

Jesus and Barabbas: Two Paths to Liberation

I've spent a lot of time pondering on the scriptures, particularly the account of Jesus and Barabbas standing before Pilate. I kept wondering, "Why was Barabbas there? He was a revolutionary, but what does that really mean?" The standard explanation never quite satisfied me - that the crowd simply chose a murderer over the Messiah.

As I read more about the historical context, I started to understand what the zealots were doing in that time period. Then I looked deeper into the names and discovered something fascinating - "Barabbas" means "son of the Father." At first, I thought this simply meant that God sees all people, even sinners, as His children. But as I explored the context more, I realized there was something much more significant happening in this story.

I'm convinced now that the choice Pilate presented to the crowd wasn't between a villain and a hero. It was between two drastically different visions of how God's kingdom should come to Israel. And oddly enough, this ancient choice still confronts us today.

The Striking Name Connection

I was quite surprised to discover something remarkable while researching Barabbas. In several early manuscripts and according to church fathers, the man we commonly know as "Barabbas" is actually called "Jesus Barabbas." The name "Bar-abbas" in Aramaic literally translates to "son of the father."

Consider the significance of this: the crowd was choosing between Jesus, who called God his Father, and another man who carried the name "son of the father." Matthew's Gospel (in some early manuscripts) presents it clearly: "Which one do you want me to release to you: Jesus Barabbas, or Jesus who is called the Messiah?" Matt 27 verse 17 (LEB). Same first name, similar claims to sonship, yet entirely different in their approach to God's kingdom. The cosmic significance of this parallel seems almost too profound to be coincidental.

Understanding the Zealots - More Than Just Rebels

Through online studies and theological courses I discovered is that the zealots weren't just violent extremists (though Rome certainly viewed them that way).

The zealots were deeply religious Jews who believed passionate devotion to Torah required active resistance against Roman occupation. They drew inspiration from biblical heroes like Phinehas, who took direct action to preserve Israel's purity, and the Maccabees, who fought against foreign oppressors. For them, Roman rule wasn't just political oppression - it was religious contamination that demanded response. Saul of Tarsus (before becoming Paul) described himself as "zealous" in a similar way, though he channeled that zeal into persecuting early Christians rather than fighting Romans.

When the Gospels describe Barabbas as an insurrectionist or "lēstēs" (often translated as "robber"), they're using terms that Romans applied to Jewish freedom fighters. One person's terrorist is another's freedom fighter. I sometimes wonder if Barabbas saw himself as something like a Robin Hood figure - fighting against Roman oppression on behalf of his suffering people.

Kingdom Now or Kingdom Coming?

What fascinates me most is how Jesus and Barabbas represent two completely different visions of establishing God's kingdom.

Barabbas took the path many expected of a messiah - revolutionary action. He likely believed that through righteous violence against oppressors, God's people could force divine intervention. His approach resonated with many Jews who had suffered under Roman occupation and wanted immediate, tangible liberation. I understand that impulse. When people suffer, waiting patiently for divine deliverance feels impossible.

But Jesus? He turned this expectation upside down, saying, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest." Remember when Peter slashed off the ear of the high priest's servant? Jesus immediately healed it, rejecting violence as his kingdom's methodology.

This moment with Peter echoes all the way back to Eden. When Jesus told him, "Put your sword back in its place, for all who draw the sword will die by the sword," he was essentially repeating God's original warning to Adam: "If you eat

of this tree, you will surely die." Both statements carry the same fundamental truth - when we take life and death into our own hands, attempting to secure our existence through our own knowledge and power rather than trusting God, the result is death.

Peter was attempting to protect Jesus (a good goal) through violence (an evil means). The revolutionary path says, "Yes, we must sometimes do evil things to achieve good outcomes." It's a calculation that makes us gods of our own existence, deciding for ourselves what mixture of good and evil is necessary for survival - exactly what the serpent promised in Eden. (There is much to say on death anxiety and how it must have affected their choice, but there is not room for discussion here).

Jesus demonstrated something radically different - that God's kingdom doesn't need human defense because it operates with a different kind of power altogether. In rejecting Peter's sword, Jesus was rejecting the entire knowledge of good and evil paradigm that had governed human behavior since Adam's fall.

I find it telling that Barabbas fought because he feared the nation would perish without intervention. Jesus, meanwhile, rested in the certainty that God's kingdom transcends circumstances and cannot be destroyed by human opposition. His resurrection would later prove this approach right, showing that divine life persists even through death itself.

Two Trees, Two Approaches

I believe this choice mirrors the original garden dilemma - the tree of life versus the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

Barabbas, though likely well-intentioned, represents the knowledge-of-good-and-evil approach - using human judgment to determine what's right and wrong, what must be preserved and what must be destroyed. This path seeks life through decisive action, through identifying enemies and eliminating them. Many of us instinctively prefer this approach because it gives us control. We can do something.

Jesus embodies the tree-of-life approach - trusting the Father's wisdom rather than grasping for control. His path acknowledges that true life flows not from

correctly assessing good and evil but from connection to life's source. It's much harder to embrace because it often means surrendering control and experiencing suffering we could otherwise avoid.

Both trees promised life. One through knowledge and action; the other through trust and relationship. The resurrection ultimately validates Jesus's approach. Life emerges not by successfully avoiding death but by passing through it with faith.

