of the events that led up to Jesus' crucifixion and death. The big picture is God's picture, which is not merely a recitation of the wicked and sinful acts of men in all these events that brought about Jesus' death. Rather the big picture is what we might call the necessity of all these events. The necessity of Jesus' crucifixion and death, a necessity brought about by the pre-ordained plan and eternal purpose of God established before the creation of the world. It was God's plan, God's purpose that Jesus would die for the sins of his people, and thus the word "necessity."

When Jesus appeared to his disciples after his resurrection he explained that even further.

Luke 24:36 "Now as they said these things, Jesus Himself stood in the midst of them, and said to them, "Peace to you." 37 But they were terrified and frightened, and supposed they had seen a spirit. 38 And He said to them, "Why are you troubled? And why do doubts arise in your hearts?...44 Then He said to them, "These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me." 45 And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures. 46 Then He said to them, "Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, 47 and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. 48 And you are witnesses of these things."

"It was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the

dead the third day," necessary so that the gospel could be preached in his name. The Apostle Paul would speak of that same necessity later on in his ministry,

Acts 17:2 "Then Paul, as his custom was, went in to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, 3 explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ." 4 And some of them were persuaded; and a great multitude of the devout Greeks, and not a few of the leading women, joined Paul and Silas."

It had to happen. It was necessary. That's the big picture, God's perspective on all of this. And with that perspective, our focus in our text today becomes the wickedness of the wicked people who were guilty of bringing about the crucifixion, both the Jewish leaders and people along with the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate. And they all would be rightly condemned for this sin.

Acts 2:22 "Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves also know— 23 Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death."

Peter would later proclaim to the Jewish council and high priest,

Acts 5:30 "The God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom you murdered by hanging on a tree."

With that awareness, then, of God's purpose being fulfilled perfectly and completely, let's look at the particular players in this great drama, with a focus upon their guilt and impending condemnation. What is obvious first is,

I. A MISSED OPPORTUNITY FOR JUDICIAL GRACE.

That is, of course, putting it rather mildly. A missed opportunity. The occasion is likely the passover, the “feast” mentioned in verse 15. And according to that verse, there was a custom for the Roman governor to show grace to the Jewish people, to release one prisoner. It’s something like the constitutional practice in our day of a presidential pardon. In the best of cases, that power is used to show grace, judicial grace, to someone convicted of some particular crime or offense. And it is within the power of our president to grant a pardon, a release from the judicial sentence. All references to politics aside, that is designed to be an act of grace. A pardon. And the Roman governor was accustomed to that very practice, which, in general terms, we can say is a good thing. It’s a good thing for a demonstration of grace. It’s a good thing for a civil authority to show grace in the name of religious faith and practice. It’s also politically expedient, then and now, an obvious way to gain the favor of some group or another. So Pilate thought he had an opportunity to escape his duty of making a judgment about Jesus. He would just release him at the feast.

Even in that, however, note,

A. The insult to Jesus.

v.16

Jesus is associated with “a notorious prisoner.” He is linked together, in the same category as Barabbas. We know that Barabbas was a bandit, a robber, according to John 18:40. He was an insurrectionist, guilty of murder in the anarchy of his political rebellion, according to Mark 15:7 and Luke 23:19. A murderer and a thief, a common criminal, we might say, a convict whose sentence and judicial condemnation was justified. He was guilty in every way, according to the consistent testimony of the

gospel writers. So here is Barabbas and here is Jesus. Pilate links them together and says to the crowds, “Which one shall I release?” Which of these convicts shall I release?

I think it is likely that Pilate expected them to pick Jesus, after all, just five days earlier Jesus had entered Jerusalem to the praise and adoration of the people,

Mat. 21:6 “So the disciples went and did as Jesus commanded them. 7 They brought the donkey and the colt, laid their clothes on them, and set Him on them. 8 And a very great multitude spread their clothes on the road; others cut down branches from the trees and spread them on the road. 9 Then the multitudes who went before and those who followed cried out, saying: “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!’ Hosanna in the highest!” 10 And when He had come into Jerusalem, all the city was moved, saying, “Who is this?” 11 So the multitudes said, “This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth of Galilee.”

But the people didn’t choose Jesus. They chose Barabbas to be freed. And Matthew tells us why, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, that Pilate knew of their evil motive. Matthew’s gospel tells us about,

B. The evidence of an evil motive.

v.17-18

Envy. Pilate knew their heart, he observed and understood their motive. Interesting choice of the single word used to summarize their sin, one we might not treat quite so seriously. Envy, which is really malice. Ill-will, a feeling of displeasure upon hearing about the advantage or prosperity of others. It is the evil spirit by which you wish harm and deprivation upon someone else, and the word is used frequently in the NT within the list of

characteristic sins even among God's people.

