

Jesus and Barabbas

by Bayless Conley

Copyright © Answers with Bayless Conley

Hey, everybody. Hi, outside on the plaza and wherever you might be watching from. It's so good to have you here. We have guests actually with us from Germany today. We also have guests with us from Russia today. We're very thankful for that. As you probably know, we're in a series in the gospel of John, going chapter by chapter. Now, we can't teach everything that's in a chapter, but we're endeavoring to take a theme or a picture, if you would, out of each chapter and talk about that. We're in John the 18th chapter today. So, if you have your Bible, you can open it there. Let's just pray.

Heavenly Father, we, to the best of our ability, settle our hearts down right now. We ask You, by Your Holy Spirit, through Your eternal Word, to speak to us. Lord, give us what the Scriptures call a spirit of wisdom, revelation, and the knowledge of You. May the eyes of our understanding be flooded with light. Help our hearts to comprehend and our spiritual eyes to see today. We pray above everything that the name of Jesus Christ would be glorified. Amen. Amen.

In John 18, we have Jesus and His disciples entering the garden of Gethsemane. Shortly after, Judas comes with a mob of temple priests and Roman soldiers carrying torches, clubs, and swords. We read, beginning in verses 12–14 NKJV, it says,

¹² Then the detachment of troops and the captain and the officers of the Jews arrested Jesus and bound Him. ¹³ And they led Him away to Annas first, for he was the father-in-law of Caiaphas who was high priest that year. ¹⁴ Now it was Caiaphas who advised the Jews that it was expedient that one man should die for the people.

It's actually recorded in John 11, and it says that Caiaphas unwittingly prophesied that Jesus should die for the people. And that's really at the heart of what I want to talk to you about today. So, they falsely accused Jesus. They strike Him on the face, and then they bring Him before the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. Pilate tried to release Jesus, but the Jewish religious leaders stirred the people up. They loudly and aggressively resisted Pilate in this. So, Pontius Pilate gave them an offer. He gave them a choice. In verses 38b–40 NKJV of John 18, it says,

³⁸ He went out again to the Jews, and said to them, "I find no fault in Him at all. ³⁹ "But you have a custom that I should release someone to you at the Passover. Do you therefore want me to release to you the King of the Jews?" ⁴⁰ Then they all cried again, saying, "Not this Man, but Barabbas!" Now Barabbas was a robber.

As we read in the other Gospels, we find out that he wasn't just a prisoner, but it says he was a notorious prisoner. He was known by all the people, and not just for robbery. He was also guilty of sedition and murder, both punishable by death. He was guilty beyond question, deserving death, punishment, and execution. Yet, we find Pilate here declaring again and again that Jesus was innocent and just. But they demanded a man who was guilty of violent, heinous crimes to go free and that Jesus take his place. Did you know even Peter referred to this event when he preached the very first sermon in Acts 3 on the day of Pentecost? Listen in Acts 3:13–14 NKJV.

Jesus and Barabbas

¹³ The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified His Servant Jesus, whom you delivered up and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he was determined to let Him go. ¹⁴ But you denied the Holy One and the Just, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you.

So, do you see the picture? Here's Barabbas. He is in chains. He's awaiting his deserved punishment, and he's released. Jesus is condemned, tortured, and executed in his place. And really, it's the picture of every one of us. Absolutely guilty, chained by our sin, rebellious against heaven, condemned, and on our way to eternal punishment, but a substitute was found. Jesus took our place. Let me read to you from Isaiah 53. It has been called the great redemptive chapter of the Old Testament. Seven hundred years before Christ was born, the Holy Spirit gave Isaiah a glimpse of the suffering Savior, but He also showed him why Christ was suffering. I read to you beginning in verses 3–6 AMPC of Isaiah 53. Speaking of Jesus, he said,

³ He was despised and rejected and forsaken by men, a Man of sorrows and pains, and acquainted with grief and sickness; and like One from Whom men hide their faces He was despised, and we did not appreciate His worth or have any esteem for Him.

