Extreme Mercy

Third in the series “That Same Power”

# Scripture: Matt. 27:15-26

# Key Thought: The people's choice of Barabbas illustrated how Jesus substituted for us.

# Intro:

Imagine how you would have felt if you had been Barabbas. Likely, Barabbas was headed for execution. He was in prison for being an insurrectionist, and had committed murder during an uprising (Mark 15:7). Matthew says he was a notorious prisoner. John says he was a robber (John 18:40). He was the kind of prisoner who would have been crucified.

I imagine that the center cross was to be his? Imagine how he must have felt to discover that Jesus had taken his place.

# The Choice of Barabbas

## Barabbas’ full name

There is an interesting historical fact that adds further drama to the narrative of the choice of Jesus. Twice Pilate uses the phrase “Jesus who is called Christ” (vv 17, 21). The reason for this becomes clear when we discover that in some of the very oldest versions Barabbas is named Jesus Barabbas (Barclay p. 361). This reading was known to Origen and Jerome, very early church scholars, who both thought it was correct. Most modern translators agree and have included it in their translations. It makes Pilate’s words make much more sense. He is asking the crowd for a choice between Jesus Barabbas, a rebel against the government, and a murderer, and Jesus who is called Christ. Under the influence of the Jewish leaders they shout for the release of Jesus Barabbas and the crucifixion of Jesus who is called Christ. Pilate was hoping they would choose the good man over the murderer, but the chief priest’s contrary influence won out.

## The irony of the choice

The irony of this choice is incredible. First, the name, Jesus, comes from the idea of salvation (Matt. 1:21). Jesus who is called Christ had said, “The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10).

* Barabbas means “Son of the father,” father being a term for a Jewish teacher and leader (Barclay). So the name Barabbas itself speaks of the choice the people were making. The people were choosing the influence of the Jewish teachers and leaders over that of the true Anointed One who came from the heavenly Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:14). They listened to the Jewish teachers and choose Jesus Barabbas. Jesus who is called the Christ had warned, “I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 5:20).
* Second, being a rebel, maybe a Zealot (J. Sidlow Baxter in Explore the Book), Jesus Barabbas represents salvation by political and even violent means. This was the way the disciples mistakenly thought the Kingdom would come. On the night Jesus was betrayed, Peter drew his sword to start the battle. But Jesus forbade him. Earthly politics and military action was the way the Jews also thought they would be rescued from the Romans. Their choice of Jesus Barabbas, the insurrectionist, was ironically consistent with that erroneous view. In rejecting Jesus who is called Christ, they rejected God’s way to salvation, a salvation that changes hearts and transforms minds first. Jesus who is called the Christ rules a heavenly kingdom as he answered Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place” (John 18:36).
* In a third irony, Jesus Barabbas was a robber (John 18:40). Jesus who is called Christ accused the Jewish leaders of turning God’s house into a “den of robbers” (Mark 11:17). Jesus who is the Christ warned that the thief comes to “steal and kill and destroy.” But in contrast “I am come that they may have life and have it to the full” (John 10:10). In choosing Jesus Barabbas, the people unwittingly choose allegiance to the Enemy of our souls, the one who steals from our lives and rejected the Anointed One who gives life.

## A lesson in God’s mercy

But back to the story. Barabbas was undoubtedly expecting to be crucified sooner or later. It was the way people like him died at the hands of the Romans. The punishment was ruled too cruel to be inflicted on Roman citizens, but it could be administered criminals from conquered peoples like the Jews.

Imagine how Barabbas felt to discover that Jesus who is called the Christ had taken his place. Not just for a day, but he was now free to go! Released! No longer under sentence of death! His penalty had been paid by another Jesus. The strips he had deserved had fallen on another! Shivers must have gone up his back as he thought about the torture of flogging that he knew Jesus who is called Christ would endure in his place. It was what the Romans did to one before they crucified you. He needed to know more about this man who had taken his place. He needed to think about what he would do with his life that had been suddenly restored to him as a free gift all because of Jesus, the Christ.

Does that sound a lot like you and I? It should.

He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities;
The punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.
We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way;
And the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. Isa 53:5-6 NIV

# Three Pentateuch illustrations of Christ as our Substitute

The idea of Jesus as our substitute should not surprise us at all. It is consistently illustrated or pre-figured in Old Testament events and practices. Let’s consider three of these.