Their motive was evil, and Pilate knew it. They resented Jesus. They were spiteful of his popularity and his independence from them and their authority. They hated him, and they showed it. Yet, even in that all of that, we see

C. The vindication of Jesus' innocence.

He was vindicated. He was shown to be innocent, recognized to be righteous. First, by Pilate's own wife! Such a curious reference in verse 19, a rather astounding bit of advice she gives to her husband, as Matthew records it.

v.19

"Have nothing to do with him," she said. Don't get involved, she warned him. The implication seems to be, don't bring him into court. And certainly, don't condemn him. Have nothing to do with him, which was very wise advice in the context of the relationship between the Roman authorities and the Jewish leaders. The advice was something along the lines of, "stay out of the church's business." And for clarity, Matthew adds her description and evaluation of Jesus as "that just man." The ESV translates "that righteous man." That's what "just" means. It means righteous. Innocent. And with all the opposition Jesus receives from the Jewish leaders and crowds, the first lady, as we would refer to her, acknowledges his innocence.

Jesus gains further vindication by Pilate with his pointed question to the crowd in,

v.23 "Then the governor said, "Why, what evil has He done?"

Pilate knows Jesus is innocent, and makes that observation plain with that question. And that is important for us, as well, with the theological awareness of the need for a perfect, sinless

sacrifice for sin. Only the sacrifice of the life of one who is perfectly innocent could satisfy the demands of God's wrath and justice. And so we read this encouragement,

1 Peter 1:18 "...knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, 19 but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot."

Heb. 7:25 "Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them. 26 For such a High Priest was fitting for us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and has become higher than the heavens; 27 who does not need daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the people's, for this He did once for all when He offered up Himself. 28 For the law appoints as high priests men who have weakness, but the word of the oath, which came after the law, appoints the Son who has been perfected forever."

Heb. 9:11 "But Christ came as High Priest of the good things to come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation. 12 Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. 13 For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, 14 how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?"

And so, according to God's perfect and all-encompassing work of providence, the unbelieving and wicked ruler named Pontius Pilate gives us the evidence of Jesus' work being acceptable to his Father as the sacrifice of atonement for our

sins. Jesus was not a martyr, dying to provide inspiration for his people. He is our propitiation, actually accomplishing what he set out to do, to satisfy the demands of the justice of God's wrath.

2 Cor. 5:21 "For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him."

And yet, despite that declaration of his innocence, what we see is

D. The wicked conspiracy against Jesus.

v.20-21

The Jewish leaders convinced the fickle crowd to turn against Jesus as well. When the offer was given to release a prisoner, they cried out for Barabbas to be set free. And with regard to Jesus, the words are revealed very plainly, "Let Him be crucified!" With that, we see not only a missed opportunity for judicial grace, but also,

II. A MISSED OPPORTUNITY FOR TRUE JUSTICE.

True justice, of course, would have meant the release of the innocent as well as the punishment of the guilty. And there is little doubt that Pilate knew who was innocent and who was guilty. He gives some evidence of understanding Jesus' innocence and according to the book of Acts, was expecting to let Jesus go free. Again, that would have been true justice. We read in Acts 3 that Pilate intended to release Jesus.

Acts 3:13 'The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified His Servant Jesus, whom you delivered up and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he was determined to let Him go. 14 But you denied the Holy One and the Just, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, 15 and killed the Prince of life, whom God raised from the dead, of which we are witnesses.'

What stands out in that is,

A. A demonstration of vindictive cruelty by the mob.

v.22

Luke's gospel provides these additional details.

Luke 23:13 Then Pilate, when he had called together the chief priests, the rulers, and the people, 14 said to them, "You have brought this Man to me, as one who misleads the people. And indeed, having examined Him in your presence, I have found no fault in this Man concerning those things of which you accuse Him; 15 no, neither did Herod, for I sent you back to him; and indeed nothing deserving of death has been done by Him. 16 I will therefore chastise Him and release Him" 17 (for it was necessary for him to release one to them at the feast). 18 And they all cried out at once, saying, "Away with this Man, and release to us Barabbas"— 19 who had been thrown into prison for a certain rebellion made in the city, and for murder. 20 Pilate, therefore, wishing to release Jesus, again called out to them. 21 But they shouted, saying, "Crucify Him, crucify Him!" 22 Then he said to them the third time, "Why, what evil has He done? I have found no reason for death in Him. I will therefore chastise Him and let Him go." 23 But they were insistent, demanding with loud voices that He be crucified. And the voices of these men and of the chief priests prevailed. 24 So Pilate gave sentence that it should be as they requested. 25 And he released to them the one they requested, who for rebellion and murder had been thrown into prison; but he delivered Jesus to their will."

