



# THE GREAT EXCHANGE

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 Mark 15:1-15  
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“Rethinking the Death Penalty” is the cover story of the current *Newsweek* magazine. The revelation that through DNA testing, 87 inmates on death rows around the United States have been found innocent has given rise to a national debate about the death penalty. This certainly doesn’t speak well of our justice system, which at times seems to condemn the innocent and allows the guilty to go free. Imagine the horror of a parent discovering that his child was executed for crimes he did not commit.

With this in mind, perhaps we can begin to imagine the emotions of the Father during the trial of the Son, when the greatest exchange in human history was about to occur. We find the account in chapter 15 of Mark’s gospel.

## I. Binding the Sacrificial Lamb (15:1)

**And early in the morning the chief priests with the elders and scribes, and the whole Sanhedrin, immediately held a consultation; and binding Jesus, they led Him away, and delivered Him up to Pilate.** (Mark 15:15, NASB)

As night gives way to morning, the Sanhedrin consult together to come to a final resolution regarding what to do with Jesus. Their quandary was that they had condemned him to death for blasphemy, but they lacked the authority to carry out the death penalty. The decision was therefore made to have Jesus tried in the civil court. “The decision that he was worthy of death had now to be officially formulated and confirmed and laid down in a bill of indictment for the Roman governor.”<sup>1</sup> But surprisingly, the indictment will not be the charge of blasphemy, since the Romans took no interest in religious law. Instead, it would be one of high treason.

Luke records the charge of the Sanhedrin, “We have found this man subverting our nation. He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar and claims to be Christ, a king” (Luke 23:2). It is ironic that Jesus, who spent his life and ministry disappointing the crowds, and even his own disciples, because he emphatically refused to take up the sword, will now be tried and sentenced as a political revolutionary who posed a threat to the Roman peace. As Moule writes: “Jesus, who is, indeed, king of the Jews in a deeply spiritual sense, has refused to lead a political uprising. Yet now, condemned for blasphemy by the Jews because of his spiritual claims, he is accused by them also before Pilate by being precisely what he had disappointed the crowds for failing to be—a political insurgent.”<sup>2</sup>

While the court deliberated, Jesus probably spent his final hours in the dungeon of the house of Caiaphas. In reality, the place was a dark, damp cistern. Imagine his cries of despair as he prayed the psalms of David during his last night on earth in that deep pit.<sup>3</sup>

**O Lord, the God who save me, day and night I cry out before you.**

**May my prayer come before you; turn you ear to my cry.**

**For my soul is full of trouble and my life draws near the grave.**

**I am counted among those who go down to the pit;**

**I am like a man without strength.**

**I am set apart with the dead, like the slain who lie in the grave,**

**whom you remember no more, who are cut off from your care.**

**You have put me in the lowest pit, in the darkest depth.**

**Your wrath lies heavily upon me; you have overwhelmed me with all your waves.**

**You have taken from me my closest friends and have made me repulsive to them.**

**I am confined and cannot escape.**

**My eyes are dim with grief. I call to you, O LORD, every day;**

**I spread out my hands to you.**

**You have taken my companions and loved one from me;**

**the darkness is my closest friend.** (Psa 88:1-10, 19)

By dawn the decision had been made. Jesus was pulled out of the cistern with ropes, bound and led away under armed guard to appear before the Roman Procurator Pontius Pilate. The strong verb that Mark chooses, “led away,” conveys the sense that Jesus was practically carried before Pilate. What a shameful thing. Yet, during this whole fiasco of trumped-up charges and the humiliation of a police escort, not a word is heard from the lamb. Isaiah’s words echo in the background...

***He was oppressed and He was afflicted***

***Yet He did not open His mouth;***

***Like a lamb that is led to slaughter,***

***And like a sheep that is silent before its shearers,***

***So He did not open His mouth.*** (Isa 53:7)

The Sanhedrin now turn the Jesus problem over to Pilate. The procurator took his official residence in Herod’s palace, in northwestern Jerusalem. Normally, Roman governors resided in the beautiful port city of Caesarea, on the Mediterranean coast, but during feast times they customarily traveled to Jerusalem to ensure that the peace was kept. In the city they took their stay in Herod’s palatial Upper Palace.

