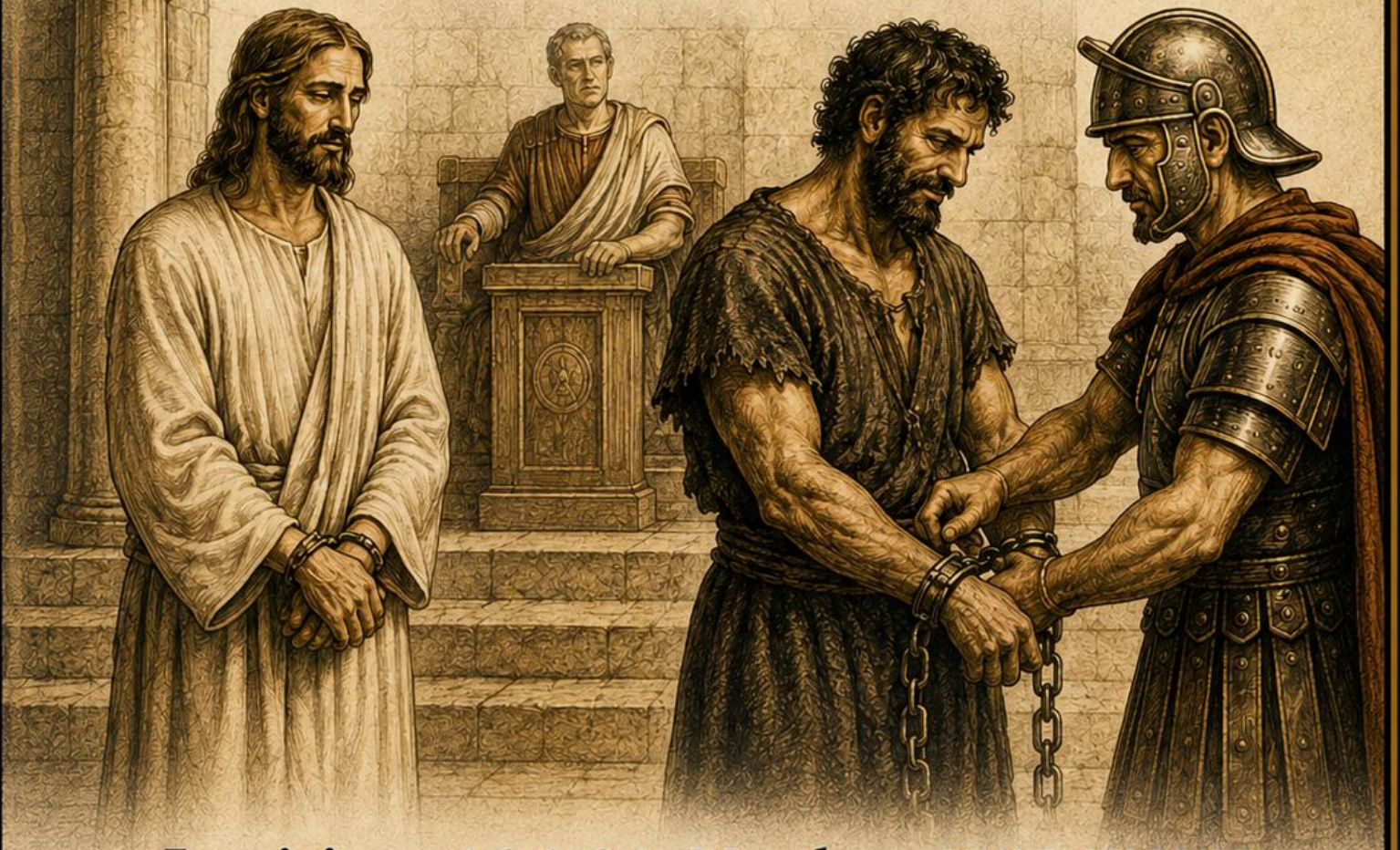


REASON TOGETHER CHURCH
REASON TOGETHER STUDIES

WAS BARABBAS THE SCAPEGOAT?

*What does the release of Barabbas teach us
about the sacrifice of Jesus Christ?*



Leviticus 16:1-34; Matthew 27:15-26 KJV

➤ *"Then released he Barabbas unto them." Matthew 27:26* ➤

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Matthew 27:15-26 KJV

Sermon Transcript

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Aloha, church family.

It is wonderful to welcome you to Reason Together Church.

Whether you are here with us in the sanctuary or joining us online, thank you for spending this time with us.

If this is your first time here, we want you to know that you are among friends.

We are not afraid of questions here.

We believe that honest questions can lead us more deeply into the Word of God.

Our question today began with a social-media submission that made a fascinating comparison.

The speaker connected the release of Barabbas with the two goats used on the Day of Atonement.

One goat died.

The other goat was released into the wilderness.

At the trial of Jesus, one man was condemned.

The other man was released.

That raises a remarkable question.

Was Barabbas the scapegoat?

Was the crowd unknowingly reenacting the Day of Atonement when it chose Barabbas and rejected Jesus?

Or is this a comparison that contains genuine insight but becomes misleading when it is carried too far?

We will listen respectfully to the submission.

We will consider history and language where they help us.

But the submission is not our evidence.

The question, not the video, will drive our study.

Scripture will determine our answer.

Bring your questions.

Open your Bible.

Let's Reason Together the Word of God.

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father,

Thank You for giving us Your Word.

Thank You for the passages that are immediately clear and for those that require us to slow down and examine them carefully.

Give us wisdom as we compare Scripture with Scripture.

Help us distinguish between what the Bible plainly says, what history may suggest and what interpreters have inferred.

Keep us from rejecting a meaningful connection simply because it is unfamiliar.

Keep us also from turning an attractive possibility into a Biblical certainty.

Most of all, help us see Jesus Christ clearly.

Show us the holiness of God, the seriousness of sin and the wonder of the sacrifice that allows guilty sinners to be set free.

In Jesus' name,

Amen.

Our primary Scripture is Matthew 27:15-26.

Matthew writes:

"Now at that feast the governor was wont to release unto the people a prisoner, whom they would."

"And they had then a notable prisoner, called Barabbas."

"Therefore when they were gathered together, Pilate said unto them, Whom will ye that I release unto you? Barabbas, or Jesus which is called Christ?"

"For he knew that for envy they had delivered him."

"When he was set down on the judgment seat, his wife sent unto him, saying, Have thou nothing to do with that just man: for I have suffered many things this day in a dream because of him."

"But the chief priests and elders persuaded the multitude that they should ask Barabbas, and destroy Jesus."

"The governor answered and said unto them, Whether of the twain will ye that I release unto you? They said, Barabbas."

"Pilate saith unto them, What shall I do then with Jesus which is called Christ? They all say unto him, Let him be crucified."

"And the governor said, Why, what evil hath he done? But they cried out the more, saying, Let him be crucified."

"When Pilate saw that he could prevail nothing, but that rather a tumult was made, he took water, and washed his hands before the multitude, saying, I am innocent of the blood of this just person: see ye to it."

"Then answered all the people, and said, His blood be on us, and on our children."

"Then released he Barabbas unto them: and when he had scourged Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified."

