

## ***The Substitute***

### ***Mark 15:1-15***

***I've always known my enemy  
Is not this world of rules; it's me.  
And yet I loathed the law, the priests,  
The sacrifices and the feasts,***

***For I was captive long before  
I sat behind that dungeon door.  
And even when they turned the key  
To let me out I wasn't free.***

***I couldn't scrub out of my mind,  
That He whose hands were always kind  
Were nailed to wood instead of mine.  
That's why I need no miracle or sign.***

***The shredded back and swollen face  
Of Him who chose to take my place  
Delivers me from death's dark sting  
And I am free, for He's my King.***

The sun rose reluctantly, slanting dusty gold bars down onto narrow side streets and chasing shadows from every valley. But a darkness remained that dawn couldn't dig it out.

Glancing out a window of his Jerusalem villa, Caiaphas saw the first slice of sun shining above the Mount of Olives. Best to call the midnight meeting a caucus rather than an actual trial, he thought.

Still, it was successful. The Sanhedrin was solidly behind him. And the Carpenter was condemned.

But it was both unofficial and impotent. And now that daylight had come, the high priest knew it was time to finish the matter.

***Early in the morning the chief priests with the elders and scribes and the whole Council, immediately held a consultation; and binding Jesus, they led Him away and delivered Him to Pilate. Verse 1***

Early that morning, the council held an official meeting to formally condemn Christ. But that death sentence meant nothing.

The Jews had no power to execute. Only the ruling Romans could do that. So temple policemen led Jesus down the narrow streets to Antonia, the Roman fortress that loomed over the northwest corner of the temple courtyard. Caiaphas and other council members followed but stopped at the courtyard outside the gate.

The bearded old Jews irritated Pontius Pilate. But there was no avoiding the matter. So he

walked to the door to meet them.

All the Jews outside the gate agreed on one thing. The issue was Jesus' guilt. They were wrong about that, of course.

It was really about their own guilt.

## *The Ruler*

Pontius Pilate was a man in the middle. Far from Rome in a hostile land, he was surrounded by people who hated everything Roman and were always ready to riot. Worse yet, were the power hungry priests who ruled over the temple.

But worst of all was Rome itself. Caesar was worlds away across the Mediterranean. But even in Palestine, he had ears with hearing sharp enough to sense the slightest ripple of disorder.

As a professional politician, Pilate knew Caesar was interested in peace and taxes. Anything that stanching the flow of funds was critical. And so was even a hint of rebellion.

But Pilate was also sworn to administer Roman justice. That meant the rule of law: Roman law. So the appointed procurator knew the matter before him was both delicate and dangerous.

He listened as the ruling Jews spat out charges against Jesus. Then the governor took the Master inside to interrogate Him.

He had heard about the Healer and Teacher from Galilee. But the old priests charged He was leading an insurrection, organizing an uprising against Rome. So only one question really mattered.

***Pilate questioned Him, "Are You the King of the Jews?" And He answered him, "It is as you say." Verse 2***

At His midnight trial, Jesus answered the priests' pointed question with an unequivocal, *I am*. But this time, while His answer was still affirmative, it was detached and distant: *You say*.

Mark limited himself to Pilate's first interrogation of Jesus. John's account is much more complete. And after the Redeemer returned from being examined by Herod Antipas, He revealed why He was so careful in His earlier answer.

***Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm." Therefore Pilate said to Him, "So You are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say correctly that I am a king. For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world," John 18:36-37***

In Pilate's mind, a king was a ruler who forced people to submit to his authority. It didn't matter what those people felt about such a king. All that mattered was that they submitted and obeyed.

But our loving Lord has never been that kind of a king. He is a Ruler who refuses to reign over anyone who doesn't willingly choose to love Him and live for Him. So a simple *yes* to Pilate's question would have been misleading.

But whether or not Jesus is a King has never been what really matters. Both then and now, only one question counts.

Is Jesus our own king? Polluted by politics and poisoned by pride, the governor had no intention of facing that issue.

