

BARABBAS: THE MAN WHO TOOK HIS PLACE
Luke 22:66 – 23:25

Good evening. I don't believe we have met. My name is Barabbas. Did I detect a flicker of recognition? Do you think you've heard of me? Perhaps so. At one time, I was rather well known. Well, really, I guess you might say I was notorious. In fact, that is exactly what a certain former tax collector by the name of Matthew called me. Matthew said, of the Romans, "They had a notorious prisoner called Barabbas." And that was me.

I had a fairly uninteresting and unremarkable childhood. Even my name is uninteresting and unremarkable. *Abba* means father or daddy and *Bar* means son. "Barabbas" – it simply means "son of a father." Not much of a name is it? It isn't a very distinguished name and doesn't give a fellow much to live up to. But it isn't exactly a burden to carry that name, either. It's just a name.

Just a name for just a kid. That's all I was: just a kid.

I was just a kid, like any other kid in the city of Jerusalem, until I got to be about 14. When I turned 14, I met some other young people about my own age or a little older and they were living an exciting life.

During the heat of the day, we used to sit in the shadow of the city wall and they would tell me stories about their exploits. They seemed to have met everyone and to have done everything.

They would shoplift food from the vendors in the markets. They had a way of doing it so they wouldn't get caught. One of the boys who was clean-cut and a smooth talker would approach a merchant and start a conversation with him. He was also very polite. It was all "Yes, sir" and "No, sir" with him. He was so smooth that no one ever suspected he was part of a gang that was stealing merchandise from the merchants. But while he was distracting the vendor in a long conversation, the other boys would slip around behind the stall and start taking fruit, vegetables, bread...anything they wanted off of the cart. Then, when they had taken all they wanted, they would signal the talker and he would politely conclude the conversation and thank the merchant for his time. As this decoy walked away, many a merchant was heard to mutter about what a nice young man he was.

During the day, these guys did petty stuff like that. But at night, they became more bold. And more aggressive. They would wait in the darkness for some unsuspecting man to walk by and then suddenly step out of the shadows and surround him and demand his silver. If the target hesitated, there was a swift fist to the kidneys from behind and a quick kick to the gut from in front and before the victim could catch his breath, these guys were gone and so was his money.

The more I heard these boys (young men, actually) tell about their exploits, the more I admired them. I thought it must be very exciting to be able to pull off such acts. The adrenaline rush had to be great because I got a rush out of just hearing the stories.

And then there was the money. All these guys had money. Every one of them. And they had money all the time. Whenever they wanted to buy something, they all had the money to buy it. All of them. I envied that, too.

But mostly, I envied the thought of belonging to a group. These guys treated me like I was one of them even though, at that time, I had never helped on even one of their thefts. Instead of being just “the son of a father”, they treated me like I was really somebody.

I guess it was inevitable but I was still thrilled the first time they asked me to go with them on one of their escapades. They said we would start with some of their easy daytime shoplifting sprees. And it was easy. Oh, my heart was in my throat and racing a mile-a-minute with the thought of what would happen if I got caught. But when we pulled it off, got away with it and then caught our breath, I realized that this was pretty exciting. I wanted to do it again. And again. And again.

After a week or so of helping the guys to shoplift from the markets, they decided I should help them roll some marks. So the next night, I went with a group of the guys and watched as they picked a victim, surprised him and took his money. There were about a dozen of us who surrounded the old guy. Maybe he had heard about our gang and knew what would happen to him. All I know is that when we hissed at him to give us his money and we wouldn't hurt him, he handed over his bag and his hands were absolutely shaking. The leader of our group snatched the money bag from the old man's hand, put his hand in his chest and gave him a shove backwards so that he fell over one of the guys who had knelt down behind him. The poor guy was so startled and so scared that he wet himself! We just couldn't stop laughing at him.

While knocking over food carts at the bazaar was easy, knocking over old men was a high. And like anything else that can get you high, once you get the taste of it, you want more. I was hooked.