Before we continue, let me take a moment to explain how giving works at Reason Together Church.

It costs money to keep the lights on, provide ministry materials and carry the message beyond this room.

Our members have been faithful in providing what is needed for the work God has given us.

We do not pass a collection plate.

If you are visiting with us today, we are not asking you to give.

You honor us with your presence, and that is more than enough.

If you have a home church, we encourage you to support your church faithfully.

Members who choose to give may use the gift box or the online option.

Giving should be willing, cheerful and free from pressure.

If this is your first time with us, you may complete a guest card with only your first name and email address.

That is all we request.

After the service, please join us at the Reason Together Café.

We have free locally grown coffee, an RTC mug waiting to be filled and free refills on conversations.

Now return with me to the courtyard outside Pilate's judgment hall.

Two prisoners have been placed before the people.

One is Jesus Christ.

The other is Barabbas.

We know what happened to Jesus.

But first, we need to understand the man who was released.

Matthew calls him "a notable prisoner."

The word notable does not mean admirable.

It means that Barabbas was prominent, well known or notorious.

This was not an unknown man arrested for a minor offense.

People knew his name.

People knew why he was in custody.

Mark gives us more information.

Mark 15:7 says:

"And there was one named Barabbas, which lay bound with them that had made insurrection with him, who had committed murder in the insurrection."

Barabbas was associated with rebellion against Roman authority.

During that insurrection, murder had been committed.

Luke 23:19 describes him as one:

"Who for a certain sedition made in the city, and for murder, was cast into prison."

John 18:40 adds this short description:

"Now Barabbas was a robber."

The word can describe more than someone who secretly steals another person's belongings.

It can describe a violent bandit or revolutionary.

When we place the four Gospel accounts together, the portrait is clear.

Barabbas was notorious.

Barabbas was rebellious.

Barabbas was violent.

Barabbas was connected with murder.

Barabbas was guilty.

That last fact is essential.

Barabbas was not an innocent man who had been unfairly accused.

He was not released because new evidence cleared him.

He was not released because Pilate discovered that the witnesses had lied.

He was not released because he had completed his sentence.

He was not released because he had paid a fine or corrected his past.

Barabbas was a guilty man who received freedom he had not earned.

Try to imagine what that morning may have been like for him.

We must not pretend that Scripture tells us what he thought or exactly what he heard from his confinement.

But we can recognize his legal position.

He was a prisoner accused of crimes for which Rome could impose death.

He had no reason to expect an ordinary walk home.

Then he heard a crowd outside.

He heard his name.

He heard shouting.

Perhaps he could not distinguish every word.

Then the door opened.

The order came.

Release Barabbas.

The chains were removed.

The guilty man stepped out.

At the same time, the innocent Jesus was handed over to be scourged and crucified.

That contrast is already powerful without adding anything to it.

Yet the social-media submission asks whether something deeper is occurring.

To answer fairly, we must travel backward from Pilate's courtyard to the book of Leviticus.

Many people have heard the word scapegoat without knowing the Biblical ceremony from which the word comes.

Today a scapegoat usually means a person who is blamed for something another person did.

A business fails and an employee becomes the scapegoat.

A team loses and one player becomes the scapegoat.

A family has a conflict and one member receives the blame for everything.

In modern speech, a scapegoat is usually an innocent or less responsible person upon whom others unfairly place their guilt.

That modern meaning can prevent us from understanding Leviticus 16.

The Biblical scapegoat was not the invention of dishonest people looking for someone to blame.

It was part of a sacred ceremony commanded by God.

To understand the ceremony, we must first understand the setting.

God had delivered Israel from Egypt.

He had entered into covenant with His people.

He instructed them to build the tabernacle, a sacred tent where His presence would dwell among them.

The tabernacle contained an outer area and two primary rooms.

The first room was called the holy place.

Beyond it, behind a veil, was the most holy place, often called the Holy of Holies.

Inside that innermost room stood the ark of the covenant.

The mercy seat formed the cover of the ark.

This was not an ordinary room.

It represented the holy presence and throne of God among His people.

The beauty of the tabernacle carried a serious message.

God desired to dwell among His people.

But sinful people could not casually enter the presence of a holy God.

The veil was not merely decoration.

It announced a separation.

The people could not simply walk into the Holy of Holies.

The ordinary priests could not enter whenever they wished.

Even the high priest could not enter according to his own schedule.

Leviticus 16 begins with a warning.

The chapter looks back to the deaths of Nadab and Abihu after they approached God in a manner He had not commanded.

Then Leviticus 16:2 says:

"And the LORD said unto Moses, Speak unto Aaron thy brother, that he come not at all times into the holy place within the veil before the mercy seat, which is upon the ark; that he die not: for I will appear in the cloud upon the mercy seat."

God is loving.

God is merciful.

God is also holy.

His holiness is not a ceremonial detail we may ignore.

Sin is not a minor inconvenience.

Sin separates people from God and brings judgment.

Once each year, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest entered the Holy of Holies as the representative of Israel.

Leviticus 16:29 identifies the day as the tenth day of the seventh month.

It was to be a solemn day.

The people were to humble themselves before God.

Ordinary work stopped.

The attention of the nation turned toward sin, cleansing and atonement.

Leviticus 16:30 explains the purpose:

"For on that day shall the priest make an atonement for you, to cleanse you, that ye may be clean from all your sins before the LORD."

The Day of Atonement was not a festival of human achievement.

It did not celebrate Israel's ability to repair its own guilt.

It displayed the provision God made for sinful people to remain in covenant relationship with Him.

The ceremony involved several offerings and several careful actions.

Before the high priest could act on behalf of the nation, he had to address his own sin.

Aaron was the high priest, but Aaron was still a sinner.

His position did not make him morally perfect.

His garments did not remove his guilt.

His religious work did not place him above the need for atonement.

Leviticus 16:6 says:

"And Aaron shall offer his bullock of the sin offering, which is for himself, and make an atonement for himself, and for his house."

Aaron first offered a bull for himself and his household.

He also took incense within the veil so that a cloud of incense covered the mercy seat.

Only after following God's instructions could he continue his work for the people.

This detail will matter later.

The Old Testament high priest needed a sacrifice for his own sins.

Jesus Christ did not.

After providing for his own house, Aaron dealt with the offering for the nation.

Leviticus 16:5 says:

"And he shall take of the congregation of the children of Israel two kids of the goats for a sin offering, and one ram for a burnt offering."

Notice the wording carefully.

The congregation supplied two goats for a sin offering.

There were two animals, but together they belonged to the presentation of one sin offering for the people.

The two goats would reveal two connected dimensions of God's answer to sin.

Aaron brought both goats to the door of the tabernacle.

Leviticus 16:7 says:

"And he shall take the two goats, and present them before the LORD at the door of the tabernacle of the congregation."

Both goats stood alive before the Lord.

At that moment, an observer could see two goats, but their different roles had not yet been carried out.

Then Aaron cast lots.

Leviticus 16:8 says:

"And Aaron shall cast lots upon the two goats; one lot for the LORD, and the other lot for the scapegoat."

One goat was designated for the Lord.

