

The Great Exchange – Mark 15:6-15

What's it all about?

Have you ever wondered what the crucifixion of Jesus is all about? Why is the death of Jesus such a big deal? I mean, as we read about it in the gospels and watch movies like *The Passion of the Christ*, what lessons are we supposed to learn from such a bloody and tragic death? And it's not as if Jesus was the only one crucified, thousands if not millions were crucified by the Romans, it was a public way of stamping their authority over the people they had conquered. It said, "This will happen to you if you challenge our authority over you" So, Jesus wasn't the only one crucified and yet it's Jesus' story that we tell year after year. Why? What's so significant about Jesus' crucifixion that we continue to retell it every year?

Answers

Now, there are all kinds of answers for that question but the first thing to realise is that the gospels are a description of the events that took place. They don't tell you exactly what everything means because stories don't do that. Stories are written to tell you what happened, and you are meant to discover the meaning of the story as you get to know the story. We are used to that kind of thinking because we use stories to teach us things all the time from kid's books to the latest movies and songs on the radio. Even Jesus used stories to get his point across. We use stories to teach us things that the person telling the story wants us to know. It's the same with the story of Jesus' crucifixion, there are lessons to learn if we know the story well enough. Lessons like love being a real sacrifice, that Jesus is the true king of God's kingdom, and that we now have real access to God, but today I want to talk to you about the great exchange that Jesus made for us.

Context

Well, to understand the great exchange we need to know the Crucifixion Friday story and I'm really glad that we have already heard it read to us from Mark's Gospel. In fact, the story of Jesus' death is in all four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) and it's worth reading them altogether or one after the other to get the fullest account of what happened during Jesus' last day of earthly life. But here in Mark's Gospel we can read of Judas' betrayal of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane after the Last Supper, found in Mark chapter 14. A crowd with swords and clubs came to arrest Jesus and one of Jesus' followers drew his sword and cut off the ear of the high priest's servant. Notice how Jesus responded to this situation...

Mark 14:48 *"Am I leading a rebellion," said Jesus, "that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me?"*

The obvious answer is 'No!' Jesus wasn't a rebellious person and he didn't lead a rebellion against the Jewish leadership or against Rome. Sure, he might have shaken things up a bit, but he never took up a sword in order to lead a terrorist group even though that's what people had expected the Christ, the coming King of the Jews, to do.

Mock Trials

The Jewish leadership then held an illegal court proceeding during the middle of the night. People gave false testimony, they lied about what Jesus had said, and they spoke about Jesus destroying the temple in

Jerusalem. They asked him if he believed he was the Christ, the promised king of God's kingdom, Jesus said he was and they believed they could charge him with blasphemy, with saying that he was from God and that he was a king. Early on the Friday morning they decided to take Jesus to the highest Roman authority available in the hope that Pilate, the Roman Governor, would kill Jesus for them. They told Pilate that Jesus called himself a King of the Jews and therefore should be considered a threat to the Roman Emperor Caesar. So, Pilate asked Jesus...

Mark 15:2 *"Are you the king of the Jews?" asked Pilate. "Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied.*

So, Jesus was happy to call himself the king of the Jews, but he didn't seem to be a threat to Rome. So, Pilate looked for a way of getting him off the hook, of releasing him, because he obviously didn't think that Jesus was guilty of any particular crime.

Prisoner Exchange Program

It seems that there was this custom that during this time of the year, where the Roman governor could pardon a prisoner and set him free from all charges. I kind of wonder if Pontius Pilate found someone who actually fitted the charges they had brought against Jesus in the hope that they would say that Jesus wasn't that bad after all and Pilate could set Jesus free from those trumped up charges. But the crowd wasn't interested in Barabbas, the man that Pilate had found, they were only interested in seeing Jesus killed.

Mark 15:12-14 *"What shall I do, then, with the one you call the king of the Jews?" Pilate asked them. ¹³ "Crucify him!" they shouted. ¹⁴ "Why? What crime has he committed?" asked Pilate. But they shouted all the louder, "Crucify him!"*

The Crucifixion

And so, Jesus was led away, picked on and beaten up. They whipped him, hit him, and spat on him. They teased him by pushing a crown of thorns into his head and placing a purple robe on his back all the while pretending to worship this "king of the Jews". And when they had finished teasing him they led him out to be crucified. They nailed him to a wooden cross with a sign that said, "The King of the Jews" and people walked by hurling insults at him. After a few hours Jesus knew that he was near death and he called out...

Mark 15:34 *"Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" -- which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*

Not long after that Jesus died and the Roman Centurion on duty said...

Mark 15:39 *"Surely this man was the Son of God!"*

In other words, Jesus was the king of God's kingdom, you could tell by the way he died. Finally, a man named Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate if he could take the body of Jesus so that he could put him in a tomb before the end of the day.

Today's Main Point

So, that's the basic story of Jesus' crucifixion from Mark's Gospel but where does the great exchange fit into this? How can we see it in this story? Well, the key to that is found in the story of Barabbas and interestingly enough all four of the gospel writers include Barabbas in their version of the day's events. So, you would have to say that the prisoner exchange with Barabbas was significant.

Who Was Barabbas?

