

Cause + Effect (Part 2): How the Cross of Christ Unlocks Prison Doors

Introduction

The Text

¹³ Pilate then called together the chief priests and the rulers and the people, ¹⁴ and said to them, “You brought me this man as one who was misleading the people. And after examining him before you, behold, I did not find this man guilty of any of your charges against him. ¹⁵ Neither did Herod, for he sent him back to us. Look, nothing deserving death has been done by him. ¹⁶ I will therefore punish and release him.”

¹⁸ But they all cried out together, “Away with this man, and release to us Barabbas” — ¹⁹ a man who had been thrown into prison for an insurrection started in the city and for murder. ²⁰ Pilate addressed them once more, desiring to release Jesus, ²¹ but they kept shouting, “Crucify, crucify him!” ²² A third time he said to them, “Why, What evil has he done? I have found in him no guilt deserving death. I will therefore punish and release him.” ²³ But they were urgent, demanding with loud cries that he should be crucified. And their voices prevailed. ²⁴ So Pilate decided that their demand should be granted. ²⁵ He released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, for whom they asked, but he delivered Jesus over to their will. (Luke 23:13–25)

Prison Break

- A. I think it’s safe to say that we all feel imprisoned in some way. Perhaps that seems too dramatic a word for you, but, when you stop and consider it, I think you know what I mean. In one way or another, we all feel bound up a bit, tied down, stuck, fettered, like our wings are clipped, like something’s off, like we’re not totally free.
1. It’s the daughter who feels imprisoned by her parents’ expectations of her. She’s not pleasing them, not satisfying them. No matter how high her GPA climbs, no matter the number of her extracurricular achievements . . . she’s never enough.
 2. It’s the tech worker, slaving away for a Pharaoh-like boss. He feels like a prisoner to the system. Silicon Valley was supposed to be the Land of Promise, he had such high hopes for what he’d accomplish here. But it’s exhausting. He feels more like a hamster in a wheel than a bird in the air.
 3. It’s the mom, who wouldn’t dare say it out loud, but sometimes, if she’s honest, she feels imprisoned by her own kids and calling. Sometimes, while the children are crying and clawing at her, all she wants to do is throw a blanket over her head and disappear. She’s just tired of it—tired of feeling like a slave, tired of feeling like a failure, tired of feeling like her own desires and dreams don’t matter.

4. It's the guy or gal who desperately wants to be married. The years keep turning and it just isn't happening. You feel imprisoned in your singleness. Everyone's asking you: "When are you going to meet 'the one'?" And you're just embarrassed, ashamed. What's wrong with you? You can't even find a date, let alone a spouse.
 5. But then, on the other hand, it's the guy or gal who is married and you feel imprisoned in the marriage. This relationship was supposed to fill you up. You've watched the movies. You've seen the "happily-ever-after"s. But this is a jail cell.
 - a. And I could just keep going on, but you get the idea. So, again, I think it's safe to say that we all feel imprisoned in some way.
- B. And, because of this, we're all trying to figure out how to break free, how to get out, right? And we've got all these different ideas of what it's going to take, what I need, what's the key to unlocking that cell door.
1. We want out. We want true and lasting freedom!
- C. I recall the time back near the beginning of Luke's gospel where Jesus walks into that synagogue in Nazareth on the Sabbath day, and they hand him the scroll of Isaiah, and he begins to read: "¹⁸ The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed,¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18–19). It's all about freedom. It's what we all want!
1. And then he sits down, with every eye now on him, and he says: "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (v. 21). "I've come for prison break, let's go!"
- D. But he doesn't say just how he's going to do this yet, does he. He doesn't tell us exactly what all this means. It seems a bit ambiguous, a bit opaque. "I want be free, you've come to offer it . . . but how exactly?"
1. Well, that's what starts come clearly into view now in our text this morning. In [Luke 4](#) Jesus announces his intent to set free the captives. In [Luke 23](#) Jesus shows us how in fact he's going to do it.

