

Release the Murderer
Mark 15:1-15

Good morning.

Last week, the Atlanta first News website reported, “*A murder suspect is on the loose after he was accidentally released, according to the Fulton County Sheriff’s Office.*”

Zion River Shaka, 30, had been booked in Fulton County Jail since 2020 but he also faced several charges from 2014 in Clayton County.

Shaka was supposed to return to jail after a Jan. 22 hearing, but the Clayton County Sheriff’s Office mistakenly let him go, according to the Fulton County Sheriff’s Office.

Fulton County deputies are looking for Shaka.”

When we hear of a murder suspect being released because of a human error we can get frustrated.

But what if they released a murderer on purpose and executed an innocent man instead, how would you feel about that?

Please open your Bibles to **Mark 15**, as we continue in that verse-by-verse study.

Last time we learned about some atrocities during Peter’s denial.

Mark 14:65 Then some began to spit on Him, and to blindfold Him, and to beat Him, and to say to Him, "Prophecy!" NKJV

Being blindfolded meant Jesus could not flinch or guard against punches, so strikes would have been much more destructive.

Isaiah tells us He was beaten so badly He was hardly recognized, but Peter denied he had been with Jesus.

Peter lied and finally he cursed and swore he didn't know Jesus.

We learned Jesus looked at Peter with love and **compassion**, not disappointment or anger, which broke Peter's heart and caused a true repentance in him. Then we saw Peter's full restoration.

Today, we will learn about Jesus' false trials before Pilate and how the religious leaders asked for a murderer to be set free and Jesus to be crucified.

I. Jesus' silence spoke volumes.

Read *Mark 15:1-5*

At this point it was about 5 a.m. and Jesus had already been brutally beaten at the High Priest's house.

The Sanhedrin got together to discern what they could do with Jesus after they had beaten Him, i.e., they wanted to discuss what legal avenue they could use to crucify Jesus.

Rome was ruling over Israel so, one of their laws was that capital punishment could only be imposed by their government.

Pilate, as a prefect or governor possessed great power and position in the Empire. But he hated Judea, he hated the Jews, and he had zero concern for them or for their religion.

The Sanhedrin sent Jesus to Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor over Judea, to expedite Jesus' execution, because they did not have the **authority** to put Him to death.

John 18:31 Then Pilate said to them, "You take Him and judge Him according to your law." Therefore, the Jews said to him, "It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death." NKJV

Why would Pilate consider getting involved in this matter?

Carson said, "Prefects governed small, troubled areas; and in judicial matters they possessed powers like those of the far more powerful proconsuls and imperial legates.

In short, they held the power of life and death."

Question: *Why didn't Pilate tell the Sanhedrin to get lost?*

Pilate was in **trouble** with Tiberius Caesar because of some of the things he had done while governing Judea.

1. When Pilate first came into Judea, his men were carrying standards of gold and silver with eagles on top which the Jews considered idols which deeply offended the Jews.

So, the Jews rioted, and Pilate ordered the rioters into the amphitheater and threatened to kill them if they continued.

These rioters all laid down and told Pilate if he killed them, 10,000 more would come and take their place.

Pilate ended up backing off and when Tiberius Caesar heard of this, he was mad that Pilate could not handle the uprising.

2. Two years later, Pilate had an aqueduct built for fresh water but he raided the Jewish Temple in order to pay for it.

Of course, this caused another rebellion by the Jews and again Tiberius Caesar heard about it and was mad at Pilate again.

And then a few months before our narrative took place...

3. Pilate ordered new shields for his soldiers and on the front of the shield was the face of Tiberius Caesar and again the Jews considered this idolatry and rebelled one more time.

Tiberius Caesar warned Pilate, if there was one more uprising from the Jews, he would be removed as governor of Judea and would be summoned back to Rome.

The religious leaders had already broken many of their own laws with the trials and beating of Jesus.

They wanted to stone Jesus themselves but didn't have the authority to do it and they didn't want Jesus' followers' upset.

The religious leaders went to Pilate, who did not want to upset the Jewish leadership again, for fear of another uprising.

