

No Guilt in This Man! John 38b-40

There is so much we have seen in this chapter. We have seen the arrest of Jesus, and Jesus before the religious authorities, particularly before Caiaphas who hands down his verdict. Then he is sent to Pilate, and they want Pilate to crucify and kill him, but Pilate asks what on what charge. They do not even want to give a charge but want Pilate to take their word for it that he is worthy of death. Pilate calls for them to try him, but they cannot put someone to death. He later sends him to Herod, but Herod only mocks him and ends up sending him back. Jesus was bloodied and beaten by the religious leaders and he would have been quite the horrible sight in front of Pilate. Rarely, if ever had he had a case where the religious leaders demanded death of a person. He knew something was up.

So he decides to try him, and we looked at the conversation Jesus had with Pilate and their interaction. And the charges that were brought up against him by the Jews that are not recorded here is that he was a violent insurrectionist. He would destroy the temple, and that he tried to persuade others not to pay taxes against Rome. Both were lies. They even tried to trap Jesus about paying taxes and answered wonderfully, give Caesar the things that are his, and give God the things that are his. And Pilate in the next chapter was going to release Jesus after beating him, and what they will do once again is change the charge against him. Listen to John 19:7, **“The Jews answered him, ‘We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has made himself the Son of God.’”** Now he is a blasphemer that needs to die. The charges against him keep changing. When that does not work for the Jews, they threaten Pilate with retaliatory action. Listen John 19:12, **“From then on Pilate sought to release him, but the Jews cried out, ‘If you release this man, you are not Caesar’s friend. Everyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar.’”** As if they are loyal subjects of Caesar. They are out for blood, and nothing but the most humiliating death of Jesus will do. It is incredible the hatred that Jesus engenders.

And we come today to the verdict of Pilate, and his offer to the Jews, and the response of the Jews who had gathered early in the morning. And it is amazing to see this passage because you really do see a couple of things. One is that the glory and character of our Lord and Saviour. No earthly court in the end can bring charges against him. The witnesses and the court of the religious leaders couldn’t do it, and now before the secular powers that be, Jesus is exonerated. And here we see the glory of the One who has come to offer his life as that perfect sacrifice for sin. The other stunning thing you see in the text is who is released. We all know this historical situation, no doubt it has been preached to you at Easter and at other times. The Jews would rather have a notorious convict released rather than Jesus. But that notorious convict is a picture of us. When we see his crimes and sinfulness and lawlessness, that is a picture of our crimes and sinfulness. I can remember reading just a little while ago that no person has ever conceived the true depth nor the cost of his sinfulness.

We truly do not realize how saturated we are and were in sin, and how our dead and sinful hearts controlled us. The only reason why we never sinned more or even more heinously is that we lacked the opportunity to display our sinful hearts. And that

restraint was none other than the grace of God. And the other thing we never realize is the full extent of what our sin deserves. God is of infinite value. It derives an infinite penalty and God's infinite penalty against sin is not over the top. God's judgment is always right and fair. These historical narratives teach us about ourselves. They do not build up our self esteem but quite the opposite. They bring us low. They humble us. And that is a good thing, because proud people do not want to admit what their sin deserves. Proud people do not want the God of glory. And on the other side God is opposed to the proud but gives grace to the humble. Have you been humbled by the gospel? Are you being humbled by the gospel and what your sin deserves?

Because here is the thing, if you think highly of yourself, you can never see the extent and the magnitude of the love of God for sinners who deserve the opposite. If we are pretty good people, then this kind of treatment of Jesus makes no sense. God would be unjust and wicked. And just like no one has ever realized the full extent and cost of sin, no one has ever realized the full extent of the love of God in the sacrifice of his dear Son. We can grow but we cannot fathom the full height and grandeur of this love. We complain so much about our lives and difficulties because we really think we deserve better. We really have great thoughts about ourselves and little thoughts about God. I want us to look at this brief section and really see the grandeur of God's love in the backdrop of such sin. The contrast could not be greater in this passage.

1. Let us look at the text, and truly see what is going on. Vv. 36b-40.

There are so many details that we could do a whole sermon here, but I do not want to lose the central thrust of this passage. We must remember what is coming to pass is exactly what God wants to come to pass. His ordained will is coming to pass. Nothing here is by mistake, just like nothing in our lives is by mistake. It pleased the Lord to crush him and put him to grief. But what is also happening is the people involved in this passage are not chess pieces on the divine game board being moved around without any thought or decision. These individuals are making real decisions that they are culpable for and will be held accountable for. There is no "God made me do it." or even "the devil made me do it." These are real actions and decisions that people are making which makes the grace and love of God toward sinners that much more outstanding and amazing.