Cause + Effect

- A. I mentioned last week that the first 25 verses in [Luke 23](#) seem to give us two vignettes—two small pictures of what the gospel is and what it is intended to accomplish in our lives and in this world. That's why I'm calling these two sermons Cause + Effect.
1. The Cause is the gospel—Jesus the Innocent One is condemned in our place on the cross.
 2. The Effects are those things which follow because of Jesus' cross.
 - a. Last week in [vv. 1-12](#) we saw one of these effects is our reconciliation with others, enemies are made friends around the cross of Christ.

- b. This week now, as we consider the second vignette given to us in [vv. 13-25](#), we shall see how the cross of Christ unlocks prison doors, how we're released and redeemed in him.
- B. So here are the two headings under which I'm organizing my thoughts for this morning (similar to last week): (1) Cause: The Innocent Condemned; and (2) Effect: The Guilty Released. Let's get to it!

(1) Cause: The Innocent Condemned

Clearly Innocent and Yet Still Condemned

- A. All throughout the passion narrative here, it's the innocence of Jesus that is marked out for us again and again. We're not allowed to miss it. It's a critical point and one which Luke intends to draw our attention to.
- B. Within the boundary lines of our text itself, the idea of Jesus' innocence shows up in at least three different ways, depending on how you tally it.
 - 1. In the first case, we read in [vv. 13-14](#) that Pilate had called back together those who had made accusations against our Savior and he issues his verdict, as it were: ["You brought me this man as one who was misleading the people. And after examining him before you, behold, I did not find this man guilty of any of your charges against him."](#)
 - a. You remember their charges back up in [v. 2](#): ["We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ, a king."](#) "He's a threat to Caesar's treasury and a threat to Caesar's crown. And for that Pilate, as governor over Judea on behalf of Rome, surely you agree, he must go!"
 - i. But Pilate here says: ["I've looked into the matter, and I find no base to the claims made against him. This man is innocent."](#)
 - 2. But Pilate goes on and adds further credence to his own ruling by adding to it that of Herod Antipas, [v. 15](#): ["Neither did Herod, for he sent him back to us. Look, nothing deserving death has been done by him."](#) Again, this man is innocent.
 - 3. And then, finally, there in [v. 22](#), when the raucous crowd is together with one voice calling out for Jesus' crucifixion, Pilate pushes back: ["Why, What evil has he done? I have found in him no guilt deserving death."](#)
 - a. We're not allowed to miss it. Jesus is innocent.
- C. And, of course we know he's not just occasionally innocent. In other words he's not just innocent with regard to the matter at hand, innocent of these particular charges. No, it's more than that. He's innocent through and through!
 - 1. So [1 John 3:5b](#): ["\[I\]n him there is no sin."](#)

- a. And yet, nevertheless, at the end of our text, there he is . . . condemned—counted guilty, sentenced to death by crucifixion.

Why?!

- A. And so, of course, the question we now have to ask is: Why?!
 - 1. And there are, no doubt, many ways we could answer this depending upon which vantage we desired to come at it from. But let's at least first start with the more natural understanding of things:
 - a. He's condemned and killed because of these men, and not just the Jewish leaders here, but Pilate as well.
- B. Interestingly, it seems to me at least, Jesus is here condemned by these men because, from their perspective, he had not come to set them free, at least not in the way they wanted. No! Indeed, it seems he is standing in the way of what they thought would be their freedom.
 - 1. I mentioned we all experience something of the prison cell, but we have a lot of different approaches and ideas as to what will bring release.
- C. Well, these Jewish leaders here and Pilate in particular represent two different approaches on the matter. And they really lay out the two broadest-level categories we could delineate.
 - 1. On the one hand the Jewish leaders represent the religious approach to it.
 - 2. On the other hand, Pilate represents the secular approach to it.
 - a. But both find Jesus a threat to their freedom. And, therefore, both never truly find it.

