

# OpenTheo

## Matthew 27:15 - 27:26



### Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

Steve Gregg delves into Matthew 27:15-26, which portrays the auction-like environment surrounding Jesus as a criminal with Pilate asking the Jewish crowd to choose between him and another criminal called Barabbas. The crowd, driven by public sentiments, chose Barabbas and demanded Jesus to be crucified. Pilate's wife warned him about the innocent Jesus, but Pilate, fearing Caesar's reaction, succumbed to the crowd's pressure and released Barabbas while condemning Jesus to be flogged and eventually crucified. Throughout the story, Jesus remains committed to his non-worldly kingdom and loyal to Rome, deflecting Pilate's attempts to place the responsibility on him.

### Transcript

Today we're going to continue studying in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 27, and we will begin at verse 15. We are in the midst of the passage that tells of Jesus having been arrested and standing trial before Pontius Pilate. And in verse 15 it says, Now at the feast the governor was accustomed to releasing to the multitude one prisoner whom they wished.

And they had then a notorious prisoner called Barabbas. Therefore, when they had gathered together, Pilate said to them, Whom do you want me to release to you, Barabbas or Jesus who is called Christ? For he knew that because of envy they had delivered him. While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent to him, saying, Have nothing to do with that just man, for I have suffered many things today in a dream because of him.

But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the multitudes that they should ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus. The governor answered and said to them, Which of the two do you want me to release to you? They said, Barabbas. Pilate said to them, What then shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ? They all said to him, Let him be crucified.

Then the governor said, Why? What evil has he done? But they cried out all the more, Let him be crucified. When Pilate saw that he could not prevail at all, but rather that a tumult was rising, he took water and washed his hands before the multitude, saying, I

am innocent of the blood of this just person. You see to it.

And all the people answered and said, His blood be on us and on our children. Then he released Barabbas to them. And when he had discouraged Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified.

Now, this Barabbas, we don't know anything about except for the stories here in the Gospels. We know the meaning of his name, which is an interesting meaning when you consider that he was given in exchange for Jesus because Barabbas comes from two Aramaic words. It means son of a father or son of the father.

And whether that was the man's real name or a nickname, a family name or whatever, we don't know. But here Jesus, who is the son of the father in heaven, is on the auction block, as it were. He's up for trade with the son of another father.

This father, the father Barabbas, had not raised his son very well because his son had become a robber, a thief and an insurrectionist against Rome. And he had been actually arrested with other insurrectionists with him. We're not told that here, but we are told that in the other Gospels.

So Barabbas was not arrested alone. He was part of a gang that had probably attempted to overthrow Roman rule. Perhaps it had attacked Roman guards, but it says he was also a robber.

So he was just an all-around bad guy. He wasn't just a patriot involved in insurrection against the oppressed in Rome. He was also a criminal who stole things from people.

So this man was bad all around. And Pilate, it says he had a custom that at the feast time he would release one prisoner, apparently to placate the Jews. And so he presented Jesus as an option, as one he could release.

And Barabbas. Now, it's not clear exactly what he hoped would happen here. Did he hope that they'd ask for Barabbas? It doesn't seem likely that Pilate wanted to release Barabbas.

It does seem likely he wanted to release Christ. As a matter of fact, we know that he had determined to let Him go. According to Acts chapter 2, Peter is preaching to the Jews and says that that he be crucified, even though Pilate had determined to let Him go.

It's possible that, you see, it says that Pilate knew that because of envy, the Jews had delivered Jesus to him. Now, anyone who was an enemy of the Jews, as far as Pilate was concerned, was a friend of his. And the fact that the Jewish chief priests didn't like Jesus probably went a long way toward endearing Jesus to Pilate just because Pilate didn't like the Jewish leaders.

And he could tell that they were jealous of Jesus. They could tell that Jesus, that Pilate could tell, that Jesus had not really done any crimes. He hadn't really done anything wrong.

And the only reason that the Jews had brought Him to him was because of envy. Now, the Jews were pressuring Pilate pretty big time here to crucify Jesus and to condemn Him. But there was also a crowd gathered there early in the morning.

And Pilate may have appealed to the crowd as an attempt to get them to call for the release of Jesus. Rather than taking the bold stand that Pilate should have taken for justice and saying, this man is innocent, I will not condemn him, he appealed to his custom that sometimes he would let a prisoner go. And perhaps he hoped that if he went over the heads of the Jewish priests and appealed to the crowds and said, which man would you like me to let go, that he hoped that notwithstanding the envy of the chief priests against Jesus, perhaps the crowds would sympathize with Jesus.

