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## The Innocent for the Guilty

John 18:39-40

**Intro:** In [Ex 12](#), God gives to Moses a list of instruction for Israel on how they were to observe the first Passover. Nested within that list is a small detail that has some bearing on the outcome of the trial of Jesus before Pilate. The instruction was that the lamb that was to be killed for the Passover feast must be “without blemish” ([Ex 12:5](#)). To make sure the lamb met this requirement, it was to be kept in the home for 3 days before the sacrifice and examined carefully. Only after it was confirmed to be flawless could it be used in the ritual of the Passover feast.

This seemingly minor detail of Passover requirements has bearing on Jesus’ trial before Pilate because in God’s plan of salvation, Jesus was the true Passover Lamb who died so that the angel of spiritual death would pass over all who trust in His sacrifice. He was examined by Pilate to this end and was found to be without blemish. At the beginning of His ministry, Jesus was declared by John the Baptist to be “the Lamb of God...” and from that point on, for 3 yrs, He moved in and among the people of Israel being examined by both friends and enemies. None could find any fault with Him either. Finally, Pilate declares, “I find no fault in Him at all.” This was the last official verdict proclaimed on earth concerning Jesus Christ and was made by the duly appointed Roman procurator of Judea.

Pilate makes this declaration 3 times: 1<sup>st</sup>) here at the conclusion of the Roman trial; 2<sup>nd</sup>) after Jesus was sent back from Herod uncondemned; 3<sup>rd</sup>) Jesus was scourged and presented to the crowd. Through all of this, Pilate was just trying to get Jesus off his hands but God wasn’t about to let him do that. Pilate was accountable to make a decision concerning Jesus Christ. He came face-to-face with the physical embodiment of truth and he was forced to make a decision about the Truth. At Pilate’s final declaration of the innocence of Jesus, the mob cries out for His execution. Finally, being unwilling to risk a riot and the loss of his own position, Pilate gives Jesus over to death even though he had found Him to be innocent. It is as one uncondemned, in fact, as one declared to be blameless, that Jesus goes to Calvary. It is as God’s blameless Lamb that Jesus dies for the sin of this world.

Of course, Pilate isn't the only one to declare this important verdict of Jesus; it was given by all who ever examined or had been associated with Jesus. It was the declaration of God the Father at His baptism and His transfiguration when He declared, "This is My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased." It was the verdict pronounced on Jesus by those who knew Him best – His disciples. John calls Jesus "the righteous" (1 John 2:1). Peter would call Him the "Holy One" (Acts 2:27) and "the Righteous One" (Acts 3:14). In his first epistle, Peter says Jesus was "without blemish and without spot" (1 Peter 1:19). Matthew identified Him as "Immanuel . . . God with us" (Matt 1:23). Thomas declared Jesus' perfection by calling Him "My Lord and my God" (John 20:28). These all had rubbed shoulders with Jesus for the better part of 3 yrs, being in the closest possible contact with Him in good times and bad. If anyone had known of a weakness in Jesus it would have been them. Yet they've confessed along with Pilate, "We find no fault in Him."

We also have the testimony of the Jewish leaders. These were the enemies of Jesus who had no reason to think of Him favorably. They hated Him and wanted to trap Him in His words so they could openly accuse Him of being in violation of the law so He could be officially condemned. Yet they never could. When they ultimately did condemn Him, it was only because He had declared Himself to be the Son of God, which they judged to be blasphemy.

Now, you would expect His own Father to speak favorably of Him and even assume that His disciples might have been predisposed to grant Him the benefit of the doubt on some occasions. You might even rightly determine that the religious rulers could never pin anything on Jesus because they had so little intimate contact with Him. Is there no one who was in the position to observe Jesus closely but still not be predisposed to judge Him favorably out of friendship for Him? We have no right to expect such a witness but God in His wisdom did provide us one in Judas.

Judas had every opportunity to observe the character of Jesus during His ministry but after he betrayed Jesus he declared, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." It's the same as saying, "I find no fault in Him at all."

It was not just those who were His contemporaries that came to that conclusion; all who've associated with Jesus ever since then, both friends and enemies; have come to the identical verdict. Consider those who have

trusted in Jesus and have been saved from their sin. Their lives are not always smooth and easy, on the contrary, they often become more difficult. Some have suffered great personal disappointment with the loss of jobs, families, health and even life. Yet, throughout the ages, no dying believer has ever spoken ill of Jesus. They found no fault in Him at all.