⁴ Surely He has borne our griefs (sicknesses, weaknesses, and distresses) and carried our sorrows and pains [of punishment], yet we [ignorantly] considered Him stricken, smitten, and afflicted by God [as if with leprosy]. ⁵ But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our guilt and iniquities; the chastisement [needful to obtain] peace and well-being for us was upon Him, and with the stripes [that wounded] Him we are healed and made whole. ⁶ All we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord has made to light upon Him the guilt and iniquity of us all.

Now, think about it. It says He bore our griefs, our weaknesses, our sorrows, our transgressions, our guilt, our iniquities, our anxieties, and our sicknesses. He suffered for us in our place. All of us are guilty, for we read, “All we like sheep have gone astray.” We read in verse 7,

⁷ He was oppressed, [yet when] He was afflicted, He was submissive and opened not His mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so He opened not His mouth.

Our kids, when growing up, did not readily step forward and take the punishment for one another. No, with them, it was always, “She did it. He did it. This is not fair. I didn't do anything. She started it. It's his fault.” But Jesus did not open His mouth. We were the sheep that went astray, but He was the lamb who was slaughtered. Our judgment and the penalty for our sin fell on Him. Listen, the plight of humanity was so desperate. The root of sin was so deep. The distance between God and man was so great that nothing short of the blood of God's own Son could remedy the situation. As a kid, and some of you may remember me talking about this. I was probably six years old. My mother had her birthday coming up. So, I got all my money together. I got on my bicycle, and I rode to a little shopping center. I went into a department store called Buffum's. I went into the jewelry section and put my nose up against the glass. I still remember. They had this little pendant in there. It was a little mouse with rhinestones on it. This was 1961, so it probably would have been somewhere in the range of maybe \$3. The lady came up. I'll never forget. She had glasses on. She said, “Can I help you, young man?” I said, “Yes.” I said, “I want that for my mom.” So, she took it out. I took all of my change out of my pocket, and I put it up on the counter. It was above my head. I still remember looking up, watching her

Jesus and Barabbas

counting my pennies, my nickels, and my dimes. She looked down and said, "Son, I'm sorry. You don't have enough money to pay for this." I remember scooping that money up, putting it back in my pockets, and riding my bike home so dejected because it was everything I had. Everything I had, and it was not enough. Listen to me. Good works are not enough to pay the ransom for our souls. No amount of personal sacrifice is sufficient to merit salvation, no matter how sincere a person may be. All of our efforts amount to nothing more than a pocket full of change when compared to the massive debt that we owed. So, we read. Listen to this, Galatians 2:20 NKJV.

²⁰ I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.

Everyone say, "For me." Tell your neighbor, "For you." He gave Himself for us. And we just read that we were crucified with Him. Do you know the Scriptures also talk about dying with Him, being buried with Him, being raised from the dead with Him, living with Him, and having our lives hidden in Him? What does that all mean? It means that what Jesus did, He did for you as your substitute, as your representative, that in God's eyes, it was you on the cross. It was you taking the lashes. It was you being beaten. It was you suffering and dying. Did you know Adam, our first ancestor, the fountainhead of the human race, willfully transgressed against God? The Scripture tells us in Genesis and in Romans 5 that through that transgression, sin, and death entered the world. And that sin, along with our own willful transgressions, has affected our very natures. Literally, the deepest part of us, our spirits, have been tainted because of sin. Ephesians 2:3 NLT puts it this way.

³ All of us used to live that way, following the passionate desires and inclinations of our sinful nature. By our very nature we were subject to God's anger, just like everyone else.