However, we read that the chief priests went among the crowds and persuaded them to call out for Barabbas to be released and to have Jesus crucified. Now, one wonders, how could the chief priests persuade the crowds to do this? It was less than a week earlier than this that Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey and was proclaimed the Messiah by many people who saw Him coming in. They cried, Hosanna to the Son of David, save now.

And there was a great multitude come out to greet Him and to honor Him. Jesus was generally popular with the crowds. So how did this multitude that was there at the praetorium outside of Pilate's house, how were they persuaded so easily to call for the crucifixion of Jesus? Well, we have probably a couple of ways we can go on this.

One is we could just say this is an example of how fickle people can be, that people might be attracted to Jesus when the crowd seems to be attracted to Him, but when the crowd seems to be against Him, they can turn against Him just as quickly. In other words, people are subject to peer pressure or whatever it appears that the leaders want them to do. If this is so, then we would have to assume that those that were proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah on Palm Sunday were very shallow in their commitment.

They were just joining the parade, as it were. They saw the crowds coming and a crowd draws a crowd. And so a great number of people who didn't have any loyalty to Jesus at all simply came out to view the parade and to participate and to cry out whatever the slogans were that people were crying out.

But then, when they find that the authorities or parts of the crowd are starting to call for His crucifixion, the fickle masses are as quick to turn around and cry out whatever everyone else wants to cry out. And that is the way many people are in their commitment to Jesus. You know, they're raised in a church where everybody says they

believe in Jesus, and so they say they believe in Jesus.

But when they get out into a different crowd, maybe at school or at work, and they find that the crowd there is against Jesus, well, then they are against Jesus in that crowd as well. People are very fickle unless they have deep convictions. Of course, true discipleship is a deep conviction.

It is a total commitment to Jesus. It is a commitment that will stand against peer pressure. It will stand alone, if necessary, against everybody because it is convinced fully that Jesus is the Son of God and that He is the Savior and the Lord, and a true disciple is committed to following Him.

And therefore, is not fickle, will not turn on Jesus as soon as the crowd seems to do so. But there are many who call themselves Christians today, who say so because they happen to be in a Christian crowd. They happen to be in Christian company.

And because they are in Christian company, they talk like Christians. They are chameleons, however, spiritually speaking, because as soon as they are in the company of non-Christians, they talk as if they are non-Christian. They participate in the lewd jokes and in the other inappropriate behaviors that Christians would not approve of.

But when they are among those who approve of those things, these same people do those things. And we could argue that this is how the crowd was persuaded on this occasion to turn against Christ, that they never were really very much for Him, that they were proclaiming Him Messiah when that was the popular thing to do, and now they are calling for His crucifixion because that had now become the popular thing to do. Well, that is one way to explain the turnaround, and it could possibly be correct, because we see this kind of demonstration of the fickleness of man in other stories in the Scriptures.

In many cases, it is the fickleness of the Gentiles rather than the Jews that is depicted in the book of Acts, for example. When Paul was at Lystra, he did a remarkable healing there, and the local pagans thought he was a god who had come down from Mount Olympus and was working powers, and so they were going to actually burn animal sacrifices to him as a god. And when he learned of it, he rebuked them and told them that that was against what he stood for and it was contrary to his teaching.

And in the very next verse in Acts, we read that some Jews came down from another place and persuaded the crowds to stone Paul, and they stoned him and dragged him out of the city. Now, within the space of two successive verses, we read of these people scarcely being restrained from sacrificing and worshipping Paul, and in the next verse, we read of them stoning him and dragging him out of the city. So quickly do people change their minds when the drift of public sentiment shifts.

You know, they're driven to and fro by every wind of opinion that comes along. And so

we see these crowds calling for Jesus' crucifixion, even though they may have been the same people who were proclaiming him the Messiah six days earlier or five days earlier. Now, another possibility is that these crowds that were there gathered at the praetorium were not a random sampling of the people who had come to the feast.

They may have been a crowd that had been gathered deliberately by the chief priests or they may have been people who were from out of town. You see, the Jews from all over the Roman Empire had to come to Jerusalem for this feast. Many of them had never heard Jesus, didn't know who he was, and they were just there as pilgrims from a faraway place come to participate in the feast.

