



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

Taking Our Place

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An Unusual Trial

Even if you're not a lawyer; even if you've never been called for jury duty and selected to serve on a panel in a jury box; even if you've never been a defendant or a witness or even a spectator in an actual courtroom: it is still likely that you and nearly all other Americans have some familiarity with the legal process of a trial. We hear about prominent high-profile trials regularly in the news—including the recent trials of former Presidential aide Paul Manafort, comedian Bill Cosby, and even the perverted doctor at Michigan State who abused female athletes. We see courtroom dramas on TV and in movies (one of the funniest was the comedy film *My Cousin Vinny*, with Joe Pesci as a bumbling lawyer in a southern courtroom). But for many of us, the real-life courtroom drama that is most burned into our memories is the farcical murder trial of O.J. Simpson 23 years ago.

It was called the “Trial of the Century,” but should probably have been more accurately titled the “Circus Trial of the Century.” It had all the elements of a three-ring spectacular to please P.T. Barnum: a famous defendant with millions of fans from his football and movie career, a publicity-seeking judge who, astonishingly, allowed the entire proceedings to be televised live, incompetent police and prosecutors, clever defense attorneys, and racial overtones that divided the jury and the nation. American jurisprudence and American journalism did not reach their high-water marks of professionalism at the O.J. trial.

What we are going to read about today is the historic account of what could properly be labeled the “**Circus Trial of All Time.**” It resulted in the most stunning miscarriage of justice ever seen, the

most unjust and tragic of all mistaken verdicts, and the hurried, bloody execution within hours of the only truly and perfectly Innocent Man who ever lived. Everything about it was wrong, obscene, even absurd. Let's read one of the eyewitness accounts, noting the many irregularities and travesties of justice; then we will zoom the camera in on one unexpected participant in this circus.

The Trial of Jesus of Nazareth

The action has already begun when we pick it up in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 27. In the previous nine hours, we have seen Jesus arrested at midnight, roughed up and hauled before a hastily-arranged illegal session of the Jewish Supreme Court (called the Sanhedrin). In this Kangaroo Court, trumped-up false evidence is presented—though the incompetent witnesses can't keep their stories straight and contradict themselves. Jesus has no attorney or advocate. He is openly abused and beaten. All His rights as a citizen under Jewish law are blatantly violated.

This group of corrupt and self-serving politicians, having already decided in advance to condemn the prisoner before the trial in order to eliminate Him as a threat to their power, votes to proceed with the death penalty. Then Jesus is dragged across town to the Roman governor's palace—because the Jewish court knew they didn't have the legal right to carry out capital punishment. And so we pick up the action in the courtyard of Pontius Pilate, the governor.

Meanwhile Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?"

"You have said so," Jesus replied.

¹²When he was accused by the chief priests and the elders, he gave no answer. ¹³Then Pilate asked him, "Don't you hear the testimony they are bringing against you?" ¹⁴But Jesus made no reply, not even to a single charge—to the great amazement of the governor.

Matthew 27:11-14

Why should Jesus bother to try to defend Himself against such blatant bias and prejudice? His silence speaks louder of His innocence than the deafening screams and curses from the Jewish politicians. Pilate is out of his element here. He has presided over a lot of trials, but never one with a defendant like this one. He starts scrambling in his brain to find a way to get out of this mess, and hits upon a desperate idea.

Now it was the governor's custom at the festival to release a prisoner chosen by the crowd. ¹⁶At that time they had a well-known prisoner whose name was Jesus Barabbas. ¹⁷So when the crowd had gathered, Pilate asked them, "Which one do you want me to release to you: Jesus Barabbas, or Jesus who is called the Messiah?" ¹⁸For he knew it was out of self-interest that they had handed Jesus over to him.

Matthew 27:15-18

This could be the solution the governor is desperately seeking. This Barabbas was a notorious criminal, Public Enemy Number One, hated by everyone. He had led an armed gang that committed mass violence. Today we would call him a terrorist. He was the equivalent of the sick young man who shot the students at the high school in Parkland, or one of the 9/11 hijackers. No sane, peace-loving citizen would want Barabbas to be let loose into their streets again. He had been rightly given the death sentence. He was scheduled to die on a cross that very afternoon, along with two of his partners in crime. Pilate thought he'd come up with a brilliant plan to release this obviously innocent man, Jesus of Nazareth. He knew the politicians' charges were a scam, a conspiracy, a collusion. But then things take a personal turn, complicating everything for Pilate.