Placing their agenda before Pilate was no guarantee of success for the Sanhedrin, however. Pilate was a “mean minded and brutal official. Contemporary records mention no less than five occasions on which his insensitive handling of situations led to serious unrest among his Jewish

or Samaritan subjects, three times resulting in a massacre, while a fourth was narrowly averted.”<sup>4</sup> On one occasion he had his soldiers carry flags bearing the idolatrous image of Caesar into Jerusalem, provoking a riot in the process. Another time he raided the sacred Corban treasury of the temple to pay for the building of an aqueduct. Josephus describes this incident:

This roused the populace to fury, and when Pilate visited Jerusalem they surrounded the tribunal and shouted him down. But he had foreseen this disturbance, and had made the soldiers mix with the mob, wearing civilian clothing over their armor, and with orders not to draw their swords but to use clubs on the tumultuous. He now gave the signal from the tribunal and the Jews were cudged, so that many died from the blows, and many that fled were trampled to death by their friends. The fate of those who perished horrified the crowd into silence.<sup>5</sup>

Pilate, no lover of the Jews, will prove to be anything but a rubber stamp for the Sanhedrin. Upon hearing that a prisoner was to be brought before him, he went to the courthouse to hear the case, as was the custom, in the early morning. “In Roman trials the magistrate normally heard the charges first, questioned the defendant and listened to his defense, sometimes permitted several such exchanges, and then retired with his advisors to decide on a verdict, which was then promptly carried out.”<sup>6</sup> John records that the priests did not want to enter the heathen residence lest they become unclean (Jn 18:29-30) and therefore unable to eat the Passover lamb, so Pilate met them out in front. The unruliness of the crowd made the investigation difficult, however, so he went back inside and summoned Jesus to him. Their statement that Jesus claimed “to be Christ, a king” (Luke 23:2) had to be taken seriously, because of the history of hotheaded zealots and fundamentalist Pharisees. So Pilate puts the question directly to Jesus.

## II. Silent Before the Shearers (15:2-5)

**And Pilate questioned Him, “Are You the King of the Jews?” And answering He said to him, “It is as you say.” And the chief priests began to accuse Him harshly. And Pilate was questioning Him again, saying, Do You make no answer? See how many charges they bring against You!” But Jesus made no further answer; so that Pilate was amazed. (15:2-5)**

To the question, “Are you the king of the Jews?” Jesus’ answer, “You say it is,” seems simple and direct. But, does Jesus simply mean, “Yes, it is as you say,” or is he making the more qualified statement, “Yes, you say I am the king of the Jews; but you have no idea what that means.” John’s gospel implies the latter (18:34-38). Jesus is king, but on a much larger scale than Pilate could have dreamed. To reduce Messiah to a competing political ruler would be absurd. His kingdom is not of this world in its origin, authority or implementation. It is much larger than that.

With Jesus’ answer the chief priests hammer home their charges. But Jesus says nothing in response to their pounding waves of accusation. “If Jesus had said nothing at all, Pilate would be bound to condemn him, since in the Roman system the defense depended heavily on the defendant’s response. But Jesus has spoken.”<sup>7</sup> His defense of two words is more than adequate. Nothing more is needed, so he remains silent. His silence has a deep impact on

Pilate, who is becoming more favorable to him and less inclined to being a pawn for the Sanhedrin, who he discerned were driven purely by envy.

The pretense of loyalty to the Emperor was too flimsy a reason to rob an innocent man his life. So Pilate, no friend to the Jews, plays a card that he hopes will give the appearance of generosity while at the same time thwarting the plans of the Jewish council. Roman law granted that on Passover the imperial magistrate could grant amnesty to an already condemned prisoner. Three such candidates were available, for whom crosses had already been ordered. To these three Jesus will now be added.

## III. The Great Exchange (15:6-15)

**Now at the feast he used to release for them any one prisoner whom they requested. And the man named Barabbas had been imprisoned with the insurrectionists who had committed murder in the insurrection. And the multitude went up and began asking him to do as he had been accustomed to do for them. And 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 delivered Him up because of envy. (15:6-10)**

Pilate is balancing on a tightrope. He hates the Jews but, not wanting to risk another riot, he plays the amnesty card. In the midst of the commotion another condemned Jew, Barabbas, waits in the background. Who is this man? The name Barabbas in Aramaic means “son of the father,” and is found mostly in rabbinical literature as a nickname for the sons of famous rabbis.<sup>8</sup> It’s interesting to speculate that Barabbas might have been the son of a great rabbi. He was raised in a god-fearing home but had become a notorious prodigal turned terrorist. Though his background may remain a mystery, his misdeeds were well known. His attempt to overthrow the Roman oppressors had led to murder and his imprisonment. News of the revolt had become well known, and a crowd had made their way to Pilate’s tribunal to secure his release.