## Abraham and Isaac

In Genesis chapter 22 we read the story about how Abraham was instructed to take his only son Isaac to the region of Moriah and sacrifice him there as a burnt offering. God had no intentions of allowing Abraham to carry through with this but he was using something common in the surrounding cultures as a test for Abraham. Abraham obeyed immediately. He traveled to the assigned spot and as they were on the way, Isaac noted that they had everything for the sacrifice except an animal. So Isaac asked his father, “Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” (Gen. 22:7) Abraham replied that God would provide the lamb for the burnt offering. On top of the mountain, Abraham bound the boy and drew the knife, but God stopped him. Abraham looked up, and they are caught by its horns in a thicket was a ram. God had indeed provided. Abraham and Isaac offered the ram to God. So we are told that Abraham called the place, “The Lord will provide.” God provided a substitute for the boy Isaac on Mount Moriah. (Mt. Moriah is the place where the temple of the Lord was later built by Solomon (2 Chr. 3:1).)

According to the writer of Hebrews, the saints of God of the Old Testament look forward to what God was going to do. But it is in Jesus, that the ultimate answer has been provided.

Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.

12 Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, 2 looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.
 Heb 11:39-12:2 NRSV

## The sacrifice of atonement

Under the Mosaic covenant, one offering that the people of Israel could offer was called the burnt offering. It was a sacrifice of atonement. But there was one thing that was very interesting about the ritual for this offering and several other ones. When the worshiper presented the animal for sacrifice, God desired that the worshiper feel very identified with the animal. For example, the instructions concerning the burnt offering read:

You are to lay your hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it will be accepted on your behalf to make atonement for you. Lev 1:4

So the sacrifice of atonement substituted for the worshiper. The same ritual was followed for the sin offering, for example (Lev. 4:4, 15, 24, and 29) and the principal applied whether the offering was being made for the sin of an individual or for the sin of the group.

Does this not perfectly foreshadow what Paul wrote about Jesus in Romans?

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. Romans 3:23-25 NIV

## The scapegoat

Once a year, the high priest of Israel had to carry out special sacrifices of atonement for the nation. One of these rituals involves two goats. One of the goats would be sacrificed and the other one, called the scapegoat, would be treated differently.

 “When Aaron has finished making atonement for the Most Holy Place, the tent of meeting and the altar, he shall bring forward the live goat. He is to lay both hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites—all their sins—and put them on the goat’s head. He shall send the goat away into the wilderness in the care of someone appointed for the task. The goat will carry on itself all their sins to a remote place; and the man shall release it in the wilderness. Lev 16:20-22

In some literal sense, the scapegoat was to carry away the sins of the nation. In some sense, the goat bore away the sins. It was a dramatized illustration of how God took away from Israel the guilt and penalty for their sins.

I cannot help but think of Paul’s words concerning Jesus.

God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. 2 Cor 5:21 NIV

Or what about what Peter said about the sacrifice of Jesus?

“He himself bore our sins” in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; “by his wounds you have been healed.” 1 Peter 2:24

So all three of these Old Testament incidents provide illustrative hints ahead of time of how God would substitute his own Son in our place. Looking back at them, our understanding of what Jesus has done for us is greatly enriched. In Jesus, God has provided the atonement for our sins that we could not provide for ourselves. Jesus indeed became the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, the sacrificial lamb provided for you and me. As we identify with him, putting our hands on him, to use the imagery of the Old Testament sacrifices, then we receive the benefits of his sacrifice for us. So there’s more to it than just knowing in our heads what Jesus has done. We must identify personally with what he has done and accept it as being done for us. When we do, Jesus removes our sins too. Just as the scapegoat carried the sins of Israel into the wilderness, Jesus has removed our sins as far as the east is from the west (Ps. 103:12).

# Conclusion:

Chuck Colson in The Faith

Christ comes to the cross to die, giving his righteous life for us; we in turn come to the cross to die, surrendering our old sinful life for him. Thereafter Christ lives in us (Galatians 2:20). P. 113

Paul writes that “God credits righteousness apart from works” (Romans 4:6). Think of the term credit in this way: God treats Jesus’ substitutionary, atoning death as provision of the righteousness that is, in a sense, deposited in the bank. You are act of faith is to believe that God has done this, whereby that righteousness is credited to your account. From then on you begin drawing on it and as you live a new life you invest it by producing good works. P. 114

I close with the story I believe from Colson about visiting a solitary confinement cell. – Prisoners had carved a huge life-sized crucifix there. The Christian prisoner escorting him said, “He’s doing time for us.” Jesus has indeed “done the time” in our place. His sacrifice is completed. Now it is up to us to receive its benefits by faith, appropriating to ourselves what God has provided through Jesus.