Well, who was Barabbas? Mark tells us that Barabbas was a murderer who was in prison with a group of insurrectionists. Insurrection is a way of talking about rebellion, civil disobedience, and revolutionaries. Now, we don't know what kind of rebellion they were involved in, whether they were zealots or freedom fighters or something different again. We don't know what role Barabbas played in this group of rebels, he could have been a leader or he could have been the muscle, after all, he was the one in prison for murder. And that's all that we really know about him; that he was a murderer who may have committed his crime during a rebellion. Not much to go on. But just because Barabbas was a rebel doesn't mean that he was popular among the people. In fact, I reckon that Pilate thought that the people would never choose Barabbas over Jesus.

Opposites

I mean, when you compare the two they seem to be opposites. Barabbas was part of an uprising or rebellion. Jesus asked the question, "Am I leading a rebellion that you have come out with swords and clubs" with the obvious answer as being 'No! Jesus was not a rebel'. Barabbas took life, he was a murderer! It seems that he must have killed people during that uprising whereas Jesus brought people back from the dead, people like Jairus' daughter, the widow's son and even Lazarus. Jesus gave people life rather than taking life. And Pilate knew that Barabbas was guilty, everyone knew that Barabbas was guilty, whereas Jesus was innocent and Pilate knew that as well.

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Jesus was an innocent man and Pilate knew it. He didn't deserve to be arrested or imprisoned or even to be brought before Pilate let alone to be whipped, beaten and then crucified. These two men were the exact opposites of each other and Pilate didn't want to have Jesus killed. He was using a custom of having a prisoner released during the Passover festival to hopefully get Jesus released. And I think Pilate picked Barabbas because he thought that no one would want to pick him, no one would want a murderer back on the streets and yet, that's what happened, mainly because the Jewish leaders were influencing the crowd against Jesus.

In the Name

Finally, it's worth noting Barabbas' name. Barabbas is actually two words put together to make one name. "Bar" means "son of" and "Abba" means "father". So, Barabbas literally means 'Son of the Father'. If you look up Hosea 11 you will see how God was like a father to his people and Israel was like his first born son. Israel was the "son of God" but they failed to live the way the son of God should live, they failed to recognise and respect their father. But Jesus didn't, Jesus loved God and lived the way that God wanted him to live. Jesus was the Son of God, the son of the father, and now he was pitted against Barabbas, another "Son of the Father". Two men with the same title but opposite in character and deeds. And so, a trade was made, an exchange, one son of the father for the other. An innocent man died for the guilty, a sinless man died instead of the sinner, a good man died instead of the rebel. A prisoner exchange was made and Jesus became the substitute.

Barabbas Free

So, Barabbas got off, he was set free from all charges. He didn't ask to be set free, he didn't do anything to deserve to be set free, but he was given his freedom all the same. I wonder what he did with that freedom? I wonder how he felt about the exchange that had been made with Jesus? Would he have been thankful? Would he have been sorry? We don't really know but I think there would have been two options open to him. The most likely option was that he felt that he had gotten away with it and he could continue with his rebellion, possibly killing other people or he may have seen this as an opportunity to turn over a new leaf and start again. Maybe he recognised the great injustice that had happened and he called out to God for forgiveness. Maybe he even committed his life to Jesus, we just don't know but it does make you wonder.

Lesson

So that's the story of The Great Exchange but what does it mean for us? Well, I think that a major point to the Barabbas story is that Jesus' death on the cross is all about an exchange between the guilty for the innocent. The question is, 'which character do you identify with?' Are you the innocent character or the guilty? Now, if we are honest, I suspect that we wouldn't want to identify with either character – both of them go too far. We are more likely to say that we are innocent; we are not that bad, we are mostly pretty good people but to say that we are as good as Jesus is a step too far. Besides which, I've never caused a man who was being carried out to be buried to get up out of his coffin. I can't raise the dead, I'm not like Jesus. But then I'm also not a murderer. I've never deliberately taken somebodies life and fortunately I've never accidentally taken a life either, so I'm not as bad as Barabbas... or am I?

Your Great Exchange

Jesus said that if you hate someone then that is as good as committing murder in your heart and I've definitely committed murder in my heart. I've also failed to keep the simplest commands of God; I've lied, I've stolen, I've wanted what other people have got. I'm a sinful person. I'm guilty of rebelling against God. I might not look as bad as Barabbas but I'm still like him in my heart.

Exchange for Us

The Crucifixion Friday story tells us that Jesus made a great exchange when he died on the cross, not just for one man but for all people. The innocent for the guilty, the sinless for the sinner, the good for the rebellious. And if we are honest with ourselves then we would realise that Jesus made that exchange for us. The question is, "How are you going to respond to that exchange?" Are you going to ignore it and get on with life pretty much the same as before? Are you going to believe it and think that you can get away with pretty much anything because you've been set free? Or are you going to be thankful and see this as an opportunity for a fresh start? The Bible calls that being born again. No longer living for yourself but for your heavenly father. You can be a true son of the father, a child of God, a Barabbas, all you have to do is recognise the exchange that Jesus made for you. He died instead of you. You will no longer be held guilty for your sin, Jesus has paid the ultimate price and set you free. The question is, "Will you respond to Jesus? Will you accept his great exchange and make him Lord of your life?"