The other was designated as the scapegoat.

The Hebrew expression connected with the second goat has been discussed and translated in different ways.

The KJV gives us the familiar word "scapegoat."

For this sermon, we do not need to solve every question surrounding the Hebrew term.

The actions described in the chapter show us the function of the living goat.

First, consider the goat designated for the Lord.

Leviticus 16:9 says:

"And Aaron shall bring the goat upon which the LORD'S lot fell, and offer him for a sin offering."

That goat was killed.

Its blood was taken within the veil.

Leviticus 16:15 says:

"Then shall he kill the goat of the sin offering, that is for the people, and bring his blood within the vail, and do with that blood as he did with the blood of the bullock, and sprinkle it upon the mercy seat, and before the mercy seat."

The high priest entered the place no ordinary Israelite could enter.

He did not enter carrying a speech about how good the nation had been.

He did not enter carrying a list of religious accomplishments.

He entered with blood.

Life had been given.

The blood was sprinkled upon and before the mercy seat.

The ceremony addressed not only the people but also the uncleanness associated with the tabernacle in the midst of a sinful nation.

Leviticus 17:11 later explains:

"For the life of the flesh is in the blood: and I have given it to you upon the altar to make an atonement for your souls."

The blood was God's provision.

The sacrificed goat pictured atonement through a life given in death.

But the ceremony was not finished.

The second goat was still alive.

Leviticus 16:10 says:

"But the goat, on which the lot fell to be the scapegoat, shall be presented alive before the LORD, to make an atonement with him, and to let him go for a scapegoat into the wilderness."

After completing the work with the blood, Aaron returned to the living goat.

Now the ceremony became intensely personal and visible.

Leviticus 16:21 says:

"And Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat."

Not one hand.

Both hands.

The high priest identified the goat with the burden it was about to carry symbolically.

Then Aaron confessed over the goat.

The verse continues:

"And confess over him all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions in all their sins."

Listen to the completeness of that language.

All their iniquities.

All their transgressions.

All their sins.

The ceremony did not pretend that Israel's failure was small.

The high priest did not excuse the people by comparing them with nations that behaved worse.

He did not rename sin so that it would sound respectable.

He confessed it.

Then Leviticus says that Aaron was:

"putting them upon the head of the goat."

The animal did not become morally guilty.

The goat had not made sinful choices.

This was a God-ordained symbol of transfer and removal.

The guilt confessed by the people was represented as being placed upon another.

Then the goat was sent away.

The verse says Aaron:

"shall send him away by the hand of a fit man into the wilderness."

A designated man led the goat away from the tabernacle.

He led it away from the tents.

He led it away from the camp.

He led it toward a place where the people did not live.

Leviticus 16:22 says:

"And the goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities unto a land not inhabited: and he shall let go the goat in the wilderness."

The people could watch the goat leave.

It moved farther from the center of the camp.

It became smaller in the distance.

Eventually, it disappeared from sight.

The goat bore the confessed iniquities away from the people.

The picture is not that sin was hidden under a rug within the camp.

The picture is removal.

The sin was carried away.

Psalm 103:12 expresses that mercy with familiar words:

"As far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us."

The two goats therefore displayed two connected truths.

Sin requires atonement through shed blood.

Sin must also be removed from the people.

One goat died.

One goat bore the confessed sins away.

We should not force the two actions to compete with one another.

Both belonged to the Day of Atonement.

Both helped Israel see what God was doing about sin.

The Day of Atonement also contained a limitation that no thoughtful Israelite could permanently ignore.

The ceremony had to be repeated.

The next year, the high priest returned.

Another bull was offered.

Two more goats were presented.

More blood was carried within the veil.

The sins of the people were confessed again.

Another living goat was led away.

The repetition announced that the work was not yet final.

The sacrifices were real acts of obedience within God's covenant, but they pointed beyond themselves.

Hebrews 10:1 says that the law had:

"a shadow of good things to come."

A shadow tells us that something real is approaching.

But the shadow is not the complete substance.

Hebrews 10:4 says:

"For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins."

The animals could not provide the final moral cleansing of the human heart.
They could not rise from the altar and offer eternal life.
They could not become a perfect and permanent High Priest.
The ceremony prepared God's people to understand the One who could.
Now that we have the full picture, we are ready to ask whether Barabbas was the scapegoat.
The submission emphasizes that the two goats were identical.
That claim needs careful qualification.
Leviticus tells us that the congregation presented two goats.
It does not command that they be completely identical in appearance.
Later Jewish tradition said that the two goats should be alike in appearance, size and value and that they should be purchased together.
That tradition helps us understand how Jewish teachers later imagined the ceremony being conducted.
But even that later tradition acknowledged that the ceremony remained valid if the goats were not alike.
We must preserve the difference between Scripture and later explanation.
Scripture says two goats.
Later tradition preferred similar goats.
We should not place the word identical into Leviticus as though Moses wrote it there.
Nevertheless, the lots make one point clear.
The animals were presented together before their different roles were assigned.
One would be killed.
One would be released.
That brings us back to Pilate's courtyard.
Pilate placed two men before the people.
Matthew 27:17 records his question:
"Whom will ye that I release unto you? Barabbas, or Jesus which is called Christ?"
The comparison immediately catches our attention.
Two figures were presented.
A decision separated their paths.
One was released alive.

The other was condemned to die.

The resemblance to the two goats is real enough to investigate.

Then we encounter another fascinating detail.

Some ancient witnesses to Matthew 27:16 and 17 give Barabbas a first name.

They call him Jesus Barabbas.

If that longer reading reflects what Matthew originally wrote, Pilate's question was even more dramatic.

Which man should be released?

Jesus Barabbas?

Or Jesus who is called Christ?

Two men named Jesus stood before the people.

The name Jesus was not unique in the first century.

It is the Greek form of the name related to Joshua.

Other Jewish men carried that name.

Calling the prisoner Jesus would not mean that he was divine or that he was another version of Christ.

It would simply mean that two men at the trial shared a common given name.

The textual evidence, however, is divided.

The KJV reads simply "Barabbas."

The Greek text underlying the KJV does not include Jesus as the prisoner's given name.

Many surviving Greek manuscripts also read only Barabbas.

A smaller group of witnesses preserves the longer form, Jesus Barabbas.

Some scholars believe the longer name was original.

They suggest that a scribe might have removed the name Jesus because it seemed inappropriate to attach the Savior's name to a murderer.

Other scholars point to the limited manuscript support and conclude that the longer form was probably added within a particular stream of copying.

Responsible students of the text disagree.

Therefore, we should say no more than the evidence allows.

Barabbas may have had the given name Jesus.

The reading is ancient and worthy of discussion.