Romans 3:23 NKJV,

²³ For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

Meaning we've been cut off from God's presence, severed from having a relationship with Him. But God had a plan, as we know. God sent a second Adam named Jesus to undo what the first Adam had done. 1 Corinthians 15 refers to Jesus as the last Adam. So, Jesus came, born of a virgin, God's spotless Son. He revealed the Father. He healed the sick. He lifted broken people. He gave hope to the hopeless. Then, He was taken by wicked hands and was crucified. But He did it for us. He took our place. The full measure of God's punishment against sin was poured out, and Jesus drank it to the bitter dregs. He did it for us so we might go free. He died in our place. Most of you would be familiar with the story of Abraham in Genesis 22. God said, "Abraham?" He said, "Yes." He said, "Take your son, your only son whom you love, and I want you to kill him. I'll show you where. Offer him as a sacrifice to Me." Abraham rose early in the morning and took two servants with him and his son Isaac. God showed him the place. Abraham said to the servants, "You guys wait here. Isaac and I will go yonder, and we'll worship. We will come back." The New Testament tells us that Abraham believed that God would raise his son up from the ashes of a smoldering sacrifice because God had promised that through that boy, through his seed, all the nations of the world would be blessed.

So, in obedience, he walked with his son up that mountain. Isaac said, "Daddy, we have the fire, and we have the wood for the sacrifice, but where's the lamb?" He said, "Son, God will provide

Jesus and Barabbas

Himself a lamb." I think Abraham couldn't even look at his son as he told him. They get on the mountain. Abraham ties his son and lays him on the altar. And the Bible says he literally stretched out his hand to kill his son. He's going to slit his throat. Suddenly, an angel called from heaven and said, "Abraham, do not touch the lad. Now, I know you'll not withhold your only son from Me." Suddenly, there was a rustling in the thicket. Abraham looks over, and there's a ram with its horn caught in the bushes. He takes it and sacrifices it in the place of his son. A substitute was found. My friend, I was laying on the altar of eternal damnation and separation from God, the knife ready to be plunged into my heart. And suddenly, there was a rustling in the thicket. A substitute was found. His name is Jesus. He bore my iniquities. He bore my guilt. It was the just for the unjust. He took my place, chastised for my peace, and lashed for my healing. His very soul, according to Isaiah, was made an offering for sin. He experienced the awful state of separation from the Father. He cried out on the cross, when He who knew no sin was made to be sin, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me? Why have You utterly abandoned Me?" Listen to me. But in God's eyes, I was the one who was crucified. In God's eyes, my life was taken. In God's eyes, my debt was being canceled. Now, it's no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And that's not all. In Hebrews 9, the writer of Hebrews talks about this earthly tabernacle that God gave the plans to Moses for. They would offer a sacrifice and talk about how they'd have to go in with the blood of that sacrifice. They would sprinkle the blood on the utensils and everything that was in there. And then he says this in Hebrews 9:22–24 NKJV,

²² And according to the law almost all things are purified with blood, and without shedding of blood there is no remission. ²³ Therefore it was necessary that the copies of the things in the heavens should be purified with these, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. ²⁴ For Christ has not entered the holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us.

In other words, after His sacrifice and resurrection, Jesus appeared in the presence of the Father on our behalf and presented His blood. He basically said, "Father, if You accept Me, You're accepting Bayless because He's in Me. What I did, I did for him. This blood was spilled for him, and for Mary, and for Carl, and for Judy, and for Edgar, and for you." The Father said, "I accept them in You." Ephesians 1:6 says that we are accepted in the beloved. Thank God for our representative. It's not based on anything that we've done. It's based completely on the virtue of what He has done for us, which makes me consider several things. Number one: it makes me think deeply about the awfulness of sin. How awful must sin be that God's Son would have to suffer a violent, bloody death to atone for it? How terrible it must be that it would literally cause a separation between the Father and the Son. Jesus, who had only known for eternity past blessed fellowship with the Father, unbroken fellowship, the Father's presence had been with Him even from the moment He was born throughout His earthly life. And then suddenly, when He took my place, when He took your place on the cross, the presence of God was gone as the Father turned His back. And He cried out, "My God, My God, You've abandoned Me." What a terrible thing sin must be to cause that.