As they shouted out their request, Pilate may have been confused as to whose release they were seeking. Some ancient Greek manuscripts preserve the man’s name as “Jesus Barrabus” (“Jesus son of the father”), which may have caused Pilate to think they were asking for Jesus of Nazareth. So in response, he puts forward this supposed “King of the Jews,” hoping to be done with this affair and, at the same time, thwart the desires of the Jewish leaders.

But the chief priests were one step ahead of their Roman rival.

**But the chief priests stirred up the multitude to ask him to release Barabbas for them instead. And answering again, Pilate was saying to them, “Then what shall I do with Him whom you call the King of the Jews?” And they shouted back, “Crucify Him!” (15:11-13)**

Leaving nothing to chance, the chief priests had already infiltrated the crowd. Now they stir the mob into a frenzy, making Barabbas the equivalent of a national hero. It was his release they wanted. But if Barabbas is released, what will Pilate do with Jesus? Having been warned by his wife not to have anything to do with “that innocent man,” (Matt 27:19) Pilate puts the question to the crowd. Two words come ringing back, “Crucify him!” Dumbfounded,

Pilate presses the case for Jesus' innocence.

**But Pilate was saying to them, "Why, what evil has He done?" But they shouted all the more, "Crucify Him!" (15:14)**

Pilate makes a final attempt to save Jesus, but the crowd, now in a riotous frenzy, is beyond reason, revealing not Jesus' supposed crimes but their original intentions and motives: "Crucify Him!"

**And wishing to satisfy the multitude, Pilate released Barabbas for them, and after having Jesus scourged, he delivered Him to be crucified. (15:15)**

Pilate could not change their minds. He had no choice but to go through with it. He released the murderer Barabbas, and delivered Jesus over to be crucified. But first he had him flogged. "Among the Jews scourging was limited to forty lashes, but the Romans were restricted by nothing but their strength and whim."<sup>9</sup> Few victims survived the dreaded *flagellum*, a whip of leather thongs well laced with pieces of sharp metal and bone, designed to cut deep. First, the victim was stripped and tied to a post. Then came the torture. One doctor tried to convey the brutality of flogging in medical terms:

The heavy whip is brought down with full force again and again across Jesus' shoulder, back and legs. At first the heavy thongs cut through the skin only. Then, as the blows continue, they cut deeper into the subcutaneous tissues, producing first an oozing of blood from the capillaries and veins of the skin, and finally spurting arterial bleeding from veins in the underlying muscles...Finally the skin of the back is hanging in long ribbons and the entire area is an unrecognizable mass of torn, bleeding tissue.<sup>10</sup>

In the ripping raw of Jesus' flesh, Pilate made sure there would be no future complaint against him to Rome—and perhaps by a slim chance, the chief priests might take pity on Jesus and not crucify an innocent man. Such were Pilate's menial motives. The Son of the Father is left a mangled mass of bleeding flesh. Sadly, this one encounter with Jesus had no impact on Pilate. More rapacious crimes forced him out of office. His life went from bad to worse. Eusebius says that "Pilate himself was involved in such calamities that he was forced to become his own executioner and to punish himself with his own hand: divine justice, it seems, was not slow to overtake him."<sup>11</sup> Pilate took his own life.

#### **IV. By His Scourging We Are Healed**

What can we learn from this story? As Jesus steps closer and closer towards the cross, the approaching night of sin seems to grow darker and colder. No disciples, no supporters of any kind remain. The cold, cruel government rulers, both religious and civil, seem to have a free hand to carry out their despicable whims. Their actions grip us in horror as we try to comprehend the meaning of evil let loose without restraint. But faith sees through the darkness to the mystery of salvation.

First, there are the chief priests, whom Mark does not mention by name. They appear totally successful in their evil plots, and in this critical hour are surprisingly capable of manipulating a powerful government with their agenda. They hate Jesus for his claim to be Messiah and his re-

fusal to fulfill their expectations to overthrow Rome, yet they have him indicted for seditious actions against Rome. Pilate has no interest in helping them.

In the past, Pilate consistently walked all over them, but now, even after being warned by his wife to stay away from this case, he has to play into their hand. The nature of the charges demands that he try the case. Finding Jesus innocent and offering to release him, he is further manipulated to release Barabbas instead. Pushed to edge of job security over justice, he performs the historic "great exchange." A harmless itinerant rabbi will die in the place of a bloody terrorist. Barabbas will live, while Jesus will be crucified.