But we cannot preach it as a settled Biblical fact.
Our faith does not depend upon this textual question.
Our conclusion about the cross will remain secure whether the prisoner's full name was Jesus Barabbas or simply Barabbas.
The name Barabbas presents another interesting contrast.
The first part, bar, is an Aramaic word meaning son.
The second part is commonly connected with abba, meaning father.
The name may be understood as son of the father, son of a father or son of a man named Abba.
Some forms and explanations have also connected it with a teacher or master.
Names often begin as descriptions and then function simply as names.
We should not pretend that every person in the crowd was silently translating Barabbas and constructing a sermon from it.
Still, the irony is difficult to miss.
The crowd chose a guilty son of a father and rejected Jesus Christ, the true Son of the Father.
If the longer textual reading is correct, the contrast becomes even sharper.
Jesus Barabbas, the violent prisoner, was released.
Jesus who is called Christ, the sinless Savior, was condemned.
At this point, we can understand why someone would identify Barabbas with the scapegoat.
The comparison contains several striking similarities.
On the Day of Atonement, two goats were presented before the Lord.
At the trial, two men were presented before the people.
The goats began together and then traveled different paths.
Jesus and Barabbas stood together before Pilate and then traveled different paths.
One goat died.
One goat was released alive.
Jesus was condemned.
Barabbas was released.
The possible name Jesus Barabbas would make the two figures appear even more similar.
Jesus' death unquestionably accomplished atonement for sin.
These are not imaginary similarities.

They explain why careful interpreters have explored Day of Atonement imagery in Matthew's account.

We do not need to laugh at the comparison or dismiss it simply because we have not heard it before.

Reasoning together means allowing a question to receive a fair hearing.

It also means testing where a comparison stops working.

This comparison has important limits.

The first limit concerns the calendar.

The ceremony of the two goats occurred on the Day of Atonement.

The release of Barabbas occurred at Passover.

Both were major observances in Israel, but they were not the same feast.

Passover remembered deliverance from Egypt through the blood of the lamb.

The Day of Atonement focused upon annual cleansing, sacrificial blood and the removal of Israel's sins.

The Gospel writers place Jesus' crucifixion within the Passover setting.

That does not prevent Day of Atonement themes from helping us understand the cross.

The work of Christ fulfills more than one Old Testament picture.

But we should not speak as though Pilate were conducting the official Day of Atonement ceremony.

He was not.

The second limit concerns the animals.

John the Baptist looked upon Jesus in John 1:29 and said:

"Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world."

The social-media submission presents this as an explicit reference to the two goats.

That is too strong.

John called Jesus the Lamb of God.

Leviticus 16 describes goats.

John's words may bring several passages and sacrifices together in one magnificent declaration.

Passover involved a lamb.

Isaiah 53:7 described the suffering servant as:

"a lamb to the slaughter."

The regular sacrificial system included lambs.

The words "taketh away the sin" naturally remind us of removal and atonement.

Jesus fulfills the truth toward which all of those sacrifices pointed.

But Scripture does not say that John was referring exclusively or explicitly to the Leviticus 16 goats.

We should let the Biblical images enrich one another without forcing them to become identical.

The third limit concerns the method of selection.

Aaron cast lots over the two goats.

Pilate did not cast lots over Jesus and Barabbas.

He offered the crowd a choice.

The chief priests and elders persuaded the multitude to request Barabbas and destroy Jesus.

Human envy, political fear and sinful manipulation filled the courtyard.

God remained sovereign over the events, but the crowd's decision was not the priestly casting of lots described in Leviticus.

The fourth limit is the most important.

The scapegoat bore the confessed sins of the people.

Barabbas did not.

No high priest placed both hands upon Barabbas.

No one confessed Israel's iniquities over his head.

No Scripture says that the guilt of the people was transferred to him.

Barabbas carried nothing away except his own undeserved freedom.

He left the judgment hall as the same morally guilty man who had entered it.

That is where the simple identification breaks down.

If we say Barabbas was the scapegoat, we risk assigning him a work the Bible assigns to Jesus.

First Peter 2:24 does not say that Barabbas bore our sins.

It says of Christ:

"Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree."

Isaiah 53:6 does not direct our iniquity toward Barabbas.

It says:

"The LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all."

Jesus is the sin-bearer.

Jesus carries the guilt.

Jesus suffers outside the gate.

Jesus removes the barrier between God and those who trust Him.

The fifth limit is simple but decisive.

No Gospel writer calls Barabbas the scapegoat.

Matthew does not say, "This happened that the scapegoat might be fulfilled."

Mark does not interpret Barabbas through Leviticus 16.

Luke does not place the sins of the people upon him.

John does not identify him with the living goat.

The comparison may be a meaningful theological reflection.

It may even draw attention to imagery Matthew's first readers could recognize.

But it remains an interpretation.

It is not an explicit Biblical identification.

So was Barabbas the scapegoat?

Not in the complete Biblical sense.

The similarities are real.

The possible literary echo is worth studying.

But Barabbas does not fulfill the central work of the scapegoat because Barabbas does not bear sin.

That answer leads us to a better question.

Who fulfills the Day of Atonement?

The answer is not divided between Jesus and Barabbas.

The answer is Jesus Christ.

On the Day of Atonement, the high priest first needed a sacrifice for himself.

Jesus did not.

Hebrews 7:26 describes our High Priest as:

"holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and made higher than the heavens."

Aaron could represent sinful people only after blood had been offered for Aaron.

Jesus represents sinful people because He is the sinless Son of God.

He does not need cleansing.

He provides cleansing.

The earthly high priest entered the Holy of Holies once each year.

Jesus entered the true holy place with a sacrifice that never needs repetition.

Hebrews 9:11 and 12 say:

"But Christ being come an high priest of good things to come, by a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands."

"Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us."

Jesus is the High Priest.

Jesus also provides the sacrifice.

He does not bring the blood of an unwilling animal while remaining untouched by the offering.

He gives Himself.

Hebrews 9:14 speaks of:

"the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God."

The goat designated for the Lord died and its blood was carried within the veil.

Jesus shed His own blood and entered with the merit of His own completed sacrifice.

The living goat bore the confessed iniquities away.

Jesus bore our sins in His own body.

The two goats displayed distinct parts of one great answer to sin.

Jesus accomplished the full answer in His own Person and work.

His blood provides atonement.

His sacrifice satisfies divine justice.

He bears guilt.

He removes sin.

He cleanses the conscience.

He opens access to God.

He lives as our eternal High Priest.

The work is complete.

Hebrews 10:11 describes the old repetition:

"And every priest standeth daily ministering and offering oftentimes the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins."

Then verse 12 announces the difference:

"But this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God."

The priests stood because their work continued.

Jesus sat down because the sacrifice was complete.

The Day of Atonement returned every year.

Calvary will never be repeated.

Jesus does not die again each time a sinner believes.

He does not offer Himself again each time a believer fails.

His one sacrifice is sufficient.

Hebrews 10:14 says:

"For by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified."

This is where the sermon moves from ancient ceremony to present hope.

Some people live as though their sins are still wandering around the camp waiting to return.

They believe Jesus can forgive small failures but not the worst parts of their past.

They confess the same forgiven sin repeatedly because they are afraid God forgot to forgive it the first time.

They trust Christ for heaven but continue punishing themselves every day.

The Day of Atonement gave Israel a visible picture of removal.

The living goat did not circle the camp and return through another gate.

It was led away to a land not inhabited.

The completed work of Christ provides something greater than the annual picture.

Psalms 103:12 says:

"As far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us."

Micah 7:19 says:

"Thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea."

God does not minimize forgiven sin.