Pilate didn't care that Jesus claimed to be the Son of God, which the religious leaders called blasphemy.

So, the religious leaders also accused Jesus of being a terrorist and claimed He tried to start an insurrection by promoting Himself as the king of the Jews, in defiance to Caesar.

Only Rome had the right to execute, the "*the right of the sword.*"

However, Rome did allow the territories they conquered to maintain a form of self-rule. Ultimately only Rome had the power to take a life and yet, Jesus would **not defend** Himself.

This perplexed Pilate. But there is more to the story than just **who had legal authority** to impose capital punishment.

Think of the narrative in ***John 8***, of the woman caught in adultery. In the narrative of the woman caught in the act of adultery, the Jews were going to stone her to death.

Also, think of the 1st Christian Martyr Steven in ***Acts 7***, the Jews **stoned** him. So, there were times the Jews used the death penalty, even though they did not have the authority to do so.

Question: *Why did the Jews stone some people to death, yet here they wanted the Romans to impose the death sentence on Jesus?*

I would assert that it was not just the Jews who killed Jesus.

1. The Jews did not want to take responsibility for His death, and they didn't kill Jesus alone it was the will of the Father.
2. Jesus had to die by crucifixion in order to fulfill the Old Testament prophecies.
3. Jesus predicted He would die at the hands of the Gentiles, in ***Mark 10***.
4. Jesus took the curse of sin, so in exchange we could be saved and become the righteousness of God in Him.

Deuteronomy 21:22 "If a man has committed a sin deserving of death, and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree,

Deuteronomy 21:23 his body shall not remain overnight on the tree, but you shall surely bury him that day, so that you do not defile the land which the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance; for he who is hanged is accursed of God. NKJV

The whole world participated in Jesus' death, but now because of Jesus' death, the whole world can receive **forgiveness** of sin if they will trust in His finished work on the cross!

In vs. 2, Pilate asked Jesus if He was the King of the Jews and Jesus plainly responded, "***It is as you say.***"

We are told in ***Luke 23:1, the whole multitude of them arose and led Him to Pilate.***

Luke 23:2 And they began to accuse Him, saying, "We found this fellow perverting the nation, and forbidding to pay taxes to Caesar, saying that He Himself is Christ, a King." NKJV

When Jesus was accused with false testimony, He refused to defend Himself, just like when He was questioned by the religious leaders earlier.

Isaiah 53:7 He was oppressed and He was afflicted, Yet He opened not His mouth; He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so He opened not His mouth. NKJV

When they took Jesus to Pilate, the religious leaders accused Him of political treason, which was punishable by death.

The religious leaders accused Jesus of stirring up civil unrest, they accused Him of telling the people not to pay taxes, and they accused Him of telling the Jews He is Christ, the promised King.

Jesus seems to be at Pilate's mercy. I am sure Pilate had seen many men beg for mercy in front of him before this time with Jesus; but, there was something very different about Jesus.

What man in his right mind would not fight to save his own life?

William Lane said, *"Such silence was wholly unusual in the forum, and demonstrated a presence and a dignity which puzzled the prefect."*

John 19:10 Then Pilate said to Him, "Are You not speaking to me? Do You not know that I have power to crucify You, and power to release You?"

John 19:11 Jesus answered, "You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above. NKJV

II. Pilate wanted to release Jesus.

Read ***Mark 15:6-10***

Remember Passover celebrates Israelites' exodus from Egypt after four centuries of slavery.

According to the ***JSTOR Daily*** website, *"Over the centuries, Passover traditions have come and gone, with some persisting and others lost to time, leaving only the faintest of traces in historical texts.*

One such custom was the annual release of a prisoner.

*“On the evening before every Passover during the Roman occupation of Jerusalem, Jewish leaders asked the Roman governor to free a single convict, who likely would have been a **political** prisoner.” (JSTOR Daily)*

During Jesus’ time in Israel there were a lot of insurrectionists wanting to uprising against the Roman occupation, similar to a modern-day terrorist.

This is exactly what the religious leaders were accusing Jesus of doing, being a terrorist against Rome.