Why Bodily Resurrection Matters So Much

This brings me to why bodily resurrection stands at the heart of Christian hope. It's not just about spiritual continuity after death; it's specifically about physical restoration and transformation.

We are all concerned with bodily security. We build walls, armies, and revolutions to protect our physical existence. Barabbas represents this natural impulse toward self-preservation through action and control. It's understandable.

Yet resurrection offers a different security. It promises that our physical existence, while vulnerable now, remains secure in God's ultimate purpose. This security comes not through revolutionary action or political power but through trust in God's restorative power.

I've found this understanding liberating. It frees us from the exhausting need to secure our existence through worldly power. Like Jesus, we can surrender immediate physical security, confident that God secures our bodily existence ultimately. This enables us to live as Christ did - vulnerable, serving, non-violent - rather than following the Barabbas impulse toward self-preservation through force.

A Choice We Still Face

In my own life, I've experienced this tension directly. A few years back, someone spread malicious lies about my wife and me, claiming we were spies for the South African Defense Force. Interestingly, my first instinct was actually the Jesus approach - to forgive. But as time went on and we began seeing the repercussions

of these lies, that's when the real temptation came to respond the Barabbas way.

The impacts of these false accusations created pressure to seek justice through worldly systems - to report him, see him face consequences, to defend our reputation through legal means. But God helped us resist that temptation. I remembered that I belong to a kingdom that cannot be destroyed. Those lies, however painful and damaging in the moment, couldn't ultimately harm what truly mattered. We chose to maintain the path of forgiveness rather than shifting to worldly self-defense, trusting that our security came from somewhere beyond human vindication.

The crowd chose Barabbas. They preferred the revolutionary path promising immediate action against oppression. I might have done the same. It reflects our persistent preference for solutions we can control, even if they involve violence.

What's particularly striking about this moment is how differently it could have been interpreted by those involved. For Barabbas's followers, his release must have seemed like divine vindication - perhaps even supernatural proof that their revolutionary approach was blessed by God. I can imagine them celebrating this "miraculous" escape as confirmation that their path of resistance against Rome was righteous. Their leader, condemned to death, suddenly freed by the very system they opposed - surely this was a sign they were on the right path?

Yet from Jesus's perspective, this same event carried a very different meaning. Barabbas took up the sword and was supposed to be crucified - the natural consequence of revolutionary activity against Rome. "Those who live by the sword die by the sword" was being fulfilled in his scheduled execution. But then, unexpectedly, he was released.

If Jesus could have spoken directly to Barabbas in that moment of release, I believe He would have said the same words He spoke to the woman caught in adultery: "I do not condemn you, but go and sin no more, lest something worse happen to you." In other words: Don't continue walking in this revolutionary path, or next time you won't merely be imprisoned but will truly die.

The crowd saw Barabbas's release as confirmation that God was with him and his revolutionary approach, encouraging them to continue in that direction. But

approximately forty years later in 69-70 AD, this revolutionary approach led to catastrophic consequences when Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed by Roman forces crushing the Jewish revolt - the "something worse" that came because they continued in that path.

The crowd's decision that day in Jerusalem, choosing Barabbas over Jesus, represented their larger rejection of Jesus's peaceful approach to God's kingdom in favor of the revolutionary path. It wasn't that this specific choice directly led to the revolt of 70 AD, nor that Barabbas himself led the eventual rebellion. Rather, this moment symbolized the direction they had chosen - one that would continue for decades as they had further opportunities to believe in Jesus's way but largely continued to reject it. The very path that seemed validated by Barabbas's release ultimately led to the calamity Jesus had warned about. What appeared to be "victory" in the moment masked devastating spiritual and historical consequences.

Yet the resurrection vindicates Jesus's counterintuitive approach. His kingdom advanced not through revolutionary violence but through faithful witness to truth. The early church grew not by taking up swords but by laying down lives, trusting that resurrection power would secure their existence beyond death.

Which path are we choosing today in our own lives? Do we seek security through systems of knowledge, power, and control? Or do we find security in resurrection promise, allowing us to live vulnerably and faithfully now? The way of Barabbas or the way of Christ - the tree of knowledge or the tree of life - this ancient choice still confronts each of us daily.

The truth is that there were times in my life, for many years, when I was torn between these two paths. I often wanted to grab hold of the Barabbas way - it seemed more practical, more immediate. But I've found that the more I study the scriptures, and the older I've become, the more convinced I am of the gospel. I'm starting to find my natural inclination leading more toward Jesus's way. His path of true liberation - even when it leads through death before reaching resurrection - increasingly makes sense to me as I mature in faith.

I think true faith is defined in a life given over into the hands of God. This is precisely what Adam faced in Eden. He heard there was a possibility of death if he ate the forbidden fruit, but the alternative required complete surrender to

God's wisdom rather than grasping for control. He couldn't do it. The temptation to "sort things out himself" by gaining knowledge of good and evil proved too strong. Like the crowd choosing Barabbas, Adam chose the path that promised immediate power rather than trusting surrender.

But Jesus shows us another way. Through resurrection, he reveals that surrendering control doesn't lead to death but to true life - life that even death cannot overcome. This is the paradox at the heart of faith: what appears to be defeat becomes victory, and what looks like wisdom often leads to destruction. The path to life runs straight through death itself, and only those willing to give themselves over completely into God's hands will discover it.