What of His enemies through the ages? There have been many who are opposed to Christianity, many who have no desire to follow Jesus at all. But, if they have taken the time to examine His character and teachings, there are very few who have not been impressed with the person of Jesus and still fewer who would stand and accuse Him. True, some do but they don't have the last word. One day, they'll be confronted with Jesus in His glory and will be forced to confess that He is who He claimed to be and that He is without fault in His conduct towards them and others. Paul says on that day, "every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" ([Phil 2:11](#)).

Jesus Christ passed every examination that could possibly be made of Him and was declared to be blameless. He was weighed in every scale, measured by every standard, by friends and foes alike, and in each case He was found to be innocent. Yet now, although He is officially pronounced innocent, He dies. Why? Death is the result of sin ([Rom 6:23](#)) but Jesus was sinless. Why does the sinless One have to die?

That question can be answered on 2 levels. From a human perspective, Jesus died because of the religious rulers' hatred and Pilate's cowardice. You could say it was the rebellion of the human heart against God was why Jesus was crucified. But that's only 1 side of the story. Did Jesus die because the religious rulers were jealous; Judas was treacherous, disciples were gutless? Did Jesus die because the mob had no compassion, Pilate had no backbone or the Roman's had no compassion? No! Jesus died because God the Father had appointed Him to be our sin-bearer! That's the truly wonderful side of the story – He died so that we might live.

So, events of Jesus' death, like the events of His life, were no mere accident. In fact, it was these events that were actually predetermined and prophetically foretold by God in the OT. It was prophesied that the Messiah would be betrayed ([Ps 41:9](#); [Zech 11:12](#)) and be rejected and scorned by His own people ([Isa 53:3](#)). Specific prophecies concern the use of false

witnesses (Ps 35:11), Jesus' silence before His accusers (Isa 53:7), His beatings (Isa 50:6), His being offered gall and vinegar to drink (Ps 69:21), His being crucified with thieves (Isa 53:12), His being pierced by a spear (Zech 12:10), and His burial in the tomb of a rich man (Isa 53:9).

In the midst of these predetermined and meaningful details, is a special story that's unusual for being found in all 4 Gospels and occupies an important place in them. The Gospel writers use some 38 verses to tell this story which is more than is given for Judas' betrayal. Yet, the story is simple enough for John to give it in only 2 verses (39-40). The basis of the story lies in Pilate's desire to release Jesus even though His accusers were clamoring for His death. Pilate was trying to do right by Jesus and satisfy the crowd so he began looking for an escape hatch. His 1<sup>st</sup> attempt was to send Jesus to Herod but that didn't pan out. In a few minutes he would have Christ scourged, thinking it might garner a measure of sympathy from the mob. But before this last resort, he hit on an idea that seemed fortuitous.

**39-40** – The **custom** Pilate mentions here is found nowhere but in Scripture. The early church fathers said this tradition was granted to the Jews by the Romans during Passover to commemorate the Jews being released from Egypt. It was a symbol of the mercy of God to the people of Israel as they were permitted to ask for the release of some offender who was imprisoned at the time. Pilate may have thought this was how he could get off the hook with the crowd and release Jesus at the same time. He may have thought all he had to do was pick the worst possible candidate to stand next to Jesus and it would be a done deal! How about Barabbas? He's a robber, an insurrectionist and a murderer! Who would prefer this vile murderer to the One in which he had found no fault at all?

Imagine Pilate's shock when, presented with the choice of a condemned murderer and an innocent Man, the crowd chooses the condemned murderer! Now, Jesus' fate was no longer in Pilate's hands. The mob had decided and Pilate was obliged by his own word to abide by their decision. He could still have released Jesus despite their poor decision. He had both the political will and the military muscle to enforce his own verdict but he chose to go the easy route and forever stands as a warning example of the consequences of trying to satisfy both God and the world.

We can surmise why Pilate presented this choice but why did the crowd

choose Barabbas? Sure, the chief priests persuaded the people but there had to be more to it than that. Think of it from a political stand point. During the Passover, nationalistic feelings were always inflamed and a vote for Barabbas would be seen as a vote against Rome. While Jesus was a popular figure, many would have been disappointed that He failed to lead an uprising to overthrow Rome. Many of the Jews probably admired Barabbas for his courage and rejoiced that he was fighting Rome. Had they honestly compared the 2 candidates, they would have had to vote for Jesus but the crowd decided based on their feelings and not on the truth. How often do those who profess to be Christians make similar decisions to vote for political convenience or financial gain instead of voting base on godly character and moral issues?

When presented with the choice of Jesus or Barabbas, how could the mob make such a bad decision? The decision of the mob was the world's decision! The world will always choose a robber, an insurrectionist and a murderer over the guiltless Jesus. Why? Because Barabbas is of the world and is the world. Barabbas is one of them, and however dangerous he may be, he is at least controllable. They can handle him. But how do you handle Jesus?

