



Even for the Guilty

The innocent traitor screamed in the courtyard as the lash snapped down on his back.

Pilate shook his head as he paced the colonnade. He may claim to be a king... but he was no traitor. Deluded? Yes. Claimed to be more than he is? Yes. But the only reason he was on trial was that the chief priests were jealous.

And Pilate loved to stick it to those chief priests. He loved to mock them.

But now they were whipping up a riot, and Pilate couldn't afford another one of those. Not anymore.

What to do with an innocent traitor?

The lash landed again. Scarlet droplets flew. Soldiers cheered. Pilate paced.

What. to. do?

Ah! Pilate snapped his fingers. Of course! It was Passover time.

"Bring him!" he yells to the guard and goes to the judge's seat.

The crowd outside quiets as he takes his place. And the soldiers bring out the broken King: A bloody back. Tattered rags of a purple robe. A crown of thorn scraping against skull.

"Behold your King!" Pilate cheers.

The crowd sneers.

Pilate said to them, "It is your custom for me to release to you one prisoner at the time of the Passover. Which of the two do you want me to release to you? Barabbas, or Jesus, the King of the Jews, who is called Christ?"

It was an obvious choice: The innocent King that was so popular, or the guilty murderer? Who would choose the guilty over the innocent?

And as Pilate makes the offer, a servant bends over his ear. "Sir, a message from your wife."

"Yes?"

"She says, 'Don't have anything to do with that innocent man, because I have suffered a great deal today in a dream on account of him.'"

Pilate shakes his head and waves the servant off. Of course the man was innocent – anyone could see it.

He looks to the crowd again. "Which of the two do you want me to release to you?"

And with one voice they answered, "Away with this man! Release Barabbas to us!"

What?

They choose the guilty over the innocent? Who would chose a murderer over the Prince of Peace?

“What shall I do then with Jesus, who is called Christ, the one you call King of the Jews?”

“Crucify him!” they shout. “Crucify him!”

Pilate did all he could to release the innocent man. He returned to the colonnade. He paced. He questioned this Jesus. The crowd grew more and more violent, and he couldn’t afford that! Not anymore.

He goes to the balcony again. “Why? What crime has this man committed? I have found in him no grounds for the death penalty. Therefore, I will have him punished and then release him.”

“Crucify him! Crucify him!”

“You take him and crucify him! As for me, I find no basis for a charge against him!”

“Crucify him! Crucify him!”

Crucify him? How could you crucify an innocent man?

And then the Jews shouted, “If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar’s. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar!”

They were blackmailing him. No friend of Caesar? Innocent or not, if Pilate let this traitor go free, if Pilate let this King go free, they would report him to Rome. He would have his own government after him.

Pilate stood before the judge’s seat, placed his hands on the arms, and lowered himself onto the hard, hard bench. He looked over the crowd. He motioned for a bowl of water to be brought, and he washed his hands. “I am innocent of this man’s blood!”

And with that the innocent was condemned while the guilty Barabbas was let go – free.

Brothers and sisters,

This is what Jesus does for you. He was innocent, sentenced for our guilt, so that we may be declared not guilty.

And this story is true.

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