Before long, I was the one who was organizing the gang to go out and roll the victims. And then, after that lost its thrill, I decided that even if they gave us their money willingly, we ought to beat them up anyway. It was exciting to watch them writhe, hear them moan, feel their fear so intense you could cut it with a knife.

And it is probably no surprise to learn that that's what eventually it led to: cut them with a knife. If beating them up and watching them bleed was such a buzz, stabbing them and watching them bleed was even more of a kick.

I don't think I'll ever forget the first time I stabbed a guy and he died. I hadn't intended to kill him. I just wanted to hurt him. But when I lunged, he lurched and the knife went right into his heart. In only a moment, he was dead. His eyes rolled back in his head, his mouth gaped open, he gurgled once and he was gone.

At first, I could only stand there and stare. I was in shock. Then one of the guys in the gang shouted that we'd better run for it or we'd be in real trouble if we ever got caught. So we ran. We ran as fast as we could. And we scattered. I thought I might never see the old gang again. I hoped I wouldn't. But I'd become dependent on them so a few days later, after the heat had died down about the killing, I went looking for them. We huddled in a back alley and whispered about the murder.

At first, we were all saying how sorry we were that it had ever happened. But the more we talked about it, the more we began to feed off of the experience and eventually, we were saying that we would do it again if we got the chance.

And we got the chance. We were just hanging out together late one night and a lone Roman soldier came staggering down the street. He obviously had been drinking way too much. With one look around the group, I could tell we were all thinking the same thing. This guy is a Roman soldier. They are the occupying army of a foreign country that has ruled our land for years. We hated the Romans and we especially hated their soldiers. We all wanted to kill him.

But this time, the killing wasn't going to be a robbery or even a murder. This time, we were doing something patriotic, something almost heroic. So we began to move down the street toward the drunken soldier. Then we fell in step with him...as much as you can fall in step with someone who is staggering!

When we got him into a dark corner, we stabbed him. Not just me, we all stabbed him. Repeatedly. We must have stabbed him a hundred times before we quit. And when we walked away, the gutter was filled with his blood.

We divided up his money. And I took his sword. If I could do a lot of damage with a knife, just think what I could do with a sword!

But that turned out to be a mistake. A serious mistake! When morning came and when the garrison of soldiers found out that one of their own had been ambushed and brutally murdered, they started going house-to-house looking for the guilty.

I'd been out late the night before so I didn't even know the soldiers were looking for anyone. I woke up when my father shook me awake and told me that there were soldiers in the house and that they wanted to question me.

They asked if I knew anything about a stabbing the night before. Of course I lied and said I did not. But they kept pressing so I kept denying. One of the soldiers said that one of my buddies had confessed and had said that I had organized the gang. I told the soldier he was lying and I stuck to my story that I didn't know anything about it.

Do you remember how we used to steal from the food stands in the bazaar? Do you remember that one of us would keep the merchant talking while the others stole him blind? Well, what I didn't know was that while this soldier was questioning me at the door to the house, others were already inside searching the rooms. One of them found the dead man's sword in my bedroom. I found out when, after my strongest denial that I had anything to do with the dead soldier's stabbing, my interrogator told me to turn around. When I did, I saw another soldier holding the sword. I knew I'd been caught.

And I knew that the Roman soldiers would not go easy on someone who had helped kill one of their own. They didn't, either. The soldiers hit me around inside our house and then they led me out into the street. To make an example of me, they tied my hands behind my back and put a rope around my neck to lead me to the jail. I was being led on a rope like you might lead a dog. And I was being kicked, beaten, shouted at and spat upon every step of the way. They wanted everyone to know what happens when a Jew kills a Roman soldier.

Once they got me to the jail, the treatment only got worse. Finally, bloodied, battered and broken, I was thrown into a cell with a dozen other men, most of them considerably older than I.

Two days later I had a trial...if you want to call it that. I went before a Roman judge. The soldier who questioned me and the one who found the sword both addressed the judge. They told him what they had found and they told them that I had admitted that I had killed their buddy. I started to speak up and say that I had not admitted any such thing but when I started to say something, I was poked in the back by the butt of a spear. Hard!