Still, one thing was clear to the procurator. Jesus was not guilty of anything. The Jews were just jealous of His popularity with the people. So, again and again, Pilate tried to secure our Savior's release. But each time, the crowd shouted him down.

***They shouted back, “Crucify Him!” But Pilate said to them, “Why, what evil has He done?” But they shouted all the more, “Crucify Him!” Verses 13-14***

It wasn't that Pilate didn't know what he should do. Neither was it that he had any doubts about the Master's utter innocence.

***...he went out again to the Jews and said to them, “I find no guilt in Him.” John 18:38***

Pilate knew the High Priest's charges were false. But he dared not go against the clamor of the crowd. Finally, he settled the matter in his mind and called for a bowl of clean water.

***...he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd, saying, “I am innocent of this Man's blood; see to that yourselves.” Matthew 27:24***

However, no man is his own judge. Merely pronouncing we are innocent means nothing. It doesn't matter if we say aren't guilty.

What really counts is what we do. And Pilate was clearly guilty. For one thing, he disobeyed God's Law when he gave in to the crowd rather than administering justice as he was sworn to do.

But that wasn't his greatest sin. Pilate refused to receive Christ as his King. And that is the sin of all sins. Then and now, no man can claim to be free from sin if he will not submit to Christ as King.

Pontius Pilate was a ship at sea with neither a rudder nor an anchor. Whatever winds blew across his bow drove him wherever they chose. He responded to pressures instead of principles.

And that is always a mistake. We must determine, first, last and always, to please God. True, just as it was for Pilate, sometimes the price of doing that is exceedingly expensive.

But it is much more expensive not to.

## ***The Rabbis***

To the High Priest and his henchmen, the matter was merely a chess game. And they played it carefully and craftily.

During the midnight trial, the only charge the Jews could find to condemn Jesus was that He had claimed to be both the Messiah and the Son of God. But that wasn't the charge they brought to Pilate.

They knew as well as Pilate did that Caesar was concerned with peace and taxes. So they fashioned their charges accordingly.

***...they began to accuse Him, saying, “We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding to pay taxes to Caesar, and saying that He Himself is Christ, a King.” Luke 23:2***

The charges were lies, of course. And the ruling Jews knew it. But the truth didn't matter to them. All that mattered was seeing the Savior shamed and skewered on a cross.

They knew merely making false charges against the Carpenter wasn't enough. So they packed the crowd with their own supporters. Then they whipped the mob into a frenzy.

***...the chief priests stirred up the crowd... Verse 11***

And when Pilate balked at their demands for Jesus' blood, they made their strongest move of all: their queen's gambit.

***Pilate made efforts to release Him, but the Jews cried out saying, “If you release this Man, you are no friend of Caesar; everyone who makes himself out to be a king opposes Caesar.” John 19:12***

That was a thinly veiled threat. If Pilate did release the Redeemer, the Jews would make sure Caesar heard about it.

Pilate couldn't allow that to happen. And when the procurator he called for a bowl of water, they knew they had checkmated him.

***...he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd, saying, “I am innocent of this Man's blood; see to that yourselves. And all the people said, “His blood shall be on us and on our children!” Matthew 27:24-25***

The priests weren't serious, of course. But the God who records our every word heard them. And He was serious. Dead serious.

But even that meant little or nothing to the ruling Jews. Utterly without conscience, they scoffed at God's judgement. And darkness that deep is so insulated from correction it is incurable.

So with smug smiles, they declared the blood guiltiness for slaying the Savior would be upon them and their children.

At last, Pilate stood the Savior before the mob. And the Jews committed the same sin he had. But while the Roman governor wavered, they did not.

***...he said to the Jews, "Behold, your King!" So they cried out, "Away with Him, away with Him, crucify Him!" Pilate said to them, "Shall I crucify your King?" The chief priests answered, "We have no king but Caesar." John 19:14-15***

The Jews didn't realize it, but a grain of truth was mingled with their lie. Caesar wasn't really their king; they hated his rule. But they spoke the truth when they said they had no king. Certainly not God.

