

# Places of the Passion: Pilate's Judgment Hall

Given first in 2023 Palm Sunday then 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent 2026

**Matthew 27: 11-23** 11 Meanwhile Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor asked Him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" "You have said so," Jesus replied. 12 When He was accused by the chief priests and the elders, He gave no answer. 13 Then Pilate asked Him, "Don't you hear the testimony they are bringing against you?" 14 But Jesus made no reply, not even to a single charge—to the great amazement of the governor.

15 Now it was the governor's custom at the festival to release a prisoner chosen by the crowd. 16 At that time they had a well-known prisoner whose name was Jesus Barabbas. 17 So 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?" 18 For He knew it was out of self-interest that they had handed Jesus over to him.

19 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." 20 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!"

**Romans 6: 1-11** 1 What shall we say then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? 2 By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? 3 Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? 4 We were therefore buried with Him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

5 For if we have been united with Him in a death like His, we will certainly also be united with Him in a resurrection like His. 6 For we know that our old self was crucified with Him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin—7 because anyone who has died has been set free from sin.

8 Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with Him. 9 For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, He cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over Him. 10 The death He died, He died to sin once for all; but the life He

lives, He lives to God. 11 In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.

What's the most famous trial in the last one-hundred years? Was it the 1925 Scopes Monkey Trial in Dayton, Tennessee—after which, our nation allowed evolution to be taught in public schools? Was it the Nuremberg Trials, when leaders of Hitler's Nazi Germany confessed their WW II atrocities? Was it the O. J. Simpson trial? Was it the Timothy McVeigh trial? McVeigh—you may remember—was tried for killing 168 people in Oklahoma City on April 19, 1995. Or maybe you're thinking about the Unabomber trial, the Saddam Hussein trial or the Martha Stewart trial. [NOTE 1]

What are the most important words in any trial? I would say that the three most important words are Innocent, Guilty and/or Free. Every trial hinges on these three words—innocent, guilty and free. Let's use these words to understand the most famous trial ever—one for the ages.

The trial takes place in Pilate's Judgment Hall. The accused? Jesus. The accusers? The Jewish leaders. The judge? Pontius Pilate. Innocent. Guilty. Free.

[NOTE 2] Innocent—That's Jesus. "For Pilate knew that it was out of envy that the Sanhedrin had delivered Jesus up. Besides, while he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, 'Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered much because of him today in a dream.'" (Matthew 27:18–19) Six times in his passion narrative, Matthew calls Pontius Pilate "the governor." As Judea's governor, Pilate is sitting on the judgment seat. That's because Pilate has the power of imperium—that's the Latin word for the person who decides formal death penalty cases. In Judea, Pilate alone has the power of imperium. You live or die according to Pilate.

Jesus is innocent! Pilate doesn't completely understand it; but Pilate's wife understands it! "Ha!" You women say. "Even then, women were smarter than men!" Pilate's wife knows Jesus is innocent. The rest of the New Testament takes this further—a whole lot further. The New Testament says Jesus is absolutely and perfectly innocent.

For example, Hebrews 4:15 says, "Jesus was without sin." Jesus could have broken bread with the devil in the wilderness or broken ranks with the Father in Gethsemane—but he didn't. Jesus was perfect. Always honest in the midst of lies. Relentlessly kind in a world of hatred and self-centeredness. Heavenly-focused in spite of countless distractions. When it came to sin, Jesus never did it. Innocent. That's Jesus. [NOTE 3]

Guilty—That's Barabbas. "And they had then a notorious prisoner called Barabbas." (Matthew 27:16) Barabbas was a Jewish Robin Hood. Barabbas took money from rich Romans and gave it to poor Jews. That made Barabbas a Jewish super star!

Barabbas was famous as an insurrectionist. Insurrectionists were anti-Roman fighters who belonged to a political group called Zealots. Zealots had one agenda. Get

Rome out of Judea—period. Zealots were ready to do anything to make that happen—even slit throats.

Barabbas wasn't a petty thief or a second-hand scoundrel. Rome wouldn't condemn a small-time crook to crucifixion. Rome would, however, execute a notorious insurrectionist—a first class killer. That was Barabbas. He was a heartless, brutal criminal. Barabbas had anger in his heart and blood on his hands. Barabbas would be crucified by noon. Dead by sundown. His only future was a hammer, three nails and a God-awful death by hanging on a cross. Innocent. That's Jesus.

Guilty—that's Barabbas. Guilty—That's us, for sure. We're all born “dead in transgressions and sins” (Ephesians 2:1). We are “lost.” (Luke 19:10) “Prone to wander, Lord I feel it. Prone to leave the God I love.” We are “blinded by the god of this age” (2 Corinthians 4:4), and “hopeless” (Ephesians 2:12). Our finest deeds are “dung” or “rubbish” and “manure” (Philippians 3:8) and “unclean rags” (Isaiah 64:6). Just call us “Barabbas.”

Paul puts it this way in Romans 7:24, “What a wretched man I am!” Not “I was a wretch.” No. “I am a wretch!” Paul uses a present tense verb! Right now, today, as a believer, truth be told—I'm still a wretch.