I gasped and before I could catch my breath, the judge had declared me guilty. Then he passed sentence: I was to be executed by being crucified on a cross. If the butt of the spear took my breath away, the sentence made me think I might never breathe again.

I was led back to the cell, shoved inside and told that I would be nailed to a cross on Friday.

I knew the routine. I'd be beaten every day between now and then so that the soldiers could take their anger out on me. Then, on Friday, I'd have to carry my own cross on a kind of a parade through town as a demonstration of Roman

justice against traitors. Finally, I'd be taken to Skull Hill where my hands and feet would be nailed to a cross and I'd be left to die, exposed to the animals and the elements in a public execution.

So I waited for Friday. Each day and night, I thought about my life and I thought about how I'd messed up. I kept hoping I would wake up and find it was only a nightmare. But I knew it wasn't.

Friday morning came and I tried to prepare myself to die. I don't know how you are supposed to prepare yourself to die but I tried as best I knew how.

About nine o'clock that morning, a guard came to get me. I assumed it was time to start the long walk to Skull Hill. But instead, he took me to the Governor's palace! Now there's a surprise for you.

When we got to the Governor's palace, the guard led me inside and through a series of hallways until we came to a room with a balcony. Pilate, the governor, was on the balcony with a bedraggled looking man. I know I felt awful but he looked like he felt worse.

The guard led me out onto the balcony and waited. Governor Pilate raised his hands and addressed a crowd of people who were standing around beneath the balcony. He explained a tradition that the Romans had, which was to release a prisoner just before the Passover. I think it made them feel generous to do that. Traditionally, the Governor lets the people decide which prisoner to release. Pilate had decided to give the people the choice of releasing me or this other guy.

At once, the crowd began to shout my name and to ask that I be released. Pilate raised his hand and asked why he should execute the other man. "After all," he said, "Barabbas is a thief and a murderer. You all know that." But some of the people began to shout, "He's not a murderer. He's a patriot! He's a hero! Release Barabbas." The shout became a chant, "Release Barabbas! Release Barabbas!"

"What should I do with Jesus, who is called the Anointed One?" Pilate asked. "Crucify him," they replied.

Obviously, Pilate wanted to release this Jesus but the crowd wouldn't hear of it so Pilate elaborately washed his hands and said, "His blood will be upon you."

With that, Pilate told the soldier to lead me out of the palace and let me go.

I was free! I'd been on death row for days but now I was free. I had been condemned but now I was free. I was facing an agonizing death but now I was free.

As I walked through the crowd and into the city, I could not help but think of the man who shared the balcony with me. Jesus, Pilate had called him. Over the next few days, I learned a lot about him.

It turns out that this Jesus was a rabbi, a teacher. He was from up north in Galilee. He had a reputation for healing sick people and performing other miracles. Some said he was the Messiah, the Anointed One, that God had promised to send for our people.

I also found out that he had not committed any crimes. None. Not even a misdemeanor. And certainly nothing deserving the death penalty. Gradually, it dawned on me. At first I thought that Jesus took my place by dying on the cross. But then I realized, I took his place.

I took Jesus' place and became an innocent man. Jesus, who had never done anything wrong, was declared guilty and I, a guilty man was pardoned.

I took Jesus' place and became free. The one who did not deserve to be charged was bound, beaten and held for trial. But the one who deserved to be held was the one who was released.

I took Jesus' place and lived. The one who should have lived is the one who died and the one who deserved to die is the one who lived.

I cannot help but wonder if my story is not also your story.

- Are you one a guilty person who has been pardoned because an innocent man died in your place?
- Are you one who was bound in sin but who was freed when a man, who deserved to go free, was bound, beaten and broken for you?
- Are you one who had been condemned and deserved to die but you now know that you live because another died in your place?

How do you live with yourself when you know that an innocent man died in your place? Let me tell you what I think: I think you can live *with* yourself when you can live for him.

INVITATION: #590 – *"I'll Live For Him"*