Crucify him! That's all the crowd could say. Kill him. When five days earlier the crowds had been worshipping him with those words I read earlier, from Matthew 21, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD! Hosanna in the highest!"... "This is Jesus, the prophet from

Nazareth of Galilee.”

Why did they do that? Because of their evil, vindictive cruelty are the words I’ve suggested to describe that evil. It was just the high priest and the Sanhedrin Council. It was the mob, the crowds, the mob. They all missed this opportunity to see true justice in the vindication of the innocent man, Jesus. Instead, they demanded his execution. And Pilate couldn’t escape that guilt either, despite his claims of innocence.

v.24

Those are empty words,

B. An unrighteousness pretense of innocence by Pilate.

He wasn’t a slave to the people, he was their ruler, their governor. But he gave them what they wanted, despite his awareness of Jesus’ innocence. So Jesus’ blood is most certainly upon his as well, despite his declaration of innocence. He can’t abdicate his responsibility, especially when he knew of Jesus’ innocence so clearly. He can’t wash his hands of the whole matter, for they are clearly stained with blood. He can’t lay all the blame upon the crowd, for he shared in their guilt and, ultimately, their condemnation. His words are empty, meaningless. “I am innocent of the blood of this just Person. You see to it.”

All of that brings us to recognize,

III. THE SELF-CONDEMNATION OF THE WICKED.

Which to say, the judgment of God is righteous. The condemnation of the wicked is deserved. They have earned it. It is not unfair. And we see that with reference both to the mob and to Pilate. The words should make you shudder, that people would be so carelessly willing to pronounce judgment upon themselves in this way.

A. The self-condemnation of the mob.

v.25

Now, I expect many or most of the crowd gave little thought to what they were saying. They didn’t consider the implications of what those words really meant. Likely they didn’t even believe those words, for surely they couldn’t really be thinking that they would actually suffer the consequences of punishment and justice themselves. Empty, careless words. But devastating in their actual meaning. In their exercise of vindictive cruelty, the mob was condemning themselves for their own sin by their own words. Even if they didn’t believe the words to be true, even if they didn’t really think that the implications of those words would actually apply to them, they did. Jesus’ blood would be on their hands!

And they, the people of Israel, the nation of Israel, would be cut off from God. As a nation, they would no longer be the nation of God, the people of God. Speaking of Jesus, Peter preached to the people of Israel on the day of Pentecost,

Acts 2:23 “Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death; 24 whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by it.”

Jesus’ blood was on their hands. They couldn’t wash it off. Thus Paul would later write of that nation of Israel in their unbelief,

Rom. 11:8 “Just as it is written: “God has given them a spirit of stupor, Eyes that they should not see And ears that they should not hear, To this very day.” 9 And David says: “Let their table become a snare and a trap, A stumbling block and a recompense to them. 10 Let their eyes be darkened, so that they do not see, And bow down their back always.”

That judgment certainly would fail upon Pilate as well, as I have already implied. We see in clearly in our text,

B. The self-condemnation of Pilate.

The sinful actions of Pilate for which he would be condemned.
v.26

Let me come full circle as we end, referring again to that great Bible study which Jesus led with his disciples after his resurrection.

Luke 24:46 Then He said to them, “Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, 47 and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.”

“It was necessary for the Christ to suffer.” And to die. So that the gospel and the promise of the resurrection could be preached to all the nations, beginning with the nation of Israel. And this is that preaching, beginning with the preaching of Peter at Pentecost and continuing to this day in this pulpit. This is the gospel I preach to you.

Acts 2:22 “Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves also know— 23 Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death; 24 whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by it. 25 For David says concerning Him: I foresaw the LORD always before my face, For He is at my right hand, that I may not be shaken. 26 Therefore my heart rejoiced, and my tongue was glad; Moreover my flesh also will rest in hope. 27 For You will not leave my soul in Hades, Nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption. 28 You have made known to

me the ways of life; You will make me full of joy in Your presence.”

That sermon would continue,

Acts 2:32 “This Jesus God has raised up, of which we are all witnesses. 33 Therefore being exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He poured out this which you now see and hear. 34 “For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he says himself: The LORD said to my Lord, “Sit at My right hand, 35 Till I make Your enemies Your footstool.” ’ 36 “Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.”

This, then, is the gospel,

Rom. 10:9 “...that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. 10 For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.”