He removes its guilt on the basis of Christ's sacrifice.

That does not make sin harmless.

It makes grace astonishing.

Now we are ready to understand Barabbas in the most useful way.

Barabbas is not primarily a picture of the scapegoat.

Barabbas is a picture of the sinner who is allowed to go free.
The Gospels place a guilty man beside an innocent Man.
Barabbas had participated in rebellion.
Jesus was obedient to the Father.
Barabbas was connected with murder.
Jesus gave life.
Barabbas was notorious for wrongdoing.
Even Pilate repeatedly recognized that Jesus was innocent.
Yet the guilty man was released and the innocent Man was condemned.
Barabbas could not leave the prison and honestly announce that justice had proven his goodness.
Justice had not declared him good.
Mercy had allowed him to walk away while another Person went forward to judgment.
We should be careful with one popular statement.
People sometimes say that Jesus carried the exact cross that had been built for Barabbas.
Scripture does not tell us which piece of wood had originally been assigned to which prisoner.
We do not need that claim.
The Gospel gives us something certain and powerful.
Barabbas was liable to judgment.
Jesus was innocent.
Barabbas was released.
Jesus was delivered to be crucified.
In the physical and judicial scene before Pilate, the guilty man went free while the innocent Christ received condemnation.
Barabbas may have walked close enough to see Jesus.
He may have heard the crowd demand crucifixion.
He may have disappeared into the city without another thought.
He may have later believed.
We do not know.
The Bible tells us nothing about his response after his release.
We must not invent a conversion or an unrepentant ending for him.
Physical release from Roman custody did not automatically give Barabbas eternal salvation.

He still needed to repent and believe.
But his release gives us an unforgettable picture.
The guilty man walks away because Jesus is condemned.
That is where we should see ourselves.
We are often tempted to enter the story as detached observers.
We stand beside Pilate and evaluate his courage.
We stand above the crowd and criticize its choice.
We stand near the disciples and wonder why they fled.
But when the issue is guilt before God, our place is beside Barabbas.
Romans 3:23 says:
"For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God."
We have rebelled against God's authority.
We have violated His commands.
We have failed to love Him completely.
We have failed to love our neighbors as ourselves.
Some sins are visible to everyone.
Others are concealed beneath religious clothing and respectable reputations.
But none of us stands before God as the innocent Christ.
We are the guilty prisoners.
We are Barabbas.
That statement may offend human pride.
We prefer to compare ourselves with someone worse.
I have never committed Barabbas's crimes.
I have never led an insurrection.
I have never been imprisoned for murder.
But Barabbas is not our standard.
The holy character of God is the standard.
Against that standard, every one of us has sinned.
We do not need minor improvement.
We need forgiveness.
We do not need a better excuse.

We need a substitute.

We do not need God to pretend that our guilt does not exist.

We need God to deal with that guilt righteously.

That is what He did at the cross.

Second Corinthians 5:21 says:

"For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him."

Jesus did not become morally sinful.

He did not begin loving evil.

He remained the spotless Son of God.

Our guilt was judicially placed upon Him.

He received the judgment sin deserves.

Those who are united to Him by faith receive a righteousness they did not earn.

This is the great exchange.

Our sin placed upon Christ.

His righteousness credited to those who believe.

Our judgment received by Him.

His life given to us.

The guilty released.

The innocent Substitute condemned.

Barabbas did nothing to earn his release.

He did not negotiate with Pilate.

He did not persuade the crowd.

He did not repair his record.

He received freedom as a gift he could not demand.

Salvation is likewise not the reward God gives to people who successfully erase their past.

Ephesians 2:8 and 9 say:

"For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God."

"Not of works, lest any man should boast."

Grace does not mean that sin costs nothing.

Grace means that Jesus paid the cost the sinner could never pay.

Imagine Barabbas refusing to leave until he had made himself worthy of release.
Imagine him telling the guard:
I appreciate the offer, but I need to stay here until I can prove that I deserve freedom.
That would not make him noble.
It would make him foolish.
The door was open because the order of release had been given.
The proper response was to walk out.
Some people respond to the Gospel in the same way.
They say they will come to Christ after they improve themselves.
They will believe after they conquer every habit.
They will receive grace after they become worthy of grace.
But grace received as wages is no longer grace.
You do not clean yourself before coming to the One who cleanses sinners.
You come guilty.
You come honestly.
You come with empty hands.
You trust the finished work of Jesus Christ.
Other people believe they are too guilty to be released.
They hear that Christ forgives, but they quietly add an exception for themselves.
They believe His blood can cleanse ordinary sinners but not them.
Look again at Barabbas.
He was not released because his guilt was small.
The Gospel does not tell us that we are only slightly sinful.
It tells us that the sacrifice of Christ is completely sufficient.
Hebrews 7:25 says:
"Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him."
To the uttermost.
Not halfway.
Not temporarily.
Not until the next failure.
Jesus saves completely those who come to God through Him.

Some believers understand forgiveness but continue carrying shame as though they were still chained in the cell.

They have trusted Christ.

They believe He died for them.

Yet they continue introducing themselves to God by the worst thing they ever did.

Repentance does not require us to deny the seriousness of sin.

But faith requires us to take God's promise of forgiveness seriously.

If Christ has borne the guilt, you do not honor Him by pretending the sacrifice was insufficient.

You honor Him by agreeing with God about the sin and agreeing with God about the Savior.

First John 1:9 says:

"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

Notice that God is faithful and just to forgive.

Forgiveness rests upon the completed work of Christ.

The believer does not need to persuade God to become merciful.

God demonstrated His love by giving His Son.

The question today is not merely whether Barabbas resembled a goat in an ancient ceremony.

The deeper question is whether you have received the freedom Christ purchased.

The answer to our title can now be stated carefully.

Was Barabbas the scapegoat?

Not in the complete Biblical sense.

The Day of Atonement scapegoat bore the confessed sins of Israel.

Barabbas bore no one's sins.

The scapegoat was sent away as part of a ceremony commanded by God.

Barabbas was released through the decision of Pilate and the demand of the crowd.

The scapegoat pictured the removal of guilt.

Barabbas remained a guilty man who received an undeserved release.

Scripture never calls Barabbas the scapegoat.

The similarities may provide a meaningful echo.

The possible name Jesus Barabbas may sharpen the contrast.

Later Jewish teaching about similar goats may make the scene even more thought-provoking.

But none of those details should carry more weight than Scripture allows.

Jesus, not Barabbas, bore our sins.

Jesus, not Barabbas, fulfilled the sacrifice.

Jesus, not Barabbas, carried guilt away.

Barabbas shows us the person who benefits when the innocent Substitute receives the judgment of the guilty.

Barabbas is a picture of me.

Barabbas is a picture of you.

That brings us to the invitation.

If you are here in the sanctuary, you do not need to wait for a different building or a more religious moment to come to Christ.

If you are watching or listening from another place, you do not need a pastor physically standing beside you.

Jesus Christ is accessible now.

The Gospel begins with honesty about sin.

Admit that you have sinned against God.

Do not hide behind comparison.

Do not defend the record God already knows.

Agree with Him about your guilt.

Believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.