And then secondly, it makes me consider the greatness of God's love. How much God loves people that He would give so much to redeem them. We had a guest speaker many years ago. He pastored a small church, and he brought such a brilliant message. It was so timely for the church. He had just such a good heart with him. He helped carry along what God was doing in the house. We prayed about it and thought about it. We just really felt we were supposed to do something significant for him and his church. So, I gave him an envelope that had an offering in it and thanked him. The next night I went to pick him and his wife up at the hotel to take them to

Jesus and Barabbas

dinner. I knock on the door. His wife answers the door. I look in, and he's sitting on the end of the bed and he's crying. I go, "Are you okay?" He turns around, and he has that open envelope in his hand. He said, "I can't believe you placed such a high value on me." I'll never forget it. My friend, God has placed an infinite value upon you. You were the pearl of great price, and He gave everything to obtain you. He bankrupt heaven and gave the most precious thing in the universe to win you. What kind of love does that?

And then it makes me consider the power of free will. The amazing grace of God in giving us a free will and the staggering ramifications of having that free will. Because if there is no free will, there's no such thing as love. If I don't have a choice, I'm just an automaton. This is just an illusion. If I really don't have a free will, there's no such thing as true relationship. There's no such thing as true love if I can't say no. Jesus said this in Revelation 22:17, "Whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely." "Whosoever will," it's a choice. It's available to all. We all know John 3:16, "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him wouldn't perish but have everlasting life." There is a genuine choice. This might surprise you, but God's will and God's desire is that all come and submit their life to the Savior. But not all will. Listen to the Scripture in 2 Peter 3:9 NKJV. "The Lord is not slack concerning His promise." It's talking about the promise of Christ's return when God sorts it all out finally and wraps everything up.

⁹ The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.

God is not willing. It is not His will that any perish, but it is His will that all come to repentance, but not all will. Jesus said, "Broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many that are going that way." It's not God's plan. It's not God's will. Somebody says, "Well, yeah, but God allows it." All right, I'll agree with that. Everything that's happened in the history of the world, God has permitted it. But there's a difference between allowing something and commissioning something. There's a huge difference between the two. Somebody says, "You're saying that everything that happens is not the will of God?" Yes, that's exactly what I'm saying. It's stated clearly in Scripture that God's will is that all repent, but not all are going to repent. We do have a free will. In fact, let me express it this way. I just want to read a couple of Scriptures, and there are numerous others that we could go to, but I think this will demonstrate it. In Jeremiah 7:31 NKJV, God is speaking and He said,

³¹ And they have built the high places of Tophet, which is in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire, which I did not command, nor did it come into My heart.

Yet they did it. God said, "I didn't command it. It didn't come into My heart." The Septuagint puts it this way, "Which I did not command them to do, neither did I design it in My heart." In the CSB translation, God said, "I never entertained the thought," yet they did it. Free will is a staggering responsibility. Very similar, Jeremiah 19:5 NKJV,

⁵ (They have also built the high places of Baal, to burn their sons with fire for burnt offerings to Baal, which I did not command or speak, nor did it come into My mind).

Yet they did it. Listen, you have a free will. As long as there's breath in your lungs, but the moment you expel that last breath, free will is over for you. It's gone. Your eternal fate will be sealed, no more choices. Only while you're alive and breathing do you have the choice. But

Jesus and Barabbas

free will is done once you leave this earthly life. And the fact is, if a person doesn't want God in their life for the 50, 60, 80 years that they're living here, you're not going to want God throughout eternity. But here's the thing: I think people never think about this: every good thing, every honorable thing, every delightful thing, every pure thing in this world, directly or indirectly, comes from God. When you take Him out of the picture, all of that is gone. All that's left is darkness and eternal misery. We have a choice now. Staggering if you think about it. And then, fourthly, I think about how strong life is, that life is stronger than death. Death took Jesus, but it couldn't keep Him. Perhaps you've heard the story of when Napoleon was defeated at Waterloo. It's quite a story. I've actually stood there where Wellington, the English commander, defeated Napoleon when I was preaching in Belgium. I wanted to go. So, I stood on the battlefield where it all took place. Europe was hanging in the balance. If Napoleon wins, England will certainly fall. They're waiting with bated breath for news of the battle. Wellington defeats Napoleon, but they couldn't just wire the message to England. They had to use lanterns. So, they would spell it out with lanterns that go from one lantern to another, to another, to another, to another. Someone would get it, and they'd ride horseback. Then, they would do it to another. Finally, from a ship out in the English harbor, they started signaling, and they signaled Wellington defeated. Then, a fog rolled in, and that's all the message that England received. Wellington defeated, and there was weeping in the streets because they knew England now will surely fall. But after a few hours, that fog blew away, and the rest of the message came through. Wellington defeated Napoleon, and there was rejoicing and singing in the streets.