Barabbas is the guy who was going to destroy the system. He was going to burn them out and kill them. Why would they want Barabbas? If you release Barabbas and he starts another riot, you can always call out the National Guard, or the Marines to put him down. Just push a few tanks into his neighborhood and you can squash whatever he's up to. You can find out where he's keeping his guns and raid his apartment. You can always stop Barabbas. But the question is: how do you stop Jesus? How do you stop a Man who has no weapons and no army but still is shaking the whole Roman empire? How do you stop a Man, who's getting revolutionary results without firing a shot? There's only one answer—get rid of Him. They thought they could get rid of the idea by getting rid of the Man with the idea. So they said, 'We can get rid of Jesus. We don't want Him to rule over us.'

Barabbas would never really ask to run your life. He might exploit you, but he wouldn't ask to run your life. Jesus does ask to run your life. Jesus asks for the right to rule over you! And that's the problem. Men would rather be enslaved to tyranny than let Jesus rule their lives. They would rather be exploited than let Christ determine their lives. So they say, 'Give us

Barabbas.' Barabbas' crime was the same crime the Jewish leaders had falsely accused Jesus of and their position in Israel was not improved by Barabbas's release. Yet they chose him over Jesus.

Now, think of this story from the perspective of Barabbas. He was arrested by Roman soldiers in the process of fomenting and insurrection. In the midst of his illegal activities, he committed murder. He's now in prison awaiting his own execution. The tension in his cell must have been unbearable. Then he begins to hear the roar of the crowd outside and he even thinks he hears his name called out. Imagine his fear and dread as the jailer comes to his cell and opens the door and releases him from the chains bound around him. He must have thought that his time had finally come. Now, imagine his disbelief when the jailer takes him to the door and tells him he is free to go!

It's entirely probable that the cross Jesus died on was actually prepared for Barabbas. Thus, Barabbas is the only man in the world who can say that Jesus took his physical place. But all of us can say that Jesus took our spiritual place for it is all of us who deserved to die for our sins. We deserved the wrath of God to be poured upon us; we deserve the eternal punishment of the lake of fire. He was delivered up for our offenses. He faced judgment because of our sins. Jesus was our substitute. He satisfied our debt to divine justice and holiness. The totality of Christianity is expressed in this statement: I deserved hell; Jesus took my hell; there is nothing left for me but His heaven! Jesus died so we might live. He was bound so that we, in bondage to sin our whole life, might be set free ([II Cor 5:21](#)).

How did Barabbas receive his new-found freedom? John doesn't mention his release; the Synoptic writers just tell us he was released. But, how did Barabbas receive the news? Did he balk at the idea thinking that he was too evil to be released; that the pardon should be given to someone who committed a lesser crime? That wasn't really an option: the choice was between Jesus and him. It's doubtful that he even considered giving his pardon to someone else.

Did he think he was justified in his criminal activity and thus, refused to accept the pardon at all? Not likely. A pardon is just a declaration on a piece of paper. The value of the pardon is determined by the acceptance of it by the person to be pardoned. If it is refused, it is no pardon at all. The same

applies to salvation- it's a gift that only affects the life of an individual when it is accepted by them. If the gift is not accepted then you do not benefit from it at all!

Maybe Barabbas thought he must reform himself first? This way, he could prove that he had earned his freedom and truly deserved it! Also not likely, or even possible! No matter how "good" Barabbas could become, it had no bearing on the crimes he'd already committed and was condemned to die for. Future reformation does not atone for past sin. Barabbas' only hope was in the pardon provided by the death of the innocent Jesus.

Did any of these thoughts cross Barabbas' mind when he was shown the door? No, because he was released. I doubt he stopped to consider reason for his release at all, so anxious was he to leave the prison and certain death and return to the free life outside the prison walls. If Barabbas could see the value of the pardon and jump at the first chance he had to accept it, why should you be any different?

A pardon is offered. Jesus has died. Won't you accept His death in place of your own and quickly escape the dungeon of sin and enjoy the freedom that comes from serving Him?

He is the guiltless One and we are the guilty. There was no fault to be found with Jesus but we are riddled with faults. We are no different than Barabbas. We have rebelled against God's righteous rule. We have broken His laws and defaced His image in us. We deserve His just condemnation. We deserve to die. This is where the glory of the gospel comes in. Jesus, the Righteous One, has died for us that we might be saved from condemnation.

This is the essence of the Gospel message. It's a story that is well known by us but deserves be repeated over and over simply because it is so wonderful. This is all we have to present to a lost and dying world. 😊