They may have found themselves there at the praetorium or in the general precincts, not knowing what was going on, not knowing who this Jesus was, and seeing that something was afoot, may have gathered around to see what was going on. And in their total ignorance, they simply took their cues from the leaders who said, Hey, listen, call for Barabbas to be released and call for this man Jesus to be crucified. In a case like this, it's possible that the crowds did not know very much who Jesus was and that they were simply obeying orders from the leaders whom they either trusted or feared.

And therefore, they did what they were told. In any case, we find that Pilate is somewhat intimidated by this crowd response. They're crying out for Jesus to be crucified.

Now, in the midst of this story, we read of this incident with Pilate's wife. Now, this whole scenario we're reading about happened very early in the morning. Jesus was standing before Pilate as early as six in the morning.

We read that in John's Gospel. And so it was just at daybreak that the Jews brought Jesus to Pilate for this. And apparently Pilate's wife had just woken up, maybe had woken up in the night, or had maybe woke up even during these proceedings, and she woke up from a disturbing dream.

We do not know what the content of the dream was. All she says is that she suffered many things in a dream last night because of this righteous man. And she sent a message to Pilate saying, have nothing to do with him.

Now, Pilate was, you know, being pulled different ways. On the one hand, he knew Jesus was innocent. He said so.

Now, that in itself wouldn't necessarily sway Pilate in Jesus' favor because Pilate had been known to kill other innocent people. He didn't value Jewish life very much. On one occasion, according to Luke chapter 13, Pilate slew a great number of Galileans who were simply offering sacrifices in the temple.

And he killed them in cold blood, apparently. And so Pilate was, you know, just the fact that Jesus was innocent was probably not enough to turn Pilate toward Jesus and make

him sympathetic toward Jesus. There were other factors, however.

We read earlier that the governor, that is, Pilate, marveled greatly at Jesus' whole demeanor. In Matthew 27, 14, there was something about just seeing Jesus, how he conducted himself, how he faced his accusers, how he remained silent under provocation and so forth that caused Pilate to note that this was no ordinary man and to be impressed by his whole demeanor. And then, of course, he has this note from his wife coming to him, to have nothing to do with this righteous man, I've just had a dream about him, and, you know, you just better leave him alone.

I mean, these kinds of things began to bother Pilate. Now, there were more things, but they're not all recorded here in Matthew. For example, as you read the parallel accounts in the Gospel of John, there's much more given there about the dialogue between Jesus and Pilate.

And on one occasion, the crowds say to Pilate, this man should be put to death according to our law because he claimed to be the Son of God. And anyone who claims to be the Son of God is guilty of blasphemy. Well, we read in John that when Pilate heard them say that Jesus was the Son of God, or that he claimed to be the Son of God, Pilate, it says he was very disturbed when he heard that.

It frightened him. And he went back to Jesus and said, where are you from? In other words, you know, are you from here or are you from somewhere else? Now, you see, until that point, Pilate had not even heard that Jesus claimed to be the Son of God, but as soon as he heard it, he took it seriously. It's interesting.

It scared him when he heard that. Now, many people, when they hear Jesus claimed to be the Son of God, they just laugh. Pilate didn't laugh because he had already encountered Jesus.

He was apparently profoundly impressed with Jesus, sufficiently that when he heard later that Jesus claimed to be the Son of God, Pilate's opinion was, I wouldn't be surprised if he was, and made him go and inquire of Jesus more about that. So, Pilate really had a strong urge to release Jesus and be free of this whole business. And his wife's dream, no doubt, contributed a great deal to that, as well as the other factors that were impressing him in a different, toward a certain direction.

On the other hand, he had the Jewish leaders and the crowds crying out for Jesus' crucifixion. It's not recorded here in Matthew, but as you read the other Gospels, you find that one of the things that really was the straw that broke the camel's back and caused Pilate to give in to the Jews was that they said to him, after it seemed like he was going to release Jesus, and he was pretty determined to do so, they got desperate, and they actually blackmailed Pilate, essentially. They said, this man said that he is the king of the Jews, and anyone who claims to be the king of the Jews is speaking against Caesar.

Now, of course, the implications of this were very plain to Pilate. If news got back to Caesar that this man, Jesus, was claiming to be king of the Jews and was therefore placing himself in the place of Caesar, you see Caesar viewed himself as the king of the Jews. Well, if Pilate let him off the hook, and news got back to Caesar, and the Jews may have been implying that we will make sure Caesar hears about this, then Pilate himself might look like a sympathizer toward someone who is rising up against Caesar.

