

In Aramaic the name Barabbas means, “son of the father,” or perhaps, “son of the rabbi.” It is possible that Barabbas’ father was a Jewish teacher who taught the Scriptures in the synagogue. Whatever Barabbas was taught, his life was the complete opposite. Arrested for insurrection and murder, his fate was sealed. He would be crucified on Golgotha’s bloody hill.

But something happened that no one, not even Barabbas, could have guessed. On the day that he was, most likely, to be executed, he was released. All charges dropped. The death sentence no longer hanging over him.

What, did someone pay off the governor? No, nothing like that. They found the real perpetrator, the real criminal. It wasn’t Barabbas who had committed insurrection and murder. It was Jesus. And so, Barabbas was set free, and Jesus went to be crucified on Golgotha.

Of course, this all depends on how you see everything. Barabbas knew he was guilty. He knew that he had committed those crimes of which he was accused. As did Pilate. Which is why he brought Barabbas out to square off against Jesus. Would the mob put a murderer back on the streets? Surely not. Surely the mob will call for Jesus to go free since their choice is Jesus or Barabbas.

Pilate was wrong. “*Barabbas!*” they called out, “We want Barabbas!” The mob was the jury, and they declared Barabbas innocent and Jesus guilty. “Set Barabbas free!” was the voice of the mob. And as for Jesus, “*Crucify! Crucify Him!*”

Mob rule is never a good thing. When the mob gets its way, justice is not carried out, but injustice. And never has a more grievous injustice taken place than to send Jesus to the cross in the place of Barabbas. But this, too, depends on how you see everything, and more importantly, how God sees everything.

In the eyes of God, Barabbas was not guilty, and Jesus, the real criminal. Before God, the charges of insurrection and murder fell upon Jesus. To God, justice was carried out by releasing Barabbas and sending Jesus to the cross.

Is justice blind? No, but God is blind to the sins of Barabbas, and also to your sins, and the sins of the whole world. “*God made (Jesus) to be sin...*” writes the apostle, “to be sin for us.” The reason why Barabbas was declared innocent is the same reason why you and I are declared innocent. God charged His beloved Son with the sins of the whole world. All sinners He declares forgiven, innocent of all wrongdoing. And Jesus goes to the cross in place of Barabbas, in place of you and me, in place of all sinners.

I delivered, in a way, a sermon like this one to a woman who was quite similar to Barabbas. Like him, she was guilty of many crimes. And through the glass that separated us, she freely shared them with me. I let her finish, and then I spoke the same word to her that was spoken to Barabbas. Not guilty. “You did not do all those awful things,” I told her, “Jesus did. Jesus did them, not you. And He already went to the cross for them. He endured the penalty. Before God,” I told her, “there is no accusation against you. He forgives you for Jesus’ sake.”

I don't know if Barabbas was crying tears of joy when Jesus took his place, but this woman was. And whether you cry tears of joy or not, the same word of forgiveness is for you.

Like Barabbas, you and I know that we stand accused, that we are guilty as charged. Our lives, to this point, have stunk with the wretchedness of our sins that we, ourselves, have done.

But the word to Barabbas is the word that is for you. There is no sin which you have done that God charges to you. Jesus took them all, paid for them all. God forgives you. He declares you innocent of all wrongdoing.

There is no cross waiting for you, no place in the depths of hell waiting for you. Jesus took that place away from you. He endured it for you. Your place is in heaven.

Is Barabbas in heaven? We don't know. We hear nothing more about him. But you, by God's grace, will finish his story, as the Holy Spirit works in you to fix your eyes and ears on Jesus who took your place on the cross so that your place is in heaven with Him. Amen.