Why would Pilate set Jesus free? Besides the tradition of a political prisoner being set free, Pilate knew Jesus was innocent.

Luke 23:13 Pilate, when he had called together the chief priests, the rulers, and the people,

Luke 23:14 said to them, "You have brought this Man to me, as one who misleads the people. And indeed, having examined Him in your presence, I have found no fault in this Man concerning those things of which you accuse Him;

Luke 23:15 no, neither did Herod, for I sent you back to him; and indeed nothing deserving of death has been done by Him.

Luke 23:16 I will therefore chastise Him and release Him."

Luke 23:17 (for it was necessary for him to release one to them at the feast). NKJV

Pilate had a political problem, so he had to make a **choice** between doing what was right or what was politically easy.

Pilate was not a fan of the Jewish nation, and he knew the religious leaders brought charges against Jesus because they were envious of Jesus' popularity with the people.

In vs. 7 we are told, ***“There was one named Barabbas, who was chained with his fellow rebels.***

The encyclopedia Britanica says *“Barabbas was a prisoner mentioned in all four Gospels who was chosen by the crowd, over Jesus Christ, to be released by Pontius Pilate in a customary pardon before the feast of Passover.*

Barabbas is called a “notorious prisoner.” In Mark 15:7, he was “in prison with the rebels who had committed murder during the insurrection” against the occupying Roman forces.

John 18:40 describes him as a bandit.”

Most commentators believe Barabbas was the one who was truly an insurrectionist, wanting to overthrow Rome.

Most secular historians also tell us Barabbas was one of the worst mass murders of the time, even hated by his own people for all the consequence he brought upon the Jews for his actions.

Barabbas had caused so much trouble and the consequences of his actions were being felt by all the people. The thieves who were crucified with Jesus were also involved in an insurrection.

Historians report that Barabbas was actually scheduled to be crucified when Jesus was being condemned.

I think Pilate was hoping to appeal to the wishes of the masses but asking the crowd if they wanted Jesus released. But the religious leaders were not done manipulating yet.

III. The murderer was pardoned.

Read *Mark 15:11-14*

The religious leaders told the crowd how to vote once Pilate offered them a choice between Barabbas and Jesus.

We must remember that most Jews did not trust, nor like Pilate, and most of them did not want to anger their own Jewish religious **leaders**.

Someone might wonder how the crowd could ask for Jesus to be crucified, seeing how one week earlier they were shouting Hosanna during the Triumphant Entry of Jesus into Jerusalem.

Up to 2-3 million people gathered in Jerusalem for the Passover Feast, which again was a celebration of how the angel of death passed over the children of Israel during the plagues in Egypt.

The crowd during Palm Sunday heard that Jesus was coming to town, and they began to hail Him the new King of the Jews.

These people knew their Messianic prophecies and when they shouted Hosanna, it fulfilled a prophecy from *Psalms 118*.

Psalm 118:26 Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD! We have blessed you from the house of the LORD.

Psalm 118:27 God is the LORD, And He has given us light; Bind the sacrifice with cords to the horns of the altar.

Psalm 118:28 You are my God, and I will praise You; You are my God, I will exalt You. NKJV

The word *hosanna* means "save, rescue, savior".

It is no wonder why the religious establishment was so bent on killing Him. The people were claiming Jesus was the Messiah who came from God.

Here we are, a week later. *Was the crowd fickle or were they afraid of the religious leaders, or was there another reason?*

But it could be as A.T. Robertson said, *"If one wonders why the crowd was fickle, he may recall that this was **not** yet the same people who followed him in triumphal entry and in the temple."*

Pilate's dilemma is shown with his question to the crowd, ***"Do you want me to release to you the King of the Jews?"***

John MacArthur said, this was *"a last-ditch effort to escape the dilemma the Sanhedrin had created for him—a conflict between conscience and career; a choice between satisfying the Jews he hated or the Caesar he feared."*

Question: *Why would a cruel Roman governor spend so much time trying to convince these Jewish people to free Jesus?*

Was it because Pilate was impressed by how Jesus did not try to defend Himself?