And for Pilate to look like that to Caesar would not go well for his career. As a matter of fact, his career was somewhat tenuous already, we know from secular history. One of the reasons that he was in Judea at this time, apparently, was as sort of a disciplinary action, because most Romans did not want to be governors in Palestine.

It was too tumultuous. Anyway, this is what Pilate was facing. He's being blackmailed on the one side, saying that if he does not cause Jesus to be crucified, that news will no doubt get back to Caesar that Pilate has taken the side of one who is against Caesar.

Of course, that was a lie against Jesus. Jesus had not taken any stand against Caesar. And when he said he was a king of the Jews, the king of the Jews, he was not claiming to be the king of the Jews in the same sense that Caesar claimed to be.

In fact, Pilate asked Jesus, are you a king then? And Jesus said, well, my kingdom is not of this world. If it was, my servants would have fought that I should not have been taken by the Jews. He said that in John 18, 36.

So Jesus was the king of the Jews, but he wasn't claiming to be the same kind of king of the Jews as Caesar did. And there would actually be room for both kings in one sense, in that Caesar could still be the political ruler of the land, and Jesus would be the ruler of the kingdom of God, which is in the hearts of men. However, there is truly a bit of a tug of war, even between Christ and Caesar.

Not so much that Caesar's throne was in jeopardy of Jesus coming and sitting there, but whenever Jesus commands the loyalty of his subjects, it is a total loyalty he demands. Jesus said, he that comes to me and does not hate his father and his mother and his wife and children, and does not take up his cross and follow me, cannot be my disciple. Obviously, Jesus demands total loyalty from those who were his followers, and he even said you have to forsake all that you have to be my disciple, in Luke 14, verse 33.

So, if Jesus is commanding the total loyalty of those who follow him as subjects in his kingdom, and if Caesar or some other authority also wants total submission to himself, then those parties that are torn two ways, a little bit like Pilate was. He was torn on one hand toward his recognition that Jesus was innocent, and not only innocent, but impressive. Whether Pilate believed Jesus was the son of God or not, we don't know, but he was very positively impressed with Jesus and wanted to take Jesus' side.

On the other hand, his loyalty to Rome, to Caesar, pulled him the other direction. And there are many people in history who have been tugged just that same way. That Christ has demanded total loyalty, and their government has demanded total loyalty, and sometimes the government gives commands that are contrary to Christ's commands.

And that being so, of course, the person who will follow Christ must submit to Christ rather than to Caesar in cases like that. In this case, Pilate went the wrong direction. He went on the side of Caesar.

He was told that Jesus was an opponent to Caesar, and therefore Pilate, fearful of taking the wrong stand and getting disciplined by Caesar, went ahead and delivered Jesus over to be crucified. But not without protest. As a final protest to his own action, he washed his hands in water and said, I'm innocent of the blood of this just person.

You see to it. Now, that was Pilate's way of protesting this whole affair, but it was not true when he said, I am innocent of the blood. We might wish that we could be innocent.

We might wish that we could put off our responsibility. We might wish that we could just take a bath and be done with it, wash our hands, just be baptized, just go through some ritual with water and say, well, okay, that absolves me of all my responsibility to take sides with Jesus. No, it does not.

There are people who have washed, as it were, in baptism, and they think that that absolves them of all their rebellion against God, as if being baptized removes their obligation to follow Jesus Christ. Pilate himself washed his hands and thought that that cleansed him of the guilt of his general position on Christ, that he delivered Christ up to be crucified unjustly. A man who is a judge has to do what is right, or else he bears the guilt for it.

And Pilate did what was wrong, but didn't want to bear the guilt for it, and washed his hands as a symbolic gesture. But that symbolism could not wash away his guilt. The Jewish people, on the other hand, said, well, his blood be on our heads and on our children's.

And that would be a reference, of course, to that generation of Jews and the following generation, who indeed did have to suffer the consequences for the guilt of that blood. Jesus himself said, the blood of all the righteous prophets, from Abel to Zechariah, will come upon this generation. And here they are calling for it upon their own heads.

Let the blood of Jesus come upon us. Let the guilt of this crime be on our heads. Well, it was, and in 70 A.D., they and their children suffered terrible consequences at the hands of the Romans, as God brought judgment on that city that took Jesus and crucified him unjustly.