The Religious Approach

- A. For the religious, they try to break free by way of self-righteousness with a superficial concern for morality and things. We'll clean ourselves up. We'll read our Bibles and spend all our time in church.
 - 1. We'll do good deeds and get God in our debt so he'll have to bless us with health and wealth and prosperity . . . and freedom. We play the religious game if it gets us what we want in the end. That's the way out of prison.
- B. And Jesus threatens these kinds of people because he sees through the game. And he comes on the scene and is so much cleaner and purer in heart than the rest. You see in him what true righteousness, what true religion looks like, and it exposes your own sinfulness and the sham of it all.
 - 1. You're not good enough. You can't put God in your debt. You can't break free like this. The cross confronts you in your empty religion. And you can't bear it.

The Secular Approach

- A. For the secular, though they're after the same sorts of things, they're not interested in trying to use God or religion to get it. Abstract realities are of no real concern to them.
1. Do you remember when Pilate is questioning Jesus in John's account of all this and Jesus says: "You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice" (John 18:37). How does Pilate respond? "Pilate said to him, 'What is truth?'" (v. 38). "I don't care about this abstract notion of truth. I don't care about your kingdom of heaven. Give me a kingdom on this earth. That's what I'm after."
 - a. And so you use education and politics and coercion and the sword and whatever else to get what you want. That's the way out of prison to freedom.
- B. But again Jesus is a threat here as well. Because he talks about transcendent reality and moral code. You're not just an animal with appetites. You've been made in the image of God. You can't just run around grabbing whatever you want whenever you want in the way you want.
1. So he calls you out. The cross confronts you in this. And you want him gone.
- C. You know, the way this played out with Pilate here was very interesting. Pilate is sort of a confusing mix of a figure here.
1. In one sense you almost feel bad for him. He seems to be genuinely conflicted at points. But, nevertheless, by the end of it all, his true colors and allegiances are shown.
- D. Here's what I mean. Pilate clearly perceived Jesus' innocence here and the gospel writers, all of them in fact, make it plain that he, therefore, did desire to release Jesus. And in his defense, he did, it would seem, try, at first at least, to do so.
1. In the first place, we know from John's account that he first tried to get the Jews to deal with the matter on their own (John 18:31).
 2. When that didn't work, he attempted to push the case towards Herod, I don't want to condemn this innocent man (Luke 23:7).
 3. When that didn't work, he stoops a bit lower, as we see there in Luke 23: 16, 22, when he says "Okay, okay, how about I 'punish and release him.'" The word "punish" in the Greek here is a euphemism for whipping. So this is no light slap on the wrist Pilate is suggesting. He is trying to strike a deal with the crowd. "Can I just beat Jesus up a bit and we'll call it good?"
 4. But that too failed to assuage them. So as a last-ditch effort he tries to leverage the old custom where he would release one prisoner for the Jews every year at the Passover and he says: "Surely you want that one prisoner to be Jesus, right?" But no.
 - a. So, at the last, he would have to make a decision.
 - i. Would he stand with Jesus for justice come what may?
 - ii. Or would he sell out on that to save himself?

- E. To really get the weight of this, you have to understand some of the background here.
1. Pilate had already been in hot water before with Caesar because of the ways he'd mishandled things in Judea, leading to rioting and petitioning the emperor and things.
 2. So, if he stands against this crowd here, and they riot and protest and word gets back to Caesar yet again, well it would be the end.
 - a. So, again, he's got to make a decision:
 - i. Is true freedom for him going to come by way of standing with Jesus?
 - ii. Or is it going to come by playing the political game and keeping power and things like this?
 - (1) Well, we know what he decided, don't we.

- F. What would you decide?
1. Perhaps there are places even now where you are being tested in this, where you have to choose, are you going to stand with Jesus even if it means you lose earthly clout and applause? Or you going to sell out? Which will truly bring freedom?

