

Lesson 103 – THE JUST FOR THE UNJUST

Matthew 27:15-26

(Matt. 27:15-17) – The Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, had made it a custom that once a year during the Passover, in order to gain favor with the Jews, he would “*RELEASE UNTO THE PEOPLE A PRISONER*” of their choosing. At that time, there was a “*NOTABLE PRISONER, CALLED BARABBAS*.” Barabbas was infamous among the Jews. He was a thief and a robber and was guilty of sedition. He had joined with others in an insurrection, and had committed murder in it (John 18:40; Luke 23:19). And so, according to Roman law, he was deserving of death. Pilate presented the people with a choice between the criminal, Barabbas, and “*JESUS WHICH IS CALLED CHRIST*,” i.e. the Anointed One, the Messiah.

(Matt. 27:18-19) – “*FOR HE KNEW THAT FOR ENVY THEY HAD DELIVERED HIM.*”

Pilate knew that it was for unjust reasons that the Pharisees had brought Jesus to him to be tried. It was their own jealousy and hatred because the multitudes had followed Jesus because of the miracles. They hated Him, and they resented that the people would consider this Jesus of Nazareth to be their long-awaited Messiah. His message of salvation by God’s free and sovereign grace exposed their false message of salvation by works (John 3:19-20; 15:18—16:3; cf. Rom. 9:31—10:4).

We can see from other scriptural accounts of Pilate’s role in the trial of Jesus that his conscience was already bothering him when his wife sent him a message concerning Jesus, “*SAYING, HAVE THOU NOTHING TO DO WITH THAT JUST MAN: FOR I HAVE SUFFERED MANY THINGS THIS DAY IN A DREAM BECAUSE OF HIM.*” Pilate had determined that Jesus was not guilty of the charges that sinful men brought against Him (Luke 23:14, 22; John 18:38). Commentators have speculated over who sent Pilate’s wife this dream. Some have said that Satan sent it to try to hinder the death of Christ, and so stop man’s redemption and salvation by it. But this gives too much credit to the devil as if he knew the outcome of these events. Besides, the Lord Himself said that the devil was the evil motivator in the hatred of the Pharisees and scribes for Him (John 8:44).

We know the Lord God Almighty was in control of all these events, and when we consider Pilate’s own words and this dream given to trouble his wife, we see again that the point is made that Christ died “the JUST for the unjust” (1 Pet. 3:18). He was the innocent, unblemished, and unspotted Lamb Who was unjustly accused and condemned by sinful men. But He was “made sin” and guilty only by the sins of God’s elect imputed to Him as they were all “made the righteousness of God in Him” by His righteousness imputed to them (2 Cor. 5:21). He kept the law perfectly in thought, word, and deed (Matt. 5:17-18). He fulfilled all righteousness for His people to insure their complete salvation unto glory (Rom. 3:21-26; 10:4). He stood before His Father as the Surety of His people and was justly condemned in their place for their sins imputed to Him (Isa. 53).

(Matt. 27:20) – This shows how much man by nature is at enmity with God (Rom. 8:7). They hated Jesus and His message so much that they were willing to release a known murderer into society rather than release Jesus, an innocent man Who had done nothing but good. They *“PERSUADED THE MULTITUDE”* to choose Barabbas and reject Jesus. Remember that this natural hatred of God is prevalent in all of us by nature as we fell in and by Adam into a state of spiritual death and depravity. If we are brought to love Christ and His truth, it is all by God’s grace and power in Christ and not of our own volition (Eph. 2:1-10).

(Matt. 27:21-23) – Pilate was determined to release Jesus, but the crowd chose Barabbas and cried out for Jesus to be crucified (Acts 3:13-15). Pilate asked, *“WHY, WHAT EVIL HATH HE DONE?”* But the crowd *“CRIED OUT THE MORE, SAYING, LET HIM BE CRUCIFIED.”*

(Matt. 27:24-26) – Pilate realized that he could not persuade the crowd, so *“HE TOOK WATER, AND WASHED HIS HANDS BEFORE THE MULTITUDE, SAYING, I AM INNOCENT OF THE BLOOD OF THIS JUST PERSON: SEE YE TO IT.”* Pilate may have thought that this act would clear him of guilt, but it did not. As a magistrate of the people, he ought to have acted the part of an upright judge and not have yielded to their unjust request. He ought not to have scourged an innocent man, and much less have condemned Him to be crucified. However, as we have seen throughout this historical record of the sufferings unto death of Christ, there was much evil on the part of sinful men, yet much good on God’s part to save His people by His grace. Pilate bore a testimony to the innocence of Christ, but we know that Christ was guilty before His Father because of our sins imputed to Him.

Therefore, even though sinful men acted in evil to get what they wanted – *“HIS BLOOD BE ON US, AND ON OUR CHILDREN”* – they could not have harmed Jesus unless it was God’s sovereign purpose and will for His glory in the salvation of His elect through the obedience unto death of Christ – *“Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise Him; He hath put Him to grief: when Thou shalt make His soul an offering for sin, He shall see His seed, He shall prolong His days, and the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in His hand (Isa. 53:10; cf. Matt. 3:15-17; Heb. 10:7-14).* And they also could not have done any harm to Jesus unless He willingly submitted Himself to suffer and die for His people – *“As the Father knoweth Me, even so know I the Father: and I lay down My life for the sheep. And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear My voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd. Therefore doth My Father love Me, because I lay down My life, that I might take it again. No man taketh it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This commandment have I received of My Father” (John 10:15-18; cf. Heb. 12:2).* All through this dark event in the history of fallen mankind we see the sovereign will and glory of God in the Lord Jesus Christ.