My friend, when Jesus Christ died on the cross, there was a hellish fog, and the only message that came was Christ defeated. The disciples hung their heads and thought it was over. Christ defeated, but three days later, that hellish fog was blown away by the wind of the Holy Spirit, and the full message came through. Christ defeated Satan. Christ defeated death. Christ defeated sin. Christ defeated the grave. Christ is victorious. Life is stronger than death. Then, I consider what He's accomplished for us through His death and through His resurrection. First and most important, He's restored our relationship with God and made that available. It's the thing that every human heart cries out for. I know why people go clubbing. I know why people do all this stuff because there's an empty place inside they're trying to fill. But I want to tell you something. Sex will never fill that empty place. Getting a new boyfriend or a new girlfriend or a new husband or a new wife is not going to fill that empty place. A new career is not going to fill it. Drugs and alcohol are not going to fill it. An extreme sport is not going to fill it. A religious ritual is not going to fill it. It's a God-shaped hole in your heart. You are meant to walk and talk with your Creator. Sin separated us from God, but through Christ's sacrifice, we can come into a new relationship with Him. He's also restored our peace. Jesus is the Prince of Peace. Past, present, and future. The blood of Christ even cleanses from a guilty conscience. Thank God I can be free from the shame of the past. I can be free from the anxieties of the present, and I can be free from fear of the future. He is the God of peace, and through Christ's sacrifice and resurrection, peace is restored. He's even restored health. His sacrifice can even touch our physical bodies.

My wife, Janet, sitting on the front row here, was attending a church. This is before we knew one another, and they had people come forward who wanted prayer. She went up to have the pastor pray for her during the service, and he prayed. She turned around and walked back to her seat. He said, "Wait a minute, sister. God's not done with you. Come back here." He calls his wife over. Now, no one in the entire world knew this except Janet. It was a secret to her alone. She was having female problems. She had not had a menstrual cycle in seven years. The pastor's wife walks over and basically hits Janet in the abdomen. God's presence fell on her. She crumples in a heap on the floor. Her period started that day. Now, the preacher's last name was Harrison. Where do you think Pastor Harrison got his name? Yeah, he's a miracle

Jesus and Barabbas

baby. Those things are only made possible because of the stripes of Jesus, because of what He did for us.

Then, finally, I think about what we owe to Him. Everything. We were crucified and raised with Him that we might live for Him. Like blind Bartimaeus, who once he received his sight, the Bible says he followed Jesus. "I was in darkness, in utter spiritual ruin, and He opened my eyes and gave me life. How can I not follow Him with all I am and with all I have?" We owe everything to Him. He took our place. He was punished for our sins. The just for the unjust. He who knew no sin was made to be sin for us that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him. The question is, what will you do? Will you accept His great sacrifice and bow your heart in submission? Or will you turn away from Him?