Just Another Prison

- A. Well, I'll tell you, neither the religious nor the secular approaches here panned out in the slightest.
1. The Jews found themselves soon cut off from God and, beyond that, cut off from their land and temple yet again.
 - a. You remember, they were so worried Jesus is going cause us to lose our place here in Jerusalem, Rome is going to come and snuff us out. Well, they got rid of Jesus, and Rome came and did it anyways in 70 A.D.
 2. And Pilate, well, he only lasted a few more years. He was removed from his post by Caesar in 36 A.D. for mishandling the people in yet another instance.
 - a. Church historian Eusebius writing in the early fourth century, claims that it was traditionally understood that Pilate committed suicide after he was recalled to Rome due to the disgrace he was in.
 - i. This historical detail is far from certain, but regardless the point remains: what Pilate so desperately tried to keep, what he was even willing to throw Jesus under the bus for . . . he lost anyways in the end.
- B. There's no freedom here. It's just another prison. In fact, the tragic irony is that we are often imprisoned by the very things we think will liberate us.

(2) Effect: The Guilty Released

A Third Route to Freedom

- A. But, you see, in our text there's a third route to freedom.
 - 1. There's the religious route;
 - 2. then there's the secular route;
 - 3. and then there's Jesus.

- B. It's incredible to consider it, but the only one who truly comes away free in this story is Barabbas—and he's the one person who, in it all, is unmistakably guilty.
 - 1. In fact, just as Luke goes out of his way to emphasize Jesus' innocence, so too we see in our text that he goes out of his way to emphasize for us Barabbas' guilt.
 - a. So in [v. 19](#), when the crowd refuses the idea releasing Jesus and instead calls for the release of Barabbas, Luke adds this parenthetical note describing him as “a man who had been thrown into prison for an insurrection started in the city and for murder.” He wants to make sure we know what kind of an unsavory character we're dealing with here.
 - b. And then, strangely, Luke is going to repeat that very same note again only a few verses later down in [v. 25](#), as if somehow over the span of a few verses we'd already forgotten this.

- C. You see, with these things it's as if Luke is pulling out his highlighter, he's saying: “I don't want you to miss Jesus' innocence. And I don't want you to miss Barabbas' guilt. Because it's somewhere in the interplay of these two realities that the way to true and lasting freedom emerges.”
 - 1. The liberation promised in [Luke 4](#) is now coming into full view and it doesn't look anything like anyone would have expected. Jesus is not running in with sword and shield. He's walking up a hill with a cross.
 - a. He is quite literally being punished in place of Barabbas. Barabbas is the insurrectionist, but they're killing Jesus on the basis of that charge.
 - i. That which should have befallen the guilty is befalling the innocent. The innocent is condemned. And the guilty is released.

The Gospel in Pictorial Form

- A. And this, brothers and sisters, is as vivid a picture of the gospel as you're going to get. We have here in pictorial form what is laid out in principle all over the New Testament. Let me read you a few texts:

1. Rom. 4:25-5:1: “²⁵ [He] was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.¹ Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”
2. 2 Cor. 5:21: “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”
3. Gal. 1:4: “[The Lord Jesus Christ] gave himself for our sins to deliver us [set us free] from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father”
4. Gal. 3:13: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.’”
5. 1 Pet. 2:22-25: “²² He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth.²³ When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten²⁴ He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.²⁵ For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.”
6. And later, 1 Pet. 3:18a: “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God.”

B. It’s the glory of double imputation. It’s the wonder of vicarious satisfaction. The mystery of substitutionary atonement.

1. And it’s the way to true and everlasting freedom.

- a. This is why it’s on the Day of Atonement that God had Israel announce the Year of Jubilee where all the the slaves or indentured servants would be emancipated. They’d blow the ram’s horn and declare freedom to all in the land ([Lev. 25](#)). But it’s tethered to atonement and sacrifice. The sacrificial death of the innocent is the way to true and lasting release for the guilty.

C. You see, whether we try coming at it through religious or secular means, in our hearts we all want the same basic thing. To be free.

