

John 18:40

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Then cried they all again, saying, Not this man, but Barabbas. Now Barabbas was a robber.

Analysis

Then cried they all again, saying, Not this man, but Barabbas. Now Barabbas was a robber. This verse captures one of history's most tragic ironies: the crowd choosing a criminal over Christ. The verb "cried" (ekraugasan, ἐκραύγασαν) indicates loud, vehement shouting—not calm deliberation but mob fury. Their unified rejection ("all again") shows how completely public opinion had turned against Jesus, manipulated by religious leaders (Mark 15:11).

"Not this man, but Barabbas" directly contrasts the innocent Lamb of God with a guilty insurrectionist. Barabbas means "son of the father" (bar-Abba), creating profound theological symbolism: sinful humanity choosing the false son while rejecting God's true Son. John's note that Barabbas was a "robber" (lēstēs, λῃστής) uses the same term Jesus applied to false shepherds (John 10:1,8) and to those who made the temple a den of thieves (Matthew 21:13).

This exchange perfectly illustrates substitutionary atonement: Christ took Barabbas' place (and ours), receiving the punishment deserved by the guilty, while the guilty went free. The crowd unwittingly enacted the gospel—a murderous rebel set free while the righteous one suffers death. Every sinner who trusts Christ is Barabbas, released from deserved condemnation because Jesus bore our penalty (Isaiah 53:5-6; 2 Corinthians 5:21; 1 Peter 3:18).

Historical Context

This event occurred during Passover, circa 30 AD, when Jerusalem swelled with pilgrimage crowds (estimated 200,000-400,000 people). Pilate, prefect of Judea (26-36 AD), customarily released one Jewish prisoner during the feast—likely a political expedient to placate the volatile population during this nationalistic celebration of Israel's liberation from Egypt.

Barabbas had participated in a recent insurrection (stasis) in Jerusalem (Mark 15:7; Luke 23:19), probably an anti-Roman uprising. Such revolts were common; Josephus records numerous messianic pretenders and revolutionaries during this period. Barabbas likely enjoyed popular support as a freedom fighter opposing Roman occupation. In contrast, Jesus threatened the religious establishment's power but had explicitly rejected political messianism (John 6:15).

The crowd's choice reveals their misunderstanding of God's kingdom. They wanted a military deliverer to overthrow Rome, not a suffering servant who would overthrow sin and death. Within a generation, this rejection bore bitter fruit: Jerusalem's destruction in 70 AD by the Romans they sought to overthrow. Meanwhile, Christ's kingdom advanced unstoppably, not through military rebellion but through the gospel's transforming power (Acts 1:6-8; Romans 1:16).

Related Passages

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

1 John 4:8 — God is love

Study Questions

1. In what ways do you sometimes choose "Barabbas"—preferring your own agenda over Christ's lordship?
2. How does the Barabbas exchange illustrate the doctrine of substitutionary atonement?

3. What does the crowd's rejection of Jesus teach about the danger of following popular opinion rather than truth?
4. How does this account challenge comfortable assumptions about human nature and the universality of sin?
5. What does Pilate's capitulation to the crowd reveal about political expediency versus moral courage?

Interlinear Text

ἐκραύγασαν	οὖν	πάλιν	πάντες,	λέγοντες	Μὴ	τοῦτον	
cried they	Then	again	all	saying	Not	this man	
G2905	G3767	G3825	G3956	G3004	G3361	G5126	
ἀλλὰ	τὸν	Βαραββᾶς	ἥν	δὲ	ό	Βαραββᾶς	ληστής
but	G3588	Barabbas	was	Now	G3588	Barabbas	a robber
G235		G912	G2258	G1161		G912	G3027

Additional Cross-References

Mark 15:7 (Parallel theme): And there was one named Barabbas, which lay bound with them that had made insurrection with him, who had committed murder in the insurrection.

Mark 15:15 (Parallel theme): And so Pilate, willing to content the people, released Barabbas unto them, and delivered Jesus, when he had scourged him, to be crucified.

Matthew 27:16 (Parallel theme): And they had then a notable prisoner, called Barabbas.

Matthew 27:26 (Parallel theme): Then released he Barabbas unto them: and when he had scourged Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified.

Luke 23:25 (Parallel theme): And he released unto them him that for sedition and murder was cast into prison, whom they had desired; but he delivered Jesus to their will.