The most important business in this life is making sure you're ready for the next. This is a vapor. It appears for a little time and then vanishes away, and you step into eternity, and it never ends. I know there are people here who will say, "Well, I know what you're saying is right." However you ended up here today or wherever you're watching, wherever you're listening, anywhere in the world, I know there are people who say, "Well, I know that's right, but I'm just not ready because if I make that commitment, I'm going to have to make some changes in my present living situation." Or, "It's liable to kind of cramp my style. I want to sow a few more wild oats, and then I know it's right, and I'm going to get on board eventually." Here's the thing. When the Holy Spirit is tugging on our heart, and we delay, and we push it off, something happens to these hearts of ours. They begin to get hard. It's that much easier the next time to delay and to push it off. And it's that much easier the next time as this calloused effect takes place on our hearts. It's a very dangerous thing to do when you know God is dealing with you. Listen, I understand. The Bible says, "Today's the day of salvation." Yet, I understand that many times, there's a process where the Holy Spirit is convicting, convincing, and bringing demonstration to a person's heart. And maybe that's you. You're just like, suddenly, this light has dawned, and you're just not sure. That's okay, but you don't want to delay. And if you know that you know, listen, you can make the choice today. The great news is we don't have to clean ourselves up to come. We come just as we are. He changes us. If I could change myself, I wouldn't need Him. So, we come as we are. We bow our hearts, and He changes us.

I want to pray with you in just a moment. If you've never accepted Christ as your Savior, I want to give you an opportunity to do it. I can give you some words to pray, but they don't amount to much unless you tie a sincere heart around those words and speak them to God. If you'll sincerely talk to God and direct those words to Him, He'll hear you, and He'll answer you. If you're a backslider, a prodigal son, a prodigal daughter, and I suspect there's a few here out on the campus listening, you've had a genuine encounter with Jesus. You know He's real. But for whatever reason, you're far away from Him today. Perhaps someone who you looked up to, someone important in your world, a Christian leader, whoever, maybe they screwed up. Maybe they sinned against you personally, and it sort of became this wedge between you and church and you and Christ. Listen, the only perfect one is Jesus, and we have to keep our eyes on Him. Everyone's going to let you down except Him. He will never let you down. Maybe you just got hanging around with your old crew, and bit by bit, you've slipped back into some of the old ways. And if you look up, it's actually alarming how far you've drifted. I was watching a thing just the other day: some guys out on a boat. I mean, they are miles out from shore, and there are two girls drifting out there. They got caught in a current and were just goofing around. They didn't realize how far they drifted away from shore and their lives were in peril. When they got fished out, they were ice cold and hypothermic. And just little by little, they drifted, drifted, drifted, and just didn't know until their life was in jeopardy. It was very fortunate that a boat was coming by.

Jesus and Barabbas

Well, friend, God is sending a boat by you today. Prodigals, it's time to come home. If you're the one who's drifted, it's time to come home. I want to pray with you. If you wouldn't mind, maybe just close your eyes, bow your heads for a minute, and just in your own secret place, just commune with God for a moment. He does know the secret language of your heart. I'm just going to count to three. If you know you want to pray, whether you're on the plaza, in this building, or anywhere in the world right now, maybe sitting in a hotel room, you may be sitting in a pub right now with a Guinness in your hand. Yeah, I'm talking to you too. When I get to three, I want you to just lift a hand. By that uplifted hand, you're just going to be acknowledging, "Yeah, I want to pray this prayer." I believe an act as simple as lifting your hand honestly can help your faith begin to move in the right direction because the Bible says faith is expressed through action. Consider it like this. Your heart is reaching up to God, and your hand is just an outward reflection of what's going on in your heart. I'll acknowledge any hands that are up. You can put them down. Then, I'm going to lead everyone in a prayer together. One, I believe it's part of God's plan that we're here together and that you're listening to me right now. Two, are you ready? God will not turn you away. He'll not say no to you if you say yes to Him. Three, if it's you, and you want to pray, lift your hand up all across the auditorium. Yeah, just keep them up. Lift them high for a minute. Lord, we thank You. A lot of hands all over the auditorium. It looks like every section we have hands that are up. Fantastic. All right, go ahead and put them down. Put a hand on your heart. And just pray out loud after me. Say,

Oh, God, thank You for sending Your Son who took my place and died for my sins. I believe that on the cross, my debt was paid in full. Jesus, I believe You were raised from the dead. I ask You to come into my life. I confess You as my Lord and my Savior. And from this moment forward, I'm all Yours. Wherever You lead me, I will go. All I am and all I have I put in Your hands, Jesus, now and forever. It's in Your name, I pray. Amen. Amen.

Copyright © Answers with Bayless Conley