Believe that He died for your sins.

Believe that He was buried.

Believe that God raised Him bodily from the dead.

Repent.

That means turning from sin and from every false object of trust.

Place your faith in Jesus Christ alone.

Do not trust church attendance.

Do not trust baptism.

Do not trust generosity.

Do not trust a prayer as though the correct words were a magical formula.

Trust Jesus Christ.

Romans 10:9 says:

"That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved."

Romans 10:13 says:

"For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved."

You may speak to God in your own words.

Tell Him the truth about your sin.

Tell Him that you believe Jesus died and rose again.

Turn from your old direction.

Ask Him to save you on the basis of Christ alone.

The prayer does not save you.

Jesus saves the sinner who places faith in Him.

If you make that decision here today, please speak with me after the service.

We want to help you understand what happened and connect you with faithful believers who can walk beside you.

If you are joining us remotely, please visit www.ReasonTogether.Church and use the contact information there to tell us about your decision.

We would love to hear from you and help you take your next step.

For those who already know Christ, remember the two pictures from the Day of Atonement.

The blood has been offered.

The guilt has been carried away.

Christ's sacrifice is complete.

Your High Priest lives.

Do not return to the cell after the door has been opened.

Do not carry the chains Christ has broken.

Walk in grateful obedience, not to earn freedom but because you have received it.

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father,

Thank You for the complete and sufficient sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

Thank You that He is our sinless High Priest.

Thank You that He offered Himself once for our sins.

Thank You that He bore our sins in His own body on the tree.

Thank You that the guilt of those who trust Him is not ignored but fully answered at the cross.

Help us appreciate the Day of Atonement and the picture You gave through the sacrificed goat and the living goat.

Help us see the blood that provides atonement and the removal that carries sin away.

Keep us from confusing later tradition with Scripture.

Keep us from building certainty upon a disputed textual reading.

At the same time, do not allow caution to make us miss the astonishing contrast in Pilate's courtyard.

The guilty man was released.

The innocent Savior was condemned.

We confess that we are the guilty ones.

We have nothing with which to purchase our freedom.

We thank You that Jesus paid the price in full.

Strengthen those who already know Christ.

Comfort those who continue carrying shame for sins You have forgiven.

Teach them to rest in the completed work of Jesus while walking in repentance and obedience.

For anyone who has placed faith in Christ today, give assurance, courage and a desire to grow in Your Word.

May we leave knowing that Jesus bore the sins, Jesus received the judgment and Jesus opened the way for the guilty to go free.

In Jesus' name,

Amen.

Thank you for being with us today.

Please join us at the Reason Together Café for free coffee and conversation.

If this was your first time worshipping with us, we do not simply say goodbye.

We say, Aloha Nui Loa.

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

Aloha.

REASON TOGETHER STUDIES

**PASTOR'S
COMMENTARY**

WAS BARABBAS THE SCAPEGOAT?

What does the release of Barabbas teach us about the sacrifice of Jesus Christ?

Leviticus 16:1-34; Matthew 27:15-26 KJV

“Then released he Barabbas unto them.” Matthew 27:26

Dr. Thomas W. Hawksley

Pastor & Teacher

Commentary in Brief

CENTRAL CONCLUSION Barabbas was not the scapegoat in the complete Biblical sense. The living goat in Leviticus 16 symbolically bore the confessed sins of Israel away from the camp. Barabbas bore no one's sins. He remained a guilty man who received an undeserved release. His freedom beside the condemnation of the innocent Jesus gives us a powerful picture of the sinner who benefits when Christ receives the judgment the guilty deserve.

The comparison begins with a real resemblance. On the Day of Atonement, two goats were presented before the Lord. One was killed and the other was sent away alive. At the Roman trial, two men stood before Pilate. Jesus was condemned and Barabbas was released. That visible pattern deserves careful attention, but resemblance is not identity.

Leviticus 16 supplies the decisive test. The high priest laid both hands upon the living goat, confessed over it all the iniquities, transgressions and sins of Israel and sent it into a land not inhabited. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John never say that Israel's sins were confessed over Barabbas or placed upon him. The Gospels identify Jesus as the innocent One delivered to death and the rest of the New Testament identifies Jesus as the One who bore our sins.

The complete Biblical fulfillment therefore centers in Jesus Christ. He is the sinless High Priest who needed no offering for Himself. He is the sacrifice whose blood provides true atonement. He is the sin-bearer who carries guilt away. Barabbas is best understood as the guilty prisoner who walks free while the innocent Substitute goes forward to judgment.

This commentary explains the Day of Atonement for readers who may know only the modern expression "scapegoat." It then examines the genuine parallels and essential differences between Leviticus 16 and Matthew 27. It also treats the disputed name "Jesus Barabbas," later Jewish descriptions of the goats and the Gospel application with appropriate restraint.

1. The Courtyard Presents a Deliberate Contrast

Two Prisoners Stand Before Pilate

"Whether of the twain will ye that I release unto you? They said, Barabbas." Matthew 27:21

Matthew brings two men before the people. One is Barabbas, a well-known prisoner. The other is "Jesus which is called Christ." Pilate asks which one should be released. The answer sends Barabbas out of custody and Jesus toward scourging and crucifixion.

The contrast is moral as well as legal. Pilate knows that Jesus was delivered because of envy. His wife calls Jesus "that just man." Pilate asks what evil Jesus has done and publicly describes Him as just. None of those statements makes Pilate innocent, but each statement intensifies the scene: the governor recognizes the innocence of Jesus and still delivers Him to death.

Matthew 27:25 has been misused to assign continuing guilt to all Jewish people. The verse reports the words of the assembled crowd in that historical moment. It does not erase Pilate's responsibility, the responsibility of the Roman soldiers or the universal truth that Christ died for sinners from every nation. The apostles themselves were Jewish, the first church was Jewish and the Gospel went first to Jewish hearers. The cross exposes human sin and reveals divine mercy. It must never be used to nurture ethnic hostility.

PASTORAL GUARDRAIL Do not turn a scene of human guilt and divine grace into a weapon against the Jewish people.

2. Barabbas Was a Guilty Man

The Four Gospels Supply a Consistent Portrait

Matthew calls Barabbas “a notable prisoner.” In this context, notable means prominent or notorious, not admirable. Mark says he had participated in an insurrection in which murder was committed. Luke identifies sedition and murder. John calls him a robber, a word that can describe a violent bandit rather than only a secret thief.

The Gospel writers do not present Barabbas as a victim of mistaken identity or false testimony. He was associated with rebellion, violence and death. His chains were not removed because a court proved him innocent. He was released because Pilate yielded to the requested festival release while delivering Jesus to crucifixion.

This difference from ordinary modern scapegoating is important. Barabbas was not an innocent person unfairly blamed for the wrongdoing of someone else. Jesus was the innocent Person condemned while the guilty man was permitted to leave.

FIRST OBSERVATION The power of the scene begins with what Scripture plainly gives us: Barabbas was guilty, Jesus was innocent, Barabbas was released and Jesus was condemned.