1. Which means, you know—having a deep sense of satisfaction, security, love, approval, welcome, belonging, that we’re provided for, that we’re successful, that it’s going to be okay. That’s what we want.

- a. And that’s what only Jesus can give in a lasting way.

I Wonder about Barabbas

A. And what we have here with Barabbas is a picture of all this. I do wonder if he got it, you know. Think about it . . .

1. You’ve got to imagine he knew his time was coming. And there he is, in some prison cell, waiting.
2. And he hears outside, the crowds yelling: “Crucify him, crucify him!” And he thinks, my goodness, the time has come.
3. And then a Roman soldier shows up at the door with keys in hand and he thinks it really is over.

4. A couple of his comrades next to him are called out, they're called "robbers" in the gospels, but the word in the Greek can also mean "insurrectionist" and Barabbas himself is called by this same Greek word in [John 18:40](#). So it was likely these were guys who were in on it with him, guys he'd run with in the political rebellion.
 5. And then Barabbas too is called out but, to his great bewilderment, his brothers are led off in one direction and he's taken in another.
 6. And, suddenly, the soldier removes the shackles and tells him he's free to go. He's speechless.
 7. And as he's searching for an explanation, wondering what in the world just happened, he sees that same soldier take the shackles and put them on Jesus. And the scourging that should have flayed open his back is unleashed upon him. And the cross that should have been his to bear is laid upon Christ.
- B. Now we don't know, did Barabbas run off skipping and dancing in the streets? Did he scuttle off into the shadows and make haste to disappear.
1. I'd like to think perhaps he stuck around and followed the crowd up Calvary's hill.
 2. I'd like to think maybe he stood on the fringes of that crowd there looking at the three crosses—his comrades on either side and that Man in the middle.
 3. I'd like to think maybe it overwhelmed him, the sheer grace of it all. "That should be me with nails in my hands, that should be me gasping for air, that should be me dying for my sin and yet there he is in my place and here I am a free man. How can it be?! I thought freedom would come through insurrection. Now I see it comes through crucifixion!"
- C. Did Barabbas get it—what God was doing that day, the true freedom Christ was offering, the depths of it? I don't know.

I Wonder about Us

- A. But one thing we can know is what we ourselves will now make of this.
1. Because, you see, in a very real sense, this isn't just Barabbas' story. This is yours and my story. We're on death row there with Barabbas. We're in dire straits for our sin.
 - a. You do realize don't you that every sin you ever commit is an act of insurrection, high treason. We know the lines. We know the rules. We know the authority of God over our lives and we say: "No!"
 - i. Barabbas is not some anomaly here. Barabbas is you and me. And that's what really drives this home. It's not only Barabbas who can look on and think that should be me. We can look on and say the same as well.
- B. And, friend, if you would receive him—if you would turn from trying to the religious or secular routes to freedom and instead come to Jesus—ah at last you'd really find it.
1. In this life you'll still have trouble, no doubt—maybe even more so sometimes because of your association with Jesus. But at the deepest level, you're free.

- a. As a daughter you may never be able to achieve the acceptance and approval of your parents. But in Christ, you have the Father's smile forever.
 - b. As a mother, it will still be hard feeling like everyone else's servant. But now you know the one who took on the form of a servant and came and died for you.
 - c. As a tech worker, you may never climb the corporate ladder, but it doesn't matter. Because you are justified not on the basis of your accomplishments but on the basis of Christ's.
 - d. And whether you're single and wanting to be married, or married and wanting to be single, you're married now to Jesus, you're the bride of Christ, and in him, at the deepest level, you're known and loved. You're free.
 - i. This is why Paul and Silas, even when they are locked up in a literal prison, they're in there singing ([Acts 16:25](#)). You can't imprison them in the deepest sense. Because they know Jesus. They're free.
- C. So wherever you're feeling imprisoned this morning, the cross of Christ is the way of release. Come, let him lead you out!