What does Barabbas represent in this story? The answer is quite clear: he is the "son of the father" (i.e. a rabbi), raised to worship at the feet of Yahweh, now turned bloody terrorist, condemned for multiple murders. Isn't that a microcosm of the story of Israel? As Jesus is raised up on that tree and numbered among *these* transgressors, we discover that the cross is at its very heart a mirror to Israel of what she had become and had now in fact condemned. This is as biting as the prophet Nathan's charge to David, "You are the man!" (2 Sam 12:7) Is this what God would have us learn? The wretchedness of our sin, which we cannot see, yet we so easily project on innocent others and then vehemently condemn them? Yes. The cross becomes a mirror of our own sin.

Isaiah wrote:

***Surely our griefs He Himself bore,  
And our sorrows He carried;  
Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken,  
Smitten of God and afflicted. (Isa 53:4)***

Then there is Pilate, the political powerhouse who stood at the crossroads of two worlds, Israel and Rome. At this hour he is striding on a stage where he does not wish to be. Ruling over this rabbi was not something he wanted to do. He knew that evil motives were at play. Jesus' answers to his questions betray a profound simplicity and a confident silence that is frightening. There is an attractiveness about this rabbi that Pilate has never encountered before. Who is this man? He can't be sure, but he knows that whatever Jesus has done is not worthy of death, and his wife's dream echoes the warnings in his mind. So he looks for a way out. Sadly, it is a way out that lacks cost or commitment. He cannot bring himself to overrule the Jews again; that would not look good to Rome. Job security was more important than the truth. This was one time when it was right to assert his authority over the Jews, but it was the one time he could not do it. In the process, the greatest injustice in history was perpetrated. Truly, this was the great exchange.

Pilate grants amnesty to a terrorist in exchange for the Son of God. To take the edge off the whole affair, flogs Jesus' skin off, turns his back and walks away. Surely this was evil at its worst. But God's purposes were infinitely larger.

***The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him,  
And by his scourging we are healed. (Isa 53:5)***

By his stripes, those blows that cut deep into his flesh, we are healed. So Pilate performed a historic function that made possible all of our holy health and *shalom* peace. So

deep is the cancer of our sin, forgiveness could not be granted without the shedding of blood. But notice, it is not a clean death. The wounds gouge deep. Nerves sting and raw pain screams. Blood oozes out over raw flesh, thirty-nine times over. Stare deeply and you will come to understand a God who will not compromise his severe holiness or quench his unrelenting love. By his scourging we are healed.

*Beneath the cross of Jesus  
I fain would take my stand –  
The shadow of a mighty rock  
within a weary land...  
O safe and happy shelter!  
O refuge tried and sweet!  
O trysting-place, where heaven's love  
And heaven's justice meet!*

Finally, we see the way of the Lamb. Mark contrasts Pilate's pitiful compromise with the silent confidence of the Lamb. Here we see *how* the sacrificial fight is waged and won. Fortified by the prayers of the night, Jesus allows himself to be bound like a sacrificial lamb. When he is asked to speak, his two words of defense muster an ocean of truth. For the remainder he is silent. It is a majestic silence.

***He was oppressed and He was afflicted,  
Yet He did not open His mouth;  
Like a lamb that is led to slaughter,  
And like a sheep that is silent before its shearers,  
So He did not open His mouth.*** (Isa 53:7)

Once he committed himself to this way, he refused to resist or complain. That silence speaks of the obedience that secured our salvation. And the apostles hold it up to us to spur us on to a holy life:

**let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin; and you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons,**

**“My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor faint when you are reprovved by Him; for those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives”** (Heb 12:2-5)

May God grant us the grace to follow the way of the Lamb. Amen.

1. Bargil Pixner, *With Jesus in Jerusalem, his first and last day in Judea*, (Rosh Pina, Israel: Corazin, 1996) 119.
2. C.F.D. Moule, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Cambridge, 1965) 124.
3. I am indebted to Pixner, 117, for these thoughts.
4. R.T. France, *Mark* (New York: Doubleday, 1998) 196.
5. Josephus, *Jewish War*, 139.
6. D.A. Carson, “Matthew,” *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 568.
7. Carson.
8. This is Carson's suggestion.
9. Carson, 571.
10. C. Truman David, “The Crucifixion of Jesus. The Passion of Christ from a Medical Point of View,” *Arizona Medicine* 22:3 (March 1965) 185, quoted by Wessel in “Mark,” *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 775.
11. Eusebius, *The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine*, translated by G. A. Williamson (Penguin Books, 1965) 43.

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