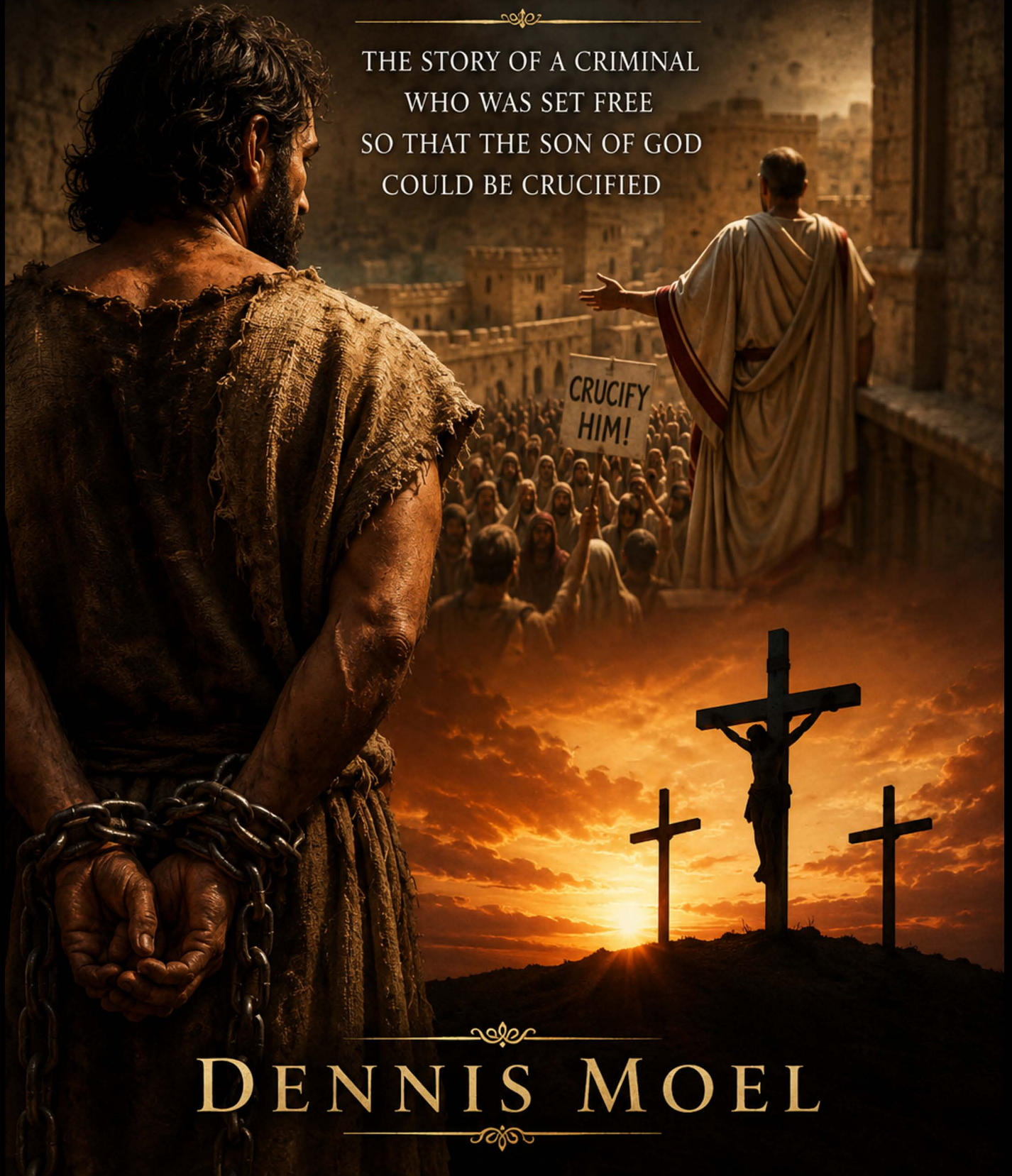


BARABBAS

THE STORY OF A CRIMINAL
WHO WAS SET FREE
SO THAT THE SON OF GOD
COULD BE CRUCIFIED



DENNIS MOEL

Barabbas

There was in the days of Jesus a custom each year at the Unleavened Bread that the Roman governor would release a prisoner from jail. The origin of this practice is unknown. Were it of the Jews, it would be a poor representation of the release granted by God's salvation in the sacrifice of the Passover lamb. Were it of the Romans, it did nothing to placate the hostility of the Jews toward the Empire.

This incident is one of a handful of events recorded in all four *Gospels*.

Matthew 27:15 At the feast the governor was accustomed to releasing to the multitude one prisoner whom they wished.

Mark 15:6 Now at the feast he was accustomed to releasing one prisoner to them, whomever they requested.

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

John 18:39 But you have a custom that I should release someone to you at the Passover.

Actually, Jesus had been arrested and had been brought to the palace of Caiaphas, the high priest, also head of the Sanhedrin Court. One might wonder why they were so eager to do away with Jesus. Here is the reason: the family of the high priest had since the time of the Roman occupation been granted the authority to control the booths at the Temple in Jerusalem where the sacrificial animals were sold to the public and where the religious money-changers were quartered. Jesus had entered the city

the week before amidst tens of thousands of people in a wild celebration in which he had been declared to be Israel's long-sought king and messiah. No sooner had he arrived in the city surrounded by such jubilation, he went straight the Temple, over-turned the money-changers' tables, and drove out the animal sellers. Jesus had charged:

Mark 11:17 Is it not written (Jeremiah 7:11) 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it a 'den of thieves.'