While Pilate was sitting on the judge's seat, his wife sent him this message: "Don't have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him."

Matthew 27:19

Now this is pressure: if Pilate doesn't release Jesus, his wife will never let him hear the end of it. Things are going to get very nasty in his marriage. Buffeted by pressure from home, he now gets pressure from the opposite direction.

But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus executed.

²¹"Which of the two do you want me to release to you?" asked the governor.

"Barabbas," they answered.

²²"What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called the Messiah?" Pilate asked.

They all answered, "Crucify him!"

²³"Why? What crime has he committed?" asked Pilate.

But they shouted all the louder, "Crucify him!"

Matthew 27:20-23

The politicians have obviously rigged this. They pressured—or perhaps even paid—the crowd to join with them in their bloodlust to see Jesus killed. The best archaeological evidence indicates that this scene happened inside the walled courtyard of the Governor's Palace, not out in a public square where Pilate could get a more accurate reading of the sense of the general population. The Pharisees and their gang had made sure that their people were the only ones inside the courtyard. Had Pilate taken the time to do a quick Gallup Poll of the sentiments of the people of Jerusalem, he would have found that Jesus was immensely popular with the common people. They had welcomed Him to town just a few days earlier with an impromptu ticker-tape parade. But the politicians carefully controlled what Pilate saw and heard, distorting his judgment. If ever there was "fake news" and a distortion of the truth, it was this effort to portray Jesus as unpopular and an enemy of the people.

When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. "I am innocent of this man's blood," he said. "It is your responsibility!"

²⁵All the people answered, “His blood is on us and on our children!”

²⁶Then he released Barabbas to them. But he had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.

Matthew 27:24-26

People in public office are not always, unfortunately, men and women of moral courage and strong convictions. Often they are spineless, prone to give in to pressure, weak and wavering. That’s the kind of guy this Pontius Pilate was. He may have talked and acted tough, but when pressed to the wall he gave in. Trying to provide cover and “deniability,” he attempted to deflect blame by “washing his hands” (which is where that cliché comes from). It, of course, failed. All of history knows him as the man who condemned the Son of God to death and presided over the most ridiculous circus trial ever.

And it was a circus! In a civil trial, there is typically a plaintiff and a defendant. Let’s say that the plaintiff was injured in a car accident, and is represented by Morgan & Morgan; the defendant is an insurance company that wants to deny or minimize damages. Similarly, in a criminal trial, there is typically a prosecutor representing the government, accusing a person of committing a crime, and a defendant and his or her attorney seeking to convince the judge and jury that they are innocent. But where else have we ever seen a trial where two people are put before a mob, with one of them to be immediately executed and the other immediately set free? What a ridiculous, absurd, unprecedented scenario!

The Experience of Barabbas

Let’s think about this character Barabbas—as disgusting and vile and worthy of death as anyone who has ever been behind bars. Ironically, his given first name was also Jesus. So this was a forced choice of Jesus or Jesus. Jesus Barabbas had been a man of cruelty and hate, and when he woke in his stinking cell on death row that morning he knew that it would be his final day. He dreaded the thought of the agony of crucifixion. There was now no way out for him, so he

thought. He'd lived by violence and would now die a violent death. If he still had any remaining conscience or thoughts of God, he knew there was no forgiveness or mercy for him. If he'd had a lawyer (and it is doubtful the Romans even allowed him one), that lawyer would have had to admit that all appeals were hopeless.

But then, in one of the most shocking and dizzying turns of fortune we could ever imagine, Barabbas was dragged from his cell into the sunlight in front of the judge and the mob-jury and, within minutes, he was a free man. How could this have happened? As he staggered out of the palace, rubbing his wrists where the handcuffs had been, he must have thought it was all a dream.