Now look at verse 36 and the official verdict of Pilate here, "**After he had said this, he went back outside to the Jews and told them, 'I find no guilt in him.'**" Now after his interrogation with Jesus, and after he even rejects him speaking about the truth and being the truth, he goes out to the people. And no doubt it is getting later in the morning. More people are milling about. Word about the arrest and the trial of Jesus is quickly spreading. And after interrogating Jesus he realizes that his kingdom, if he really has one in Pilate's opinion is no threat to Rome and certainly is not rising up to resist Rome or Roman rule in any way. And this is his official pronouncement. It would be like in our court system where everyone is asked to rise, and the defendant is asked to rise, and the verdict is read out, "We find the defendant not guilty." And think of the verdict because Jesus is not worthy of any punishment let alone death. No guilt!

Now that should be the end of the case but Pilate knows that the Jews want blood so he is willing to cause them to save face. And I think many people think that Pilate is wanting to do right, but if he did he would have quickly released Jesus, but he

more concerned about his position and his own political future than anything, so he tries to placate the Jewish religious leaders by an offer. Look at verse 39, **“But you have a custom that I should release one man for you at the Passover. So do you want me to release to you the King of the Jews?”** Now let me say there is no historical records outside the scripture of this custom. It might have been around for a couple of years, and it might have been that no one significant was ever released. But no doubt the custom was to placate the Jews. The Passover celebrated God’s deliverance from Egyptian bondage, and here is someone being released from bondage. No doubt it was to create some loyalty to Rome.

And there are a couple of things we should say about this offer. One is that it should never have been made. This is not justice or mercy here. Jesus has just been pronounced innocent of all charges, therefore he should be set free. This is a vile act of withholding or altering justice by a wicked man. The other thing is Pilate hatred of the religious leaders and even the people of Israel, because one of the charges is that Jesus is this rival king to Caesar, and look at the offer, **“So do you want me to release to you the King of the Jews?”** He pronounces him king of the Jews. And again, what a sight Jesus would have been. There would be dried blood and spit in his face. He would look nothing like royalty. This is your king and you are such a weak and despicable and pathetic nation. This would have infuriated the religious leaders.

Now we are told over in the other gospels that Pilate gave a choice between Barabbas and Jesus. Listen to how it is recorded in Matthew 27:15-18, **“Now at the feast the governor was accustomed to release for the crowd any one prisoner whom they wanted. And they had then a notorious prisoner called Barabbas. So when they had gathered, 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.”** As the crowd became larger, Pilate thought this would be an easy decision, he would placate the religious leaders in that he did something, but the will of the people would prevailed, but what he did not count on was how far the influence of the religious leaders had reached, because look at the last verse in this chapter, **“They cried out again, ‘Not this man, but Barabbas!’ Now Barabbas was a robber.”**

Now we do learn much about this man Barabbas. The word “robber” here is more than a thief. He used violence in order to line his pockets. Matthew says that he was “a notorious prisoner,” in other words, one whom the Jews would have agreed needed to be arrested and executed. Over the gospel of Mark we read that he was an insurrectionist. So here is one who is really guilty of the crime that Jesus was accused of. He probably was a zealot who wanted to actually overthrow the Roman rule. It was this one who Pilate brought forward. But the people, no doubt under the influence of the religious leaders, and Jesus now looking like no Messiah who would deliver them from Roman rule, cried out for Barabbas and therefore the execution of Jesus. It is incredible. Two trials now would have taken place before Pilate. One for Barabbas and the official pronouncement by Pilate was guilty, and the other trial for Jesus, and he is found innocent. You cannot help but see the glory of the one who came to give his life for the guilty. He came to give his life as that ransom price.

And I want you to think about everything that is taking place. They planned that very day three executions — three criminals would die a horrible death. There should be three thieves but there will only be two. There will be one who is not guilty of the crimes but will be executed in the place of another. The big idea of the cross is the doctrine called penal substitution. There is a penalty substitute. You see this is the sacrifice system in that the innocent animal is sacrificed for the sins against God, the crimes against God for the guilty. No one among the Romans or the Jews would argue that Barabbas does not deserve to die. He is notorious in the sight of all, but his life will be spared. Why? There will be another who will take his place. Wow, do you see the love of Christ? Jesus really did come to die for his enemies. He really did come to take the penalty that others deserve. This whole incident might seem incidental but it is not. It is here for a reason. Jesus is our great penalty substitute.

2. We need to see this passage personally.

The first thing that we can say is about our Saviour, and it is incredible how people throughout the last two thousand years have tried to bring something against Jesus but never can. The verdict of Pilate on Jesus is a public verdict so that all may know he is not guilty. But he is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. There is no sin, no transgression, and no evil found in Jesus. He is perfect in righteousness and holiness and justice. Where injustice is all around him, he stands as the perfectly righteous one. Listen to 1 Peter 2:22-23, **“He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.”** This must of amazed Pilate — the way that Jesus defended himself. Usually when people defend themselves they lash out at their accusers. Here and all the way through the life of Jesus, there is never any recorded sin coming from his lips. James says the one who can control his tongue is perfect. Gossip, slander, lying, embellishments are so natural from our sinful lips. Jesus is perfect. Think of what John is indicating in this gospel. This one really is like us in that he is human, but so unlike us because he is perfectly God-like — being God. He is perfectly holy that not even his enemies or the secular authorities can bring any charge against him.

