

As the door to his prison cell was being opened, Barabbas surely assumed that it was time for him to be taken out for his punishment: death by crucifixion. He deserved it. Of this he was well aware. He committed murder during an insurrection in the city. Besides, he was a robber. Barabbas: his name was not celebrated. He was not known as a good person. No one would be shedding tears for him as he was dying on the cross.

Imagine, therefore, his shock to learn that he was being released. No whipping, no beating with rods, no crucifixion. Was this a joke? No. The guards took off his chains at Pilate's command. In the eyes of the authorities, Barabbas was innocent. He was free to go and live his life.

What? Did someone tamper with the evidence? No. Did witnesses come forward to give him an airtight alibi? No. Barabbas gained his freedom at another's expense: Jesus.

Barabbas would have heard of Him. Who, in the city and region of Jerusalem, had not? The only man more well known in Jerusalem than Barabbas would have been Jesus. But He was known for helping people; Barabbas for hurting people. Jesus was known for healing people of their diseases and for raising the dead to life; Barabbas for taking away life and bringing death. Where Jesus went, multitudes followed. But people fled from Barabbas wherever he went.

He was not about to argue. He had no intention of going up to Pilate and telling him that this was all a huge mistake, that he deserved to die instead of Jesus. How lucky can a man be? Barabbas just found out. This was his lucky day, and he wasn't even Irish. So, with his prison cell open, his shackles removed, all charges against him dropped, Barabbas walked out into the early morning of the day and he could start over with a new life.

Did I say Barabbas? Actually, I meant to say your name. And so, go ahead and put your name there in place of Barabbas. The story is the same. You want to hear it?

It's not whether you are a nice person or not; whether you have committed heinous crimes or not; and whether people admire you or run away from you. Your story, and that of Barabbas, is the same because you were in the same situation as he was. Your sinfulness, and mine, whether great or small, locked us up in a spiritual prison. And the end that awaited us, as for Barabbas, was nothing short of death. But not just death here and now. Death forever, eternal death. Imagine hanging from a cross forever. Feeling the wrath of God forever. The shame, and the disgrace, and the agony forever. And as with Barabbas, there was not one solitary thing we could do about it.

But then Jesus came. He came to exchange places with you. He came to suffer the punishment, to feel God's wrath, to endure the agony of hell. And just like with Barabbas, the guard came to your prison cell. He opened the door. He unlocked your shackles. And he set you free. That, my friend, was the day you were baptized into Jesus Christ.

Was that the luckiest day of your life? No luck here, only mercy, God's face being turned toward you with mercy and grace. Jesus felt the wrath; you receive the benefit. All charges against you are dropped. Jesus paid the price for you. You are free to live.

Now here is where the story is incomplete. We don't know what happened to Barabbas after that. Did he go out and live the life God desired for him? Or did he go back to his wicked ways? We don't know. His is an incomplete story.

What about yours? Can I give you some assurance? I quote the words of St. Paul in Philippians. *"I am sure of this, that He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ."*

He did not exchange places with you for you to live a life under the power of sin. Jesus did not set you free in your baptism so you would fall back into slavery to sin. Jesus set you free to live with Him now and forever; to put away the works of darkness.

Here is your power – believe it is true – that God has dropped all charges against you. Believe it is true that your sins are forgiven, because they are. Leave that prison cell and the shackles behind. Live each day knowing for certain that your past is history. From now on you live in Christ, and with Christ, as one whom God loves and forgives. Amen.