For 2,000 years people have speculated about what the rest of the story of Barabbas might have been. Did he return to a life of crime? Did he run as far away from Jerusalem as he could and move to another country? Or did he follow the mob that trailed the condemned man carrying His cross and watch Jesus of Nazareth die in his place? Some speculative historical novels have been written about Barabbas, telling a story of his conversion to faith in Christ (similar to the plot of the classic novel and film *The Robe*, which speculated that the centurion who supervised the crucifixion and won Christ's robe in a dice game may have become a believer himself). Though we don't know for sure, it is possible that Barabbas **did** have a change of heart. Other characters named in the Gospel accounts went on to be significant figures in the life of the church of the 1st century. Imagine the story Barabbas would tell if that had happened. "He died for me. Jesus my Savior took my place. He was my substitute: the innocent One who died instead of me, the guilty one."

We are all Barabbas

Barabbas is, indeed, the only person who literally could say that Jesus died in his place. But in a deeper spiritual sense every single one of us is Barabbas. Jesus took **our** place. He died carrying **our** sins and our guilt. He gave His life that **we** might be set free.

The sudden and mind-boggling process that happened for Barabbas cast him in a passive mode. He didn't seek or appeal for clemency. It was handed to him as an unexpected gift. What Jesus did for you and me is also an indescribable gift. **But it is not applied to us automatically.** It is the choice presented to every man and woman: **Will you** receive the gift of His grace (in taking your place to pay for sin and to reconcile you to God), or will you refuse it? All who hear the Christian message (known as The Gospel) have a right to choose. Many of you here today have already made that decision. Others are still wrestling with it, not sure if they want to reach out and take it by faith.

The Bad News and the Good News

Finally, let's address the hot-button issue of what has been labeled the "exclusive claims" of the Christian faith. Many modern people, raised in a climate in which tolerance and acceptance of everyone and everything is the presumed highest virtue, have criticized the Church for claiming that Jesus is the only way to God. We've been accused of being narrow-minded bigots, labeled as the worst possible examples of prejudice. And because of this caricature, some have refused to even consider who Jesus is and what He might mean to them.

There is no question that tolerance and mutual respect are absolutely essential to civil life and relationships in a very diverse world. In past centuries, when countries were far separated from each other by distance and people rarely, if ever, met someone of a different nationality, race, or religious background, it was natural to judge and label people who were different. But today the world has shrunk. We can easily go to other places, and other people who are very dissimilar to us can easily come to us. We should respect everyone and treat them properly. In fact, the ethical teachings of Jesus make that mandatory: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

But respecting and loving others does not require that we give up our own culture and values, nor must we believe that all ideas and all faiths are equal. To be truly loving and respectful, we have a duty

to share with others what we have found—not to coerce them, but to give them a chance to hear what is truly “good news.” This is why we generously give to empower missionaries in our own community and around the globe: because we are convinced that all people deserve to hear about the greatest Man who ever lived, about what He taught, about what He did for us, and about how they, too, can experience the blessings He offers. We don’t proclaim Christ because we think **we** are superior. We just humbly tell what we have found, in the common phrase of centuries ago, “as one beggar telling another beggar where to find an unlimited supply of bread.”

Think of it in this way. Your doctor has run a battery of tests on you, and sits down in the examining room to give you the results. He or she has bad news and good news. The bad news is that you have a fatal disease, and if it’s not treated there is every reason to assume it will kill you. The good news is that a new medicine has just been approved by the FDA that can cure this disease. It has been through rigorous clinical trials, and has a cure rate of 100%. And one pill is all it takes. The doctor’s hand is stretched out with a pill in the palm.

It’s your choice. You can take your chances that you will be able to survive without the pill. You can decide to go to other doctors, or try other remedies, or do nothing and hope you’re lucky enough to survive. Or you can take the cure.

Many people around the world who haven’t heard about Jesus are trying to find the cure for the mortal disease of the human soul in other ways. It’s not my place or yours to judge them. I’m not God, nor are you. What He does with those who have never heard of the Savior is not our right to say. But here’s what I can say with certainty: I’ve tried the cure, and it works. And if anyone will do likewise, they will not be disappointed. ■