The Bible calls it sin. Sin isn't a regrettable lapse or an occasional stumble. Sin stages a coup against God's rule. Sin storms the castle. Sin lays claim to God's sovereign throne. Sin defies God's universal authority. Sin says, “Get out, God. Get lost, God. I'm in charge here, God!” Now we would never say that out loud, but our actions say it. We don't realize it but our actions say it.

It's easy in church to want to live in peace with all people; it's harder, however, to act on that when you didn't get promoted at work because you didn't have the right connections. It's easy in church to want to help the poor, but it's hard to do that when you see a new flat-screen TV—besides, you work so hard for your money. It's easy in church to say one thing and then go into the world and do the exact opposite.

The prophet says in Isaiah 53:6, “We all, like sheep, have gone astray and each of us has turned to his own way.” You have your way. I have my way. Your way may be accumulation. Her way may be intoxication. His way may be flirtation. We all have turned to our own way. Just like sheep.

I don't like to confess it. In fact, I'd just-a-soon avoid it. I'm Barabbas. I'm a prisoner to my past, my low-road choices and my high-minded pride. God has declared me guilty. What's his sentence? Romans 6:23, “The wages of sin is death.” Death. Let that sink in. Innocent—that's Jesus. Guilty—that's Barabbas. Guilty—that's us. **[NOTE 4]**

Free—That's Barabbas? What??! “Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus. The governor again said to them, ‘Which of the two do you want me to release for you?’ And they said, ‘Barabbas.’” (Matthew 27:20–21) The word “persuaded”—rendered a past tense verb—is better translated here as a past perfect tense verb—“had persuaded.” What's the difference? The Sanhedrin had all their ducks in row long before this early morning trial. “Had been persuaded.”

Meaning what? Well one Commentator poses that this indicates that the crowd is different from the crowd on Palm Sunday. Now that is a big leap because of the tense that the verb is in but it is very possible and makes it easier to understand the complete opposite response. Now, as I mentioned in a sermon earlier this Lenten season, there were 8 times the number of people in Jerusalem than normal because of the Passover, so it is possible but there is no real way to know. The commentator that focuses on the past perfect tense of the verb persuade believes that the Palm Sunday crowd consisted of mostly Galileans. This crowd on Good Friday consisted of Judeans (mostly traditional Jewish religious people)—up at 6:00a to get Barabbas off the hook. The Galileans are camped outside of Jerusalem still sleeping! So it is not necessarily true that the very same people who proclaimed Hosanna in the Highest, blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord, are shouting just a week later, “Crucify Him.”

Listen! Can you hear him? It’s the Roman guard with the key. He unlocks the prison door, swings it open and shouts, “Barabbas! You’re free. The crowd chose you to go free!” Barabbas stumbles into the light of day. Shackles gone. Crimes pardoned. Free! Free—that’s Barabbas. Free?—That’s us, for sure. How so? Christ endured not just the Roman nails, the mockery and the spear—but also the gears of God’s grinding justice. “The gears of God’s grinding justice? Really?” Yes, really. God doesn’t overlook sin. God doesn’t say, “Hey, no big deal.” That’s not how it works. God is holy, righteous and perfect. God can’t overlook sin. God must punish sin. So God put the punishment our sins deserve on Jesus on Good Friday!

**[NOTE 5]** That’s why God placed all our sin on Jesus. It’s accurate, therefore, to say, “Christ substituted himself for the world.” It’s life-changing, however, to say, “Christ substituted himself for me. My sins? They are many. God’s mercy? It is more—so much more.

We’re free! Psalm 146:7, “The Lord sets prisoners free.” Romans 8:2, “The law of the Spirit of life has set you free.” Galatians 5:1, “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.” Revelation 1:5, Jesus “has freed us from our sins by his blood.” There are a million ways to become a prisoner. There is only one way to be free. His name is Jesus.

**[NOTE 6]**

Just think. The outcome of history’s most famous trial means that the Savior’s liberating power sets us free from the condemnation of our sin; free from the pain of our past; free from worry about our future. No one can take this freedom from us. No law can stop it. And no power on earth or hell can destroy it.

Innocent, guilty and free. These are the most important words in any trial. What would you say is the most life-changing of the three? Innocent? Guilty? Free?

To me, there is no doubt! It has to be the word Free! John 8:36, “If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.” That’s us! Like Barabbas! By faith, forevermore, free! Free to give our lives to the Lord. Free from sin, free from death and hell, free!... to live and love Jesus’ way. Let’s pray ... Amen.

**Sermon Notes for "Places of the Passion: Pilate's Judgement Seat**  
**Based on Matthew 27: 11-23 and Romans 6:1-11**  
**Given April 2, 2023 at Doster Community Church**

- I. Every trial comes down to three words, Innocent, Guilty, and Free.
- II. In this trial Jesus is the innocent.
- III. The guilty in this trial are Barabbas and us, those who are sinners.
- IV. The Free also could be Barabbas because the Jewish leaders had persuaded the people to choose Barabbas. But Free refers to us as well!
- V. God put the punishment our sins deserve on Jesus. Christ substituted himself for the world, each of us can say He did it, "for me." We are free!
- VI. There are a million ways to become a prisoner. There is only one way to be set free: His name is Jesus! "If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:36). What are you going to do about it? What is one thing you can do this week to live more like you are really FREE? Write it down.