*Was it because Pilate believed Jesus was the promised Messiah?
Was it to spite the Sanhedrin? Was it to **save his political life?***

Not only did Pilate think Jesus was innocent, but his wife had a vision and told Pilate not to touch this **innocent** man. But Pilate does not want a political catastrophe on his hands.

Matthew 27:19 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." NKJV

IV. Pilate tried to appease his political foes.

Read *Mark 15:15*

Remember, during the false trials of Jesus before the religious leaders, Jesus was beaten with open palms and spat upon.

Here before during this trial, Pilate ordered Jesus to be scourged before He was led off to be crucified. Scourging by the Romans was one of the worst forms of flogging throughout history.

Scourging was not meant to kill someone; however, it was brutal enough to be fatal. Scourging was meant to not only harm a person, but to **humiliate** them as well.

The whip used during this punishment was called in Latin a flagrum.

It was like a cat o' nine tails, with several strands of leather with lead balls or pieces of bone tied to the ends of the strands.

The victim of a scourging was to be tied to a post, stripped of their clothing, and beaten from the shoulders to the waist.

According to David McClister, "*Roman law mandated scourging as part of capital sentences, but this probably had the effect of shortening the victim's agony once on the cross.*

The victim would have been so weak from blood loss and pain that he would die more quickly than if he had not been scourged." 800 years before, Isaiah prophesied about Jesus.

Isaiah 53:5 But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed.

Isaiah 53:6 All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way; and the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all. NKJV

By law Pilate had to have Jesus scourged before His crucifixion, but I wonder if Pilate was secretly hoping the Jewish Sanhedrin would change their minds once they saw Jesus beaten.

V. Practical Application.

When we hear of a murder suspect being released because of a human error, we can get frustrated. *But what if they released a murderer on purpose and executed an innocent man instead?*

Most secular historians tell us that Barabbas was one of the worst mass murderers of the time; even hated by his own people for all the consequence he brought upon the Jews for his actions.

In *Matthew 27*, Barabbas is called a notorious prisoner, but I would also call him a notorious sinner. The truth be known, we are all like Barabbas, **notorious** sinners in need of salvation.

Pilate was given a choice between Jesus and Caesar! Pilate had to choose between his place in the world or his place with Jesus.

Pilate had to choose between his power in the world or Jesus.

Pilate desperately tried to have both, a good standing with Jesus and his status as Friend of Caesar as the Roman governor.

You can never permanently keep anything that you have gained in this world by denying Jesus. Within 10 years Pilate lost his position as Governor of Judea and he was sent back to Rome.

When Pilate was sent back to Rome, Tiberius had died, and the new Caesar banished him to Gaul where he committed suicide.

Pilate compromised everything in this trial of Jesus in order to secure his identity as a Friend of Caesar and his position in the Roman Empire.

Pilate, just like the religious leaders, chose the world and Caesar over Jesus, the real King of kings and Lord of lords.

Last week I said, Jesus was not the one on trial here.

Again today, Jesus was not on trial, the crowd, the religious leaders, and Pilate were actually the ones on trial.

Matthew 10:32 "Therefore whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven.

Matthew 10:33 But whoever denies Me before men, him I will also deny before My Father who is in heaven. NKJV

Like this crowd and Pilate, you can choose to be Friend of the world or a Friend of Jesus. That is the decision that determines eternity for you.

Choosing Jesus is a decision to flee from the consequence of sin, eternal loss, eternal darkness, and entering the light of Jesus Christ and receiving eternal life.

Because of our sin, we were the murderers who escaped the **penalty** due us, when we received the free gift of Jesus Christ, who is the innocent Man who was executed on Calvary's Cross.

Think about the irony here. As enemies of Rome, these Jewish religious leaders, actually made themselves loyal subjects of Caesar, in order to get rid of Jesus in their lives.

Within less than 40 years after this narrative, Rome would destroy Jerusalem and the Temple and drive the Jews from the land promised to Abraham and his descendants.

So, for us this morning: *Are you a friend of the world or a friend of Jesus? Who is your Savior and King?*