3. The Modern Scapegoat Is Not the Whole Biblical Picture

A Familiar Word Can Hide an Unfamiliar Ceremony

In ordinary speech, a scapegoat is someone who receives blame that belongs to others. A family, business, government or team may protect itself by fastening responsibility upon one person. The modern expression usually suggests manipulation and injustice. The person blamed may be innocent or less responsible than the people shifting the blame.

Leviticus 16 describes something different. The Biblical scapegoat was part of a holy ceremony commanded by God for the Day of Atonement. Human beings did not invent the rite to avoid accountability. God gave Israel a visible lesson about confessed sin, atoning blood and the removal of guilt.

The goat itself did not make moral choices and did not become sinful in character. It served as a God-appointed symbol. The high priest confessed Israel’s sins over the animal, symbolically placed them upon its head and sent it away from the camp. The action taught that sin must be acknowledged and that God provides for its removal.

READING PRINCIPLE Begin with the ceremony God described before importing the modern meaning of the word.

4. The Day of Atonement Begins With the Holiness of God

The Most Holy Place Was Not Open for Casual Entrance

Leviticus 16 opens after the deaths of Nadab and Abihu. Aaron is warned not to enter at all times within the veil before the mercy seat, “that he die not.” The warning establishes the setting for everything that follows. The Day of Atonement was not religious theater. A sinful people lived in covenant relationship with the holy God who dwelt among them.

The tabernacle had an outer court and two principal rooms. Priests served in the holy place. Beyond the veil was the most holy place, where the ark of the covenant and the mercy seat stood. God

promised to appear in the cloud upon the mercy seat. Ordinary Israelites did not enter that room. Even the high priest entered only according to God's command.

Once each year, on the tenth day of the seventh month, Israel stopped ordinary work and humbled itself before the Lord. Leviticus 16:30 states the purpose: "For on that day shall the priest make an atonement for you, to cleanse you, that ye may be clean from all your sins before the LORD." The day proclaimed both the seriousness of sin and the mercy of God.

Atonement involved more than a private feeling of regret. Sin defiled people and affected the sacred place in which God dwelt among them. The prescribed washing, clothing, sacrifices, incense and blood all emphasized that access to God comes according to His provision, not human preference.

FOUNDATIONAL TRUTH We cannot understand the scapegoat until we understand that sin is real, God is holy and reconciliation requires the remedy God provides.

5. The Earthly High Priest Needed Atonement

Aaron First Offered for Himself and His House

"And Aaron shall offer his bullock of the sin offering, which is for himself, and make an atonement for himself, and for his house." Leviticus 16:6

Aaron held a sacred office, but the office did not make him sinless. Before representing the nation, he washed, put on the prescribed linen garments and offered a bull for himself and his household. He entered with incense so that its cloud covered the mercy seat. He then brought the blood of the bull within the veil.

This repeated need distinguishes every earthly high priest from Jesus Christ. Hebrews says Jesus is "holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners." He did not need to offer a sacrifice for His own guilt. He could offer Himself for ours because He had no sin of His own.

CHRIST-CENTERED DISTINCTION Aaron needed atonement before he could minister for the people. Jesus is the sinless High Priest who provides atonement for the people.

6. Two Goats Were Presented as One Sin Offering

One Offering Was Displayed Through Two Related Actions

Leviticus 16:5 says the congregation supplied "two kids of the goats for a sin offering." Verse 7 says Aaron presented both goats before the Lord at the door of the tabernacle. He then cast lots, "one lot for the LORD, and the other lot for the scapegoat."

The goats were not competing saviors and they did not represent two independent plans of redemption. Together they belonged to the sin offering for the people. One goat would die and its blood would be carried within the veil. The other would remain alive long enough to bear the confessed sins away from the camp.

The casting of lots assigned the roles. Scripture does not tell us that the goats represented two human candidates from whom a crowd would later choose. Nor does Leviticus command the congregation to select one goat by popular demand. The similarity of two presented subjects is visually interesting, but the mechanisms are different.

INTERPRETIVE CAUTION The two goats belong together in one God-ordained presentation of atonement and removal. Do not divide the fulfillment between Jesus and Barabbas.

7. The Goat for the Lord Was Killed

Its Blood Was Brought Within the Veil

“Then shall he kill the goat of the sin offering, that is for the people, and bring his blood within the veil.” Leviticus 16:15

The goat upon which the Lord's lot fell was offered as the sin offering for the people. Its blood was sprinkled upon and before the mercy seat. Aaron also made atonement for the holy place because it stood among a people marked by uncleanness, transgression and sin.

The blood declared that guilt cannot be answered by denial or moral comparison. A life was given according to God's command. Leviticus 17:11 explains that the life of the flesh is in the blood and that God gave it upon the altar to make atonement for souls.

Animal blood could teach the pattern, but it could not complete the final work. Hebrews 10 says that the repeated sacrifices served as a remembrance of sins and that it was not possible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. The ceremony pointed beyond itself to the sufficient offering of Christ.

DOCTRINAL CONNECTION The sacrificed goat directs our attention toward Christ's death and shed blood, but Jesus is greater than the animal shadow.

8. The Living Goat Bore Confessed Sin Away

Both Hands, Full Confession and Visible Removal

After the blood rite, Aaron returned to the living goat. Leviticus 16:21 says he laid both hands upon its head and confessed “all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions in all their sins.” The threefold description leaves no room for treating sin lightly.

The verse says Aaron put those sins upon the head of the goat. This was symbolic transfer within a ceremony God had commanded. The animal did not become a morally wicked creature. It was appointed to bear away the burden that had been confessed over it.

A “fit man” then led the goat into the wilderness. Leviticus 16:22 says, “And the goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities unto a land not inhabited.” The goat left the tabernacle, passed out of the camp and disappeared into an uninhabited place. Israel received a visible picture of guilt removed from the people.

The ceremony helps explain the language of Psalm 103:12: “As far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us.” Forgiveness does not mean that God pretends sin never mattered. It means He deals with guilt according to His righteous provision and removes it from those He forgives.

DECISIVE FEATURE The Biblical scapegoat is identified by bearing confessed sin away. Any proposed fulfillment must account for that defining action.

9. The Two Goats Reveal Death and Removal Together

The Ceremony Must Not Be Torn Apart

One goat displayed the giving of life through shed blood. The other displayed the bearing away of confessed guilt. The first was not the complete picture without the second and the second did not

function apart from the completed blood rite. Leviticus presents both within one coordinated act of atonement for Israel.

This guards us from assigning one goat to Jesus and the other to Barabbas as though they shared the saving work. Barabbas contributed nothing to atonement. His blood was not presented before God and no sins were placed upon him. He was a beneficiary of release, not a participant in redemption.

Jesus fulfills what the entire ceremony anticipated. He is the Priest who acts, the sacrifice that is offered and the sin-bearer who removes guilt. The New Testament does not distribute those saving roles between Christ and another person.

APPROVED SUMMARY The goats give two aspects of one saving picture. Christ alone supplies the reality to which both aspects point.

10. There Are Genuine Parallels With the Barabbas Scene

A Meaningful Echo Should Be Acknowledged

The comparison should not be dismissed as though it contains no insight. In both scenes, two subjects are placed before an authority and only one goes away alive. One dies while another is released. The contrast becomes especially striking because the Gospel scene occurs during Passover week in Jerusalem and the condemned Person is Jesus Christ.

