

Pilate said to them, “Whom do you want me to release for you: Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?” For he knew that it was out of envy that they had delivered him up. (Matthew 27:17-18)

Merciful God, we know what it cost your Son to give his life for us. We thank you that in the midst of our rejection, you remained faithful and never swayed from your saving purpose. Forgive us for the times we have failed you, that we may not trust in ourselves, but only in what you have done for us, through Christ our Lord. Ame.

Introduction

Jesus was brought to stand trial before the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate, as the religious made accusations against him. Pilate tried to avoid the issue by allowing the crowd to set a prisoner free. But when the crowd was offered a choice between Jesus and the criminal Barabbas, things did not go as Pilate expected.

Read: Matthew 27:11-26

On reading these verses, what are some of your initial impressions and questions? What stands out to you?

The Biblical Context

In today’s story, we get a look into how the trial of Jesus unfolded. There was pressure from the religious authorities to have him killed, and the priest and the scribes stirred up the crowd. Scripture says: “In his humiliation justice was denied him.” This is no more clear than in the contrast between the righteous Jesus and the murderous Barabbas. The innocent was condemned and the guilty was set free.

The crucifixion of Jesus was the act by which Jesus took upon himself the penalty for our sins and sacrificed his own life so that would have life — a new relationship with God. At Golgotha (“the Place of the Skull”), Jesus gave his life for the sins of the world.

Discussion Questions

1. The chief priests had already decided to kill Jesus (Matthew 26:66); why did they need to take him to Pontius Pilate? (See John 18:31-32 for a hint.)
2. When asked by Pilate, “Are you the king of the Jews?” Jesus responded, “You have said so.” What did Jesus mean by this? How did Pilate’s own words here hold him accountable for what he was about to do?
3. The Passover festival was the most important holiday of the year for the Jewish people. Why do you think it was a custom for the Roman Governor to release a prisoner at this festival?
4. The Bible says that Barabbas was a murderer (Luke 23:19) and a “robber” (John 18:40). This biblical word actually means “rebel” or “insurrectionist.” How were his actual crimes similar to what Jesus was being falsely charged with?
5. What message did Pilate’s wife send to her husband? Have you ever had a dream that you understood to be a warning? Can God use dreams to send us a messages like this?
6. Why do you think there were so many in the crowd who wanted Jesus to be crucified? How much did the chief priest have to do with that? When have you seen mobs stirred up against someone falsely? Why does this happen especially online?
7. When a person says, “I wash my hands of this” — it means they no longer want anything to do with it and refuse to take blame. To what degree does Pilate deserve the blame for Jesus’ death? How do we all?
8. Read Psalm 94:14-22. In times when it seems that everyone has turned against us, what promise do we have in the Lord? How does faith in God give us confidence in the face of hate from the crowd?