Dissatisfied with bribery, lies and murder, they added the sin of refusing to submit to God's Son as their one and only King.

Like those hard-hearted Jews, when we give ourselves over to sin, we stand condemned by the God who created us.

And when we arrogantly refuse to submit to Christ as our Savior and King, we ratify our rebellion and earn our place in Hell.

## ***The Rebel***

Only one of the characters in this eternal drama never appeared on stage. He sat in a dark cell deep inside the Roman garrison.

***The man named Barabbas had been imprisoned with the insurrectionists who had committed murder in the insurrection. Verse 7***

Barabbas started out at the bottom in life and went down. He began by beating and robbing travelers. Then he graduated to rebellion and murder. He was the worst of the worst among the Jews.

But he was still a step ahead of both Pilate and the proud priests on the ruling council. Pilate tried to declare his innocence. And the Jews didn't care if they were guilty or not.

But Barabbas knew he was guilty. There was no doubt in his mind about that. A Roman court had condemned him to death by crucifixion. And even if the Romans hadn't, the rebel leader knew he was saturated and soaked through with sin.

Sitting in the dank darkness of a Roman dungeon, Barabbas waited for the last few grains of sand to drain out of the hourglass of his life. But high above him on the courtyard, Someone was preparing to take his place.

It started out as a last ditch effort by the Roman governor to secure the Redeemer's release. ***Now at the feast he used to release for them any one prisoner whom they requested...The crowd went up and began asking him to do as he had been accustomed to do for them. Pilate answered them, saying, "Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?" For he was aware that the chief priests had handed Him over because of envy. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to ask him to release Barabbas for them instead. Verses 6,8-11***

The custom was a piece of meat thrown to an unruly, rebellious province. Each year at Passover, the Romans would release a prisoner of the people's choice.

And Pilate hoped the one they chose this time would be Jesus. But the Jews incited the crowd to demand Barabbas' release instead.

Still, that didn't tell the procurator what he should do with Jesus.

***Answering again, Pilate said to them, "Then what shall I do with Him whom you call the King of the Jews?" They shouted back, "Crucify Him!" Verses 12-13***

So the substitution was complete. And a Healer and Teacher took the place of a thief and killer. ***Wishing to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas for them, and after having Jesus scourged, he handed Him over to be crucified. Verse 15***

The contrast couldn't be more complete. Ancient manuscripts tell us that Barabbas' first name was also Jesus. And that is only the beginning.

Our Savior is the Son of God. And Barabbas means *son of the father*, a human father. Also, Barabbas was guilty of the very same crime the Jews falsely charged that Christ committed: inciting rebellion against Rome.

So the Son of God not only carried a cross that rightfully belonged the son of a sinful father. The crime that condemned our sinless Savior is the very crime of which Barabbas was unquestionably guilty.

In every possible way, Jesus took Barabbas' place and died the death that murderer deserved. So while Jesus was being beaten by Roman soldiers, Barabbas was walking out into the morning sunlight.

We have no record to tell us what happened to Barabbas after that moment. He melts into the mists of history. So we cannot know how he reacted to the gift of life our Lord gave him.

But we do know he was very close to salvation. He knew he was guilty and Jesus paid for his sins. However, that wasn't enough to save him anymore than it is enough that we admit our guilt and know Christ died the death our sins justly deserved.

Pontus Pilate tried to walk the razor edge of indecision. And the Jews willingly gave themselves over to sin. So they must face the fury of God's wrath.

But if Barabbas stopped short of receiving Jesus Christ as both his Savior and his King, he was no better off than they were. He too died in his sins and had to endure excruciating agony of God's wrath.

Salvation is a family affair. And to be adopted into God's family, we must receive Jesus as both our Savior and our Lord.

***...as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, John 1:12***

That is the practical, personal lesson in the eternal drama that was played out at the praetorium. Jesus died the death we deserve. And He did so to purchase our forgiveness and freedom.

But we must believe it is so, admit our guilt and choose to receive Jesus as both our Savior and our King.

Or we are without excuse.