The Barabbas episode also displays substitution in a concrete judicial form. A guilty prisoner was liable to judgment. The innocent Jesus was delivered to the death Barabbas escaped. Scripture does not say that the particular cross had first been built for Barabbas, and we should not add that detail. The certain facts are already sufficient: Barabbas went free and Jesus went to crucifixion.

A typological echo may be spiritually fruitful even when it is not an exact ritual reenactment. The responsible approach is to name the resemblance, test its limits and allow clear New Testament teaching to govern the final conclusion.

BALANCED JUDGMENT The comparison is meaningful as an echo of death and release. It becomes misleading when Barabbas is assigned the sin-bearing work Scripture gives to Jesus.

11. The Differences Are Theologically Decisive

Similarity Does Not Establish Identity

The Day of Atonement occurred on the tenth day of the seventh month. The trial of Jesus occurred during Passover. The Levitical ceremony used goats. Pilate's courtyard held two men. Aaron cast lots before the Lord. Pilate negotiated with a crowd under political pressure. These differences do not erase every comparison, but they prevent us from calling the scenes identical.

Most importantly, the living goat bore confessed sins. No priest placed hands upon Barabbas. No confession of Israel's iniquities was spoken over him. The Gospels never say that he carried guilt away. He left the courtyard with his own moral history unchanged.

Barabbas was guilty before his release and remained personally responsible before God after it. Release from Roman custody was not eternal salvation. Scripture does not tell us whether he later repented and believed. We must not invent either his conversion or his final unbelief.

Jesus, by contrast, is repeatedly declared innocent in the Passion narratives and explicitly identified as sin-bearer in the apostolic writings. First Peter 2:24 says He "bare our sins in his own body on the

tree.” Second Corinthians 5:21 says the One who knew no sin was made sin for us so that believers might be made the righteousness of God in Him.

DECISIVE TEST Ask who bears the sin. Scripture answers: Jesus Christ, not Barabbas.

12. Was Barabbas the Scapegoat?

Not in the Complete Biblical Sense

The title question deserves a direct answer. Barabbas was not the scapegoat in the complete Biblical sense. He did not receive a priestly confession of the people's sins. He did not bear those sins into the wilderness. His release was not part of the ceremony commanded in Leviticus 16 and Scripture never gives him the title scapegoat.

Calling Barabbas the scapegoat without qualification reverses the most important role. In modern speech, the scapegoat is often an innocent person made to suffer for others. In Matthew 27, that description fits Jesus more closely than Barabbas. In the precise Levitical sense, the defining sin-bearing and removal also finds its fulfillment in Jesus, not in the released prisoner.

Barabbas nevertheless occupies a vital place in the Gospel scene. He is the guilty person set free while the innocent Christ is condemned. He does not explain how atonement is accomplished. He shows us the kind of person who needs and benefits from substitutionary grace.

PERMANENT DETERMINATION Barabbas is not the sin-bearing scapegoat. He is the released guilty sinner. Jesus alone is the High Priest, sacrifice and sin-bearer.

13. What About the Name “Jesus Barabbas”?

A Disputed Reading May Sharpen the Contrast but Cannot Carry Doctrine

Some ancient manuscripts and later textual witnesses contain the reading “Jesus Barabbas” in Matthew 27:16 and 17. If original, Pilate's question would set “Jesus Barabbas” beside “Jesus which is called Christ.” The choice would then sound especially pointed: which Jesus will be released?

The reading is disputed. Some textual scholars think scribes removed the name Jesus from Barabbas because they did not want a criminal bearing the Savior's name. Others think the longer form entered the text through copying or explanation. The King James Version reads simply “Barabbas,” and that is the wording used in the sermon and in direct KJV quotation.

No essential conclusion depends upon the longer reading. The canonical narrative already gives a sharp contrast between Barabbas and Jesus Christ. The variant may be mentioned as an interesting textual question, but it must never be presented as an established fact or as proof that the two men were ritual counterparts.

TEXTUAL CAUTION A disputed reading may illuminate a possibility. It must not become the foundation of a doctrine.

14. What About the Tradition That the Goats Looked Alike?

Later Jewish Description Is Not a Command in Leviticus

Later Jewish tradition describes the two goats as similar in appearance, size and value and selected together. That tradition can make readers think of two comparable figures presented side by side. It is historically relevant to later practice and worthy of respectful mention.

Leviticus 16 itself does not command that the goats be visually identical. The later Mishnah discusses their similarity as desirable and also indicates that the rite remained valid if they were not alike. The tradition therefore must not be preached as though Moses gave Israel a prophecy of two outwardly matching human candidates before Pilate.

The same restraint applies to later customs concerning a scarlet thread and the fate of the goat in the wilderness. Those traditions may help historians understand later observance, but they do not rewrite the Biblical instructions or establish the identity of Barabbas.

HISTORICAL CAUTION Label later tradition as later tradition. Appreciate it without granting it the authority of Scripture.

15. Jesus Is the Better High Priest

He Entered by His Own Blood and Lives Forever

The Day of Atonement reaches its New Testament explanation in Hebrews. The earthly high priest entered repeatedly with blood that was not his own. Jesus entered the true holy place on the basis of His own sacrifice. He did not merely carry an offering. He offered Himself.

Aaron needed cleansing and a bull for his own house. Jesus needed neither. Aaron's work was repeated each year. Jesus offered one sacrifice for sins forever. Aaron left the most holy place and eventually died. Jesus rose from the dead, sat down at the right hand of God and continues as the believer's living High Priest.

Hebrews 9:12 says that Christ entered in once, "having obtained eternal redemption for us." Hebrews 10:14 says, "For by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified." The annual pattern yielded to a completed work.

PASTORAL ASSURANCE Our access to God rests upon a sinless and living High Priest whose sacrifice never needs to be repeated.

16. Jesus Is the Sacrifice and the Sin-Bearer

The New Testament Joins Atonement and Removal in Christ

John the Baptist announced Jesus as "the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world." Peter says Christ bore our sins in His own body on the tree. Hebrews says He was once offered to bear the sins of many. These statements do not assign the removal of sin to Barabbas. They center it in Christ's own person and work.

Second Corinthians 5:21 must be read carefully. Jesus did not become morally corrupt or begin loving evil. The sinless One stood in the judicial place of sinners and received the judgment their guilt deserved. Those united to Him by faith receive a righteous standing they did not earn.

This is the great exchange. Our guilt is counted to Christ and answered in His death. His righteousness is counted to those who believe. God does not excuse sin or pretend justice is unnecessary. At the cross, mercy and justice meet because the Substitute willingly bears the penalty.

The sacrificial goat helps us see life given in death. The living goat helps us see guilt carried away. Jesus brings both truths to completion. His blood provides atonement and His sin-bearing work removes the believer's guilt from before God.

GOSPEL CENTER Jesus did not share redemption with Barabbas. He accomplished it alone.

17. Barabbas Pictures the Sinner Who Receives Undeserved Freedom

Our Place in the Story Is Beside the Guilty Prisