

William Jefferson was a congressman from the state of Louisiana. In 2002, he used the resources of an organization designed to encourage people to vote to ensure that his daughter would win an election to the Louisiana State House of Representatives. In 1998, 2002, and 2006, Jefferson used this same organization to make sure that his sister would win elections as a city official for New Orleans.

A few days after Hurricane Katrina hit Louisiana, Jefferson used a National Guard detachment to recover personal belongings from his home. When the truck they were in got stuck in mud, Jefferson called in a National Guard helicopter to help them out. All this happened while rescue operations were still going on in other parts of the state.

In March 2005, a company named iGate sent William Jefferson \$400,000 to ensure that he would help its business by persuading the army to purchase iGate technology. The final straw came in August 2005, when the FBI raided Jefferson's home and found \$90,000 in cash in his freezer.

Is William Jefferson innocent? No way! William Jefferson is guilty, beyond guilty! In 2007, Jefferson was sentenced to thirteen years in federal prison—the longest sentence ever given to a congressman for bribery.

We're in a series called Witnesses to Christ. Today, we meet Barabbas. There's a trial going on and, as in any trial, there are three key ideas—innocent, guilty, and free. Innocent, guilty, and free. Here we go!

Innocent—that's Jesus. Pilate tells the crowd, "I find no guilt in Him" (John 18:38). Pontius Pilate didn't think Jesus deserved the cross. A lecture or even a lashing, but not the cross.

Two times in John 18:28, the Gospel writer calls Pontius Pilate "the governor." As Judea's governor, Pilate sits on the judgment seat. That's because Pilate has *imperium*, supreme power or absolute dominion. In Judea, Pilate decides formal death-penalty cases. You live or die according to Pilate.

And Pilate declares that Jesus is innocent. He does so again in John 19:4, 6. The rest of the New Testament takes this further—a *whole lot*

*further.* The New Testament says Jesus is absolutely and perfectly innocent. Hebrews 4:15 says that Jesus was “without sin”; 2 Corinthians 5:21 says of Jesus, “[He] knew no sin.” *When it came to sin, Jesus never did it. Innocent. That’s Jesus.*

Guilty—that’s Barabbas. Barabbas was as guilty as William Jefferson—and then some!

Pontius Pilate poses this question to the people: “Do you want me to release to you the King of the Jews?” They cried out again, ‘Not this man, but Barabbas!’” (John 18:39–40). John 18:40 concludes with these words: “Now Barabbas was a robber.” The Greek word here is *lestes*.

A *lestes* is a marauding, violent outlaw who finances his lawlessness through what he plunders and steals. How do we know that? *Lestes* is the same word used in the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:30, where Jesus says, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers [*lestais* is the plural of *lestes*], who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead.” Put John 18:40 and Luke 10:30 together, and what do we learn? We learn that a *lestes* is the *worst* kind of outlaw. A *lestes* won’t just rob you. A *lestes* will rob you and kill you!

Mark 15:7 tells us more: “Among the rebels in prison, who had committed murder in the insurrection, there was a man called Barabbas.” Barabbas was probably the leading *lestes* among the insurrectionists. Insurrectionists were anti-Roman rioters who belonged to a political group called Zealots. Zealots had one agenda: get the Romans out of Judea. And Zealots were ready to slit throats to make it happen.

So don’t think that Barabbas was a petty thief or a secondhand scoundrel. Rome wouldn’t condemn a small-time crook to crucifixion. But they would lynch a *lestes*. Barabbas was judged guilty and condemned to die. He would be crucified by noon. Dead by sundown. His only future was a cross, three nails, and an awful death.

Innocent—that’s Jesus. Guilty—that’s Barabbas for sure. We’re all born “dead in the trespasses and sins” (Ephesians 2:1). We are blinded by the god of this world (cf. 2 Corinthians 4:4) and hopeless (cf. Ephesians 2:12). Our finest deeds are unclean rags (cf. Isaiah 64:6). Just call us “Barabbas.”

Paul says as much in Romans 7:24: “Wretched man that I am!” Not “I *was* a wretch.” No. “I *am* a wretch!” Present tense! Right now, today, as a believer, truth be told—I’m still a wretch.

The Bible calls it sin. Sin isn’t a regrettable lapse in judgment or an occasional stumble. Sin stages a rebellion against God’s rule. Sin storms the heavens. Sin lays claim to God’s throne. Sin defies God’s authority. Sin sneers, “Get out, God. Get lost, God. I’m in charge here, God!”

“All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way” (Isaiah 53:6). You have your way. I have my way. Your way may be accumulation. Her way may be intoxication. His way may be flirtation. We all have turned to our own way. Just like sheep.

I don’t like to confess it. In fact, I’d just as soon avoid it. But I’m Barabbas. I’m a prisoner to my past. I know my sins. And God has declared me guilty. What’s His sentence? “The wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23). *Death.*

Innocent—that’s Jesus. Guilty—that’s Barabbas. Guilty—that’s us. Free—that’s Barabbas. Listen! Can you hear this? It’s the Roman guard with the key! He unlocks the prison door, swings it open, and shouts, “Barabbas! You’re free. They chose you to go free!” Barabbas stumbles into the light of day—shackles gone, crimes pardoned. Free!

Free—that’s Barabbas for sure. Free—that’s *us* for sure. How so? Christ endured not just the Roman nails, the mockery, and the spear, but also the gears of God’s grinding justice. “The gears of God’s grinding justice?” Really? Yes, really. God doesn’t overlook sin. God doesn’t say, “Hey, no big deal.” That’s not how it works. God is holy, righteous, sovereign, and perfect. God can’t overlook sin. God must punish sin.

That’s why God placed all our sin on Jesus. It’s accurate, therefore, to say, “Christ substituted Himself for the world.” It’s life-changing, however, to say, “Christ substituted Himself for *me*. My sins? They are many. God’s mercy? Is more. I’m free!”

Psalms 146:7 says, “The LORD sets the prisoners free.” Romans 8:2 says, “The law of the Spirit of life has set you free.” Galatians 5:1 says, “For freedom Christ has set us free.” Revelation 1:5 says, Jesus “has freed us

from our sins by His blood.” There are a million ways to become a prisoner. There is only one way to be free. *Jesus*.

The Savior’s liberating power sets us free from the condemnation of our sin, free from the pain of our past, free from worry about our future. No one can take this freedom from us. No law can stop it. And no power on earth or hell can destroy it.

Innocent, guilty, and free. These are the most important words in any trial. What would you say is the most life-changing of the three?

Innocent? Guilty? Free?

That’s easy! Free! “If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:36). That’s us! Like Barabbas! By faith, forever free! Amen.