

Barabbas Theory of the Atonement by Cyrus I. Scofield

Barabbas was condemned to die. No one has ever questioned the justice of his sentence. He was a rebel against the law, a robber and a murderer. And now the outraged law had laid strong hands on him, and he lay bound, under sentence of death. He was not under probation, but under doom. He was not awaiting trial, but execution. Just before him, as his only prospect, was the awful death of crucifixion. He knew what that meant: long hours of unspeakable agony, the hands and feet torn by great spikes, the wrist and shoulder joints dislocated by the dragging down of the body, each quivering nerve a separate torture through tension, a burning, unquenchable thirst, and, all around, a jeering, taunting mob. All the horizon of his life is narrowed to that. The only question is, when?

Even this begins to be answered. The jailers prepare three crosses. Ah! he well knows the three sockets cut in the hard rock out there in the Place of the Skull. Is one of these crosses for him? The very thought gives him a sense of suffocation, and of something clutching at his heart. Then he is told: yes, he is to suffer in the morning. Two malefactors are to die with him, but he, as the greater criminal, is to have the place of eminence, is to have the middle cross.

Then the night falls. But it is a disturbed night. Even in the prison it is perceived that something unusual is occurring. Confused noises, outcries, the tramping of feet, penetrate the thick walls. Barabbas dumbly wonders what it all means. Perhaps it is another insurrection such as that he, poor fool, raised against the majestic, inflexible Law. But the night wears on, and at last it is daylight—the light of his last day! And now he hears footsteps, the key grinds in the lock, his prison door swings open, but, just as he is summoning all his brute's fortitude for the ordeal which awaits him, he hears the joyful words: "Go free! Go free! Barabbas; another takes your place; another is to die between the two malefactors."

As Barabbas emerged into the free, glorious sunshine, the crowd was already surging out toward the Place of the Skull. And then, if not before, the desire must have arisen to know who had been condemned to die in his place. One can, easily imagine how Barabbas followed the throng, striving eagerly to see the Man who was to die for him. Perhaps it was not until the sound of the hammer driving the nails had ceased, and the cross—Barabbas' cross—had been upreared, bearing its awful burden, that Barabbas saw the Sufferer. We may well believe that, moved by a strange, irresistible drawing (John 12:32), Barabbas pressed his way through the howling mob until he stood looking up into the face of Jesus.

Barabbas knew Him, of course. His substitute in agony there was the new Teacher out of Galilee, the Man who spake as never man spake, the Man whose life had been absolutely without sin. Adam sinned, and Abraham and Moses, and all the prophets, but not this Man. And, besides, He healed even leprosy by a touch or a word. One day when the

crowd got hungry he manufactured enough food for five thousand men, not to mention women and children, out of five loaves and a few small fishes. Because of these, and like things, Barabbas perhaps really was convinced that He was the Messiah, the Son of God. But he had not become His disciple because he loved sin.

However that may have been, it is easy to see that Barabbas had no need to be a theologian to form a good working theory of the atonement.

First, He knew that he was a guilty wretch, under the righteous condemnation of the law (Luke 23:25). And in both these respects Barabbas was a representative of all men (Rom. 3:10-20, 23; Gal. 3:10).

Secondly, Barabbas knew that the Sufferer before him had done no sin (John 8:46; John 19:4; 1 Peter 2:22).

Thirdly, He knew that Jesus was, for him, a true substitute. He was verily and actually dying in his place and stead; an innocent and holy being bearing the very penalty which the law had justly decreed to him, Barabbas. Whoever, in the coming ages, might question whether Christ's death was vicarious and substitutional, he could never question it (2 Cor. 5:21; Gal. 3:13; 1 Peter 2:22-24; 3:18; Isa. 53:5-6).

Fourthly, He knew that he had done nothing whatever to merit the marvelous interposition of that substitutional death. Whatever may have been back of it, it reached him as an act of pure grace (Psalm 69:19-20; Eph. 2:4-9; 2 Tim. 1:9; Tit. 2:11; Rom. 4:4-5).

Fifthly, He knew that Christ's death for him was perfectly efficacious. There was, therefore, nothing for him to add to it. Just because Christ was dying, he was living. The only question before Pilate was whether Christ should die or Barabbas. When it was decided that Christ should die, Barabbas was set free. His assurance was complete the instant that his Substitute said, "It is finished," and gave up the ghost (John 19:30; Eph. 1:7; Col. 1:14; Rom. 5:19; 1 John 1:7; Col. 1:20; Heb. 10:10,14).

John McNeill, the great Scotch preacher, well says:

My brethren, let me commend to you Barabbas' theory of the atonement. It is a good theory to preach on, pray on, sing on die on. Do you know any other theory that will stand these tests?