And it is so different than us. If we come into the throne room of God, if our lives are laid bare, the verdict handed down by Pilate of Jesus cannot be handed down to us. We are guilty. Our sin creates an infinite distance between us and God, and makes us recipients of judgment. But this verdict that is handed down by Pilate’s own will and through the providence of God is our hope. Jesus’ innocence and sinlessness qualifies him to be our substitute. Without that there is no hope. God is so good! He meets our greatest need, in which all other needs fail to measure up. How often all of us forget who Jesus is or we let the good news grow old and stale. We can read through these narratives and not realize this is personal. This was done for us.

The second thing we see is the fickleness of the human heart. You can see that with Pilate. He knows the right thing to do. He certainly is an evil and wicked man, but that sense of justice is still built into every person and part and parcel of the image of God in us. And really, even when he defends Jesus, it really is not a sense where he cares about justice or the innocence of Christ, but word was sent from his wife about a prophetic dream she has and they put a lot of stock in these kinds of dreams. And his

defence of Jesus probably has more to do with that than his sense of justice. Don't feel sorry for him. He wants to release Jesus but doesn't because he fears the Jews causing trouble for him with Rome. He cares more for himself than justice.

We also see how fickle the crowds are. And they really are a picture of the heart of all humanity. Certainly the unsaved. People will get excited about Jesus if he will give them what he wants. So if Jesus will deliver on my best life now. Think of the crowds and what they were hoping for as they praised Jesus and sang "hosanna in the highest." They were hoping for their best life now. They were hoping for prosperity of this new kingdom and the deliverance from Rome and no more taxes. But when Jesus appears before them as beaten and bloodied, they are ready to call for his execution. They are ready to be bitter against him. They do not want a Messiah and Saviour like this, but it is this very Saviour that they need most. They need a bloodied and beaten Saviour. They need a Messiah who would be willing to die for their sins and appease the wrath of God. Rome is not their greatest threat — God is, and he is also there only hope. The fact is that people do not want to admit this is their greatest need and every other need pales as insignificant compared to this need.

And we can see very easily today why people reject Christ. They do not want to see their sin, and the need of forgiveness. And when we see Jesus here it is the ever present reminder of the cost of sin. But it is amazing how we can also be so fickle. We can be so thankful for the Saviour we have, and then the next minute complain about our lives and the way God has treated us. We so often forget the great grace in our lives and that he has met our need. And as you look at the last week, what has characterized our lives — thankfulness, realizing the Saviour we have, or bitterness? When we are bitter we are saying like the fickle crowds we want a different Saviour, we want a different deliverer. We need to keep before our hearts and lives are greatest need. This is the Jesus we need.

And you see that in Barabbas. Because whether we like to admit or not, we are Barabbas. Barabbas would be one of those so called "great sinners" where everyone would say if God is just and loving then he deserves to be judged. Everlasting judgment for him? Sure thing. He deserves it. We have no problem seeing that Hitler, Stalin, Saddam Husain and others deserve judgment. Our problem is admitting that we deserve judgment. Barabbas deserves judgment. And here is the glory of this text, his judgment falls on another. Jesus becomes his substitute. He willingly goes to that cross prepared for another man. He goes in his stead. And think of it, because we are Barabbas. We deserve an eternity under the wrath and judgment of God, but our judgment fell on another. It fell on Jesus Christ. He took our place. And as we see it, all we can do is glory in Christ. Jesus died for those who are sinners. He died to take the punishment we deserve.

And here is once again a picture of the whole gospel and the reason why Jesus came. And the gospel never gets old. We never wear out the message or the need of the cross. Think of it, you might have had a horrible week. You might have fallen in sin and blown it, and you are here this evening feeling guilty. And as you look at Barabbas you can identify with him. And you wonder what hope there is for you? Your hope is that no matter how deep your transgression God's grace is so much deeper. The cross of Jesus really does cover it all. And even on my best days, sin is still part and parcel of my life. I am still not beyond the need of his grace. We are Barabbas, but that sin and

guilt of who we are is transferred to another. Barabbas gets what Jesus deserved. He got released from judgment even though condemned. And Jesus took on what Barabbas deserved even though innocent of all crimes. It is such a glorious picture. I do not know what you are struggling with today, but here is my plea, nothing changes us in the midst of all our trials and struggles and even our failures than seeing Jesus, the innocent one loved us enough to take our place. One suffered once and for all in my place. Oh, Christian, preach this message to your heart. It will truly change and keep changing your heart. The most zealous and passionate believers are those who keep the gospel of grace before their hearts and their lives. In that gospel we see who we are, but we also see who Christ is, and we see One who is greater than our need. Look to him who is the Author and Finisher of our faith!