

# John 18:39-40

## - The third cross -

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## Introduction

- ❖ There were three crosses erected at Calvary:
  - The first cross was meant for a criminal. We don't know his name. He died on the cross.
  - The second cross was meant for a criminal. We don't know his name. He died on the cross.
  - The third cross was meant for a criminal. And we do know his name:
    - BARABBAS. He didn't die on the cross but was released from prison.
  - All three deserved this sentence to death. "We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve" (Lk 23:41).
    - But Christ took the place of Barabbas and gave his life as a ransom:  
"Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mt 20:28; Mk 10:45; 1 Tim 2:6) — "now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant" (Hb 9:15).
- ❖ The context, form and structure, theological, technical and hermeneutical notes given in this sermon outline overlap with other sermon outlines taken from the Gospel of John. This makes it possible to use this sermon outline as a "stand-alone". You can also fit this outline into a series of sermons.

## Context

- ❖ John 18:39-40 forms the conclusion of the first part of the trial against Jesus:<sup>1</sup>
  - The first interrogation by Pontius Pilate (John 18:28-38).
  - The first attempt of Pontius Pilate to set Jesus free; Barabbas or Jesus (John 18:39-40).
  - Second attempt to set him free; the humiliation of Jesus (John 19:1-7).
  - The second interrogation by Pontius Pilate (John 19:8-11).
  - Third attempt to release Jesus (John 19:12).
  - Finally, Pontius Pilate handed Jesus over to be crucified, under pressure from the Jews and after his attempts to set him free had failed (John 19:13-16).
  - The crucifixion and death of Jesus (John 19:17-30).
- ❖ The first interrogation (John 18:28-38) and the release of Barabbas in more detail:

Then the Jews led Jesus from Caiaphas to the palace of the Roman governor. By now it was early morning, and to avoid ceremonial uncleanness the Jews did not enter the palace; they wanted to be able to eat the Passover.

So Pilate came out to them and asked, “What charges are you bringing against this man?”

“If he were not a criminal,” they replied, “we would not have handed him over to you.”

Pilate said, “Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law.”

“But we have no right to execute anyone,” the Jews objected.

This happened so that the words Jesus had spoken indicating the kind of death he was going to die would be fulfilled.

| Pontius Pilate   | Jesus  |
|--|--|
| Pilate then went back inside the palace, summoned Jesus and asked him, “Are you the king of the Jews?”                         | “Is that your own idea,” Jesus asked, “or did others talk to you about me?”  |
| “Am I a Jew?” Pilate replied. “It was your people and your chief priests who handed you over to me. What is it you have done?” | Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place.” |

<sup>1</sup> Corley, B. *The trial of Jesus. 3.4 The Roman proceedings*. In: Green, J. B., McKnight, S., & Marshall, I. H. (1992, p 847-849).

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|---|---|
| "You are a king, then!" said Pilate.  | Jesus answered, "You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me." |
| "What is truth?" Pilate asked.  |   |
| "What is truth?" Pilate asked. With this he went out again to the Jews and said, "I find no basis for a charge against him. But it is your custom for me to release to you one prisoner at the time of the Passover. Do you want me to release 'the king of the Jews'?" They shouted back, "No, not him! Give us Barabbas!" Now Barabbas had taken part in a rebellion. |   |

## Technical notes, historical, and theological background

### Pontius Pilate

- ❖ Pontius Pilate was Roman Governor of Judea (A.D. 26-36/37) during the reign of Emperor Tiberius. He is known to have treated Jewish customs with contempt. Josephus recorded some conflicts between Pilate and the Jews. The Jews didn't like him.<sup>2</sup>
  - He had to keep order and peace under Roman power.
  - had to uphold justice according to Roman standards.

### Passover

- ❖ "The Exodus was the redemptive event par excellence in the life of God's covenant people. The Passover reenacted annually the greatest miracle Yahweh performed out of grace for His chosen; it was to become the focal point of Jewish history. The Passover celebration retold the story of freedom after more than four hundred years of Egyptian bondage. The frequent OT allusions to that deliverance indicate that it was a source of hope for the nation's future redemption."<sup>3</sup>
  - The Passover was of religious importance.
  - The Passover was also of political importance because the Jews were under Roman bondage.
    - Against this background, the historical background of the custom to release a prisoner is understandable, although this custom has been attested from other sources.

<sup>2</sup> Hoehner, H. (1992). *Pontius Pilate*. In: Green, J. B., McKnight, S., & Marshall, I. H. (1992, p. 617-619).

<sup>3</sup> Wilson, M. R. Passover. In G.W. Bromiley (Ed.) (1979–1988, Vol. 3, p. 676).

## Exposition

### Verse 38b

- ❖ With this, he went out again to the Jews and said, “I find no basis for a charge against him.”
  - After the first interrogation, Pontius Pilate as the judge passed his judgment: “not guilty.”
  - Pontius Pilate should have released Jesus and given him protection against the possible anger and the hatred of the crowds, invoked by the Jewish leaders.
  - As a politician, he wanted to avoid an insurrection among the Jews, therefore he didn’t release Jesus. He didn’t take his own responsibility but made the crowds responsible by letting them choose between Jesus and Barabbas.
    - Did Pontius Pilate expect that the crowds still felt some sympathy for Jesus the Christ, so that they would choose Jesus instead of Barabbas? Was it an act of misjudgment?

### Verse 39-40

- ❖ “But it is **your** custom for me”
  - It seems to be that this custom was a result of negotiations between the Jewish leaders and the Roman government. It is plausible that the Jewish leaders promised the Romans that they would keep Jerusalem free from riots during the important festival of the Passover.
    - Now, Pontius Pilate feared for unrest and riots among the people. “The political situation for Pilate was acutely unstable because of a series of clashes with the Jews, so he would have been inclined to placate them on this occasion.”<sup>4</sup>
- ❖ “to release to you one prisoner at the time of the Passover.”
  - This was a symbolic act referring to the exodus. See below.
- ❖ “Do you want me to release ‘the king of the Jews’?”
  - Why did Pontius Pilate still use the charge “the king of the Jews” against Jesus? He should have dropped the charge altogether. But, Pontius Pilate is mocking at this charge of the Jews. This man is not a threat to the Roman empire. This man is not a rebel. He is not a leader of a group of revolutionaries. This man is harmless.
  - At this point, Pontius Pilate reached a point of no return. If the people will choose Barabbas, it would become almost impossible for Pontius Pilate not to lose his face.
- ❖ “They shouted back, “No, not him! Give us Barabbas!” Now Barabbas had taken part in a rebellion.”
  - Barabbas = “**Βαραββᾶς**”: ‘son of Abba’<sup>5</sup> Abba is the Aramaic word for father. It is probably a reference to God and might be rendered as: “a son (given by/of) the Father.” He was a notorious prisoner (Mt 26:16).

<sup>4</sup> Corley, B. *The trial of Jesus*. In: Green, J. B., McKnight, S., & Marshall, I. H. (1992, p. 849).

| [Jesus] <sup>6</sup> Barabbas  | Jesus, king of the Jews                            |
|--------------------------------|--|
| Son of the Father (= Barabbas) | Son of the Father (Jn 17:1)                        |
| Guilty                         | Not guilty   |
| Released                       | Delivered over to them to be crucified (Jn 19:16). |
| The sinner                     | Without any sin                                    |

- Had taken part in a rebellion = “ληστής”: 2. **revolutionary, insurrectionist, guerrilla** of Barabbas.<sup>7</sup> But, compare Mk 15:7: “A man called Barabbas was in prison with the insurrectionists who had committed murder in the uprising.”
  - It is not certain if Barabbas was a revolutionary. Mark doesn’t call Barabbas an insurrectionist. He was **with** the insurrectionists in prison. It is more likely that he took advantage of the insurrection as a thief and robber (1. **robber, highwayman, bandit**; Lk 10:30, 36; Jn 10:1, 8; Mt 21:13; Mk 11:17; Lk 19:46).<sup>8</sup>
  - The other two criminals crucified together with Jesus were also called “robbers” (Mt 27:38, 44; Mk 15:27).
- This exchange of Barabbas against Jesus is fundamental to the understanding of the meaning of the crucifixion.
- ❖ Finally:
  - The people rejected Jesus and identified themselves with Barabbas, as one of them.
  - Pontius Pilate had politics prevail above justice.
  - Jesus had himself substituted instead of the sinner Barnabas and identified himself with all sinners.

## Application

- ❖ Questions which can be asked:
  - How often do people sacrifice someone to safeguard their own position?
    - In (church-)politics? (Pontius Pilate)
    - In society? (the crowds)

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<sup>5</sup> Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000, p. 166).

<sup>6</sup> Mt 26;16,17. *The authenticity of text enclosed in brackets is dubious.* In: Nestle, E., & Nestle, E. (2012).

<sup>7</sup> Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000, p. 594).

<sup>8</sup> Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000, p. 594).

- How often do people identify with and feel sympathy with the sinner? Paul wrote about this in his letter to the Romans:
  - Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them." (Rom 1:28–32).
- ❖ It is important to believe that Jesus took upon himself the cross which was meant for Barabbas, the sinner and for you and me.
- ❖ Jesus is the LAMB:
  - "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (Jn 1:29; 1:36). He took the place of Barabbas, although Barabbas probably didn't understand what was going on.
  - "The eunuch was reading this passage of Scripture: "He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth" (Ac 8:32).
  - "Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast—as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed" 1 Cor 5:7).
- ❖ "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor 5:21).
- ❖ "Surely he took up our infirmities  
and carried our sorrows,  
yet we considered him stricken by God,  
smitten by him, and afflicted.  
But he was pierced for our transgressions,  
he was crushed for our iniquities;  
the punishment that brought us peace was upon him,  
and by his wounds we are healed.  
We all, like sheep, have gone astray,  
each of us has turned to his own way;  
and the LORD has laid on him  
the iniquity of us all" (Isa 53:4-6).

## Quotes<sup>9</sup>

- ❖ "Beware of the pleasant view of the fatherhood of God: God is so kind and loving that of course He will forgive us. That thought, based solely on emotion, cannot be found anywhere in the New Testament. The only basis on which God can forgive us is the tremendous tragedy of the Cross of Christ. To base our forgiveness on any other ground is unconscious blasphemy. The only ground

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<sup>9</sup> Atonement (n.d.). Retrieved March 08, 2016, from <http://www.goodreads.com>

on which God can forgive our sin and reinstate us to His favor is through the Cross of Christ. There is no other way! Forgiveness, which is so easy for us to accept, cost the agony at Calvary. We should never take the forgiveness of sin, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and our sanctification in simple faith, and then forget the enormous cost to God that made all of this ours.

Forgiveness is the divine miracle of grace. The cost to God was the Cross of Christ. To forgive sin, while remaining a holy God, this price had to be paid. Never accept a view of the fatherhood of God if it blots out the atonement. The revealed truth of God is that without the atonement He cannot forgive— He would contradict His nature if He did. The only way we can be forgiven is by being brought back to God through the atonement of the Cross. God's forgiveness is possible only in the supernatural realm.

Compared with the miracle of the forgiveness of sin, the experience of sanctification is small. Sanctification is simply the wonderful expression or evidence of the forgiveness of sins in a human life. But the thing that awakens the deepest fountain of gratitude in a human being is that God has forgiven his sin. Paul never got away from this. Once you realize all that it cost God to forgive you, you will be held as in a vise, constrained by the love of God."

— Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest*.

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