The sellers had become corrupt in overcharging the people coming to sacrifice. The money-changers had been cheating the people. The family of the high priest had been getting a cut of the proceeds. It was a set-up for them that was almost too good to be true, and one that the priests had no intention of surrendering. This Jesus had become more than a nuisance; he was a threat.

That it was against the rules to have a trial at night, on a sabbath, and that there was not a quorum of judges, the tribunal went right ahead, just as the chief priests had conspired. Jesus of Nazareth was found guilty of blasphemy having declared Himself to be the Son of God. Such a crime, they felt, was worthy of the death penalty; however, the court at that time, had not the authority to carry out such a sentence, and had to appeal to the Roman procurator.

When Pontius Pilate examined the prisoner he found nothing criminal in him. At the worst he suspected that there had been a conflict over religious observance between Jesus and the priests. He thought to release

Jesus, but the priests insisted. The procurator/governor Pilate had already attempted to wriggle out of having to deal with the situation by transferring the case to Herod Antipas, the governor of the Galilee district from where Jesus came. Herod just happened to be in Jerusalem for the Passover, but he was wily enough to see that he didn't want to touch this matter; thus, he returned the prisoner to Pilate.

Pilate thought of another way that he might squirm out of the situation: offering Jesus to the people as the "released prisoner of Passover." Knowing that the priests would never go along with his scheme, the governor appealed to the throng which had gathered. Little did he know that the crowds were NOT the same people who the week before had so triumphantly escorted Christ into the city. No. These were goons gathered together by the priests; they had been clearly instructed how to respond to the governor. "Crucify him," they yelled.

Pilate quickly reacted. He gave the people the choice of the "released prisoner of Passover" this Jesus or a notorious death-row criminal. How shocked he was when the crowd chose the criminal Barabbas to be released. You can just imagine how stunned was Barabbas as the sudden stroke of luck.

Matthew 27:16 And at that time they had a notorious prisoner called Barabbas.

Mark 15:7 There was one named Barabbas, who was chained with his fellow rebels; they had committed murder in the rebellion.

Luke 23:18-19 Barabbas...who had been thrown into prison for a certain rebellion made in the city, and for murder.

John 18:40 Barabbas was a robber.

Let us consider this man. Here is the meaning of his name: "Bar" is the *Aramaic* word for "the son of." "Abbas" means, "the father." So his name meant, "the son of the father." Was this name just some coincidence? Or, was there a message in it from Providence?

Actually, Jesus Christ, is Himself the son of the Father in Heaven. Jesus questioned the people:

John 10:36 "Do you say of Him whom the Father sanctified and sent into the world, 'You are blaspheming,' because I said, 'I am the Son of God'?"

John 19:7 The Jews answered him, "We have a law, and according to our law He ought to die, because He made Himself the Son of God."

Jesus, Himself, was the son of the Father. One thing we can truthfully say about Barabbas: he WAS the son of the father, that is our father Adam. As a matter of fact, we can all lay claim to that title. Therefore, can we see our own selves as Barabbas? We are sons of Adam, are we not? We are all criminals, like Barabbas, are we not?

"Oh," we say, "We're not a rebel, a murderer, or a robber like that man!" Really? Don't you think more highly of yourself than you ought? Have you not balked at rejecting your own personal desires and lusts? We are rebels by our very nature. We may not have killed another person, but we have all murdered with our tongues. WE ARE BARABBAS!

Barabbas surely had heard of the reputation of that man from Galilee. He had heard of the reported miracles. He had heard how Jesus had stood up to phony religion. He had heard how Jesus had slammed corrupt leadership. Perhaps he had thought this Christ was another rebel, like himself. Surely, Barabbas had resigned himself to the ignominious, humiliating agony that was to be his own crucifixion. Never did he imagine that he would escape. Never did he consider that he might be delivered. How shocking! How unexpected! He certainly knew that beyond his noble intentions to save Israel, he was a no-good thief. Or, perhaps he thought what was happening to him was so unfair. Which way do you see the circumstances in your life? Do you think you are in need of being saved, or do you see life as a series of bad breaks?

Do you realize what a wretch you were before Christ intervened? Do you ever consider how corrupt you have been? Or, do you think that God is fortunate to have you in his Kingdom?

Or, perhaps you have handled things as Pilate did. Pilate washed his hands: "Don't blame me; I tried to do the right thing." Yet, no one remembers Pilate as innocent, do they? Have you woven plans to extricate yourself from a sticky situation? Poor Pilate. He didn't account that the opposition was one step ahead of him. Too bad Pilate didn't deal with the situation outright. He

thought he was being so clever: Barabbas was the worst criminal of the day. Who would ever vote for him? Wrong!

Have you been victimized or ill-treated? Have you been humiliated? Have you been unjustly accused? Have you ever had some of your personal business made public? Have you ever misplaced your trust in someone undependable? Did you ever try to protect yourself? How did you handle it? Did you consider that the Almighty, merciful God might be involved in your circumstance? Did it ever enter into your mind: what would Jesus do? Well, I'll tell you what he would not have done: He would not have evaded the issue; He would not have tried to protect Himself; He would not have plotted several possible escapes; He would have not shifted the blame; He would have not tried to share the blame; He would not have gotten even or struck back or raised up a rebellion; He would not have tried to explain his way out.

Who were you before Jesus came into your life? You were Barabbas. Or, perhaps you were Pilate. How are you doing now? How do you measure up to God's high standard? Can He count on you? Are you yet an over-comer? Can He trust you in eternity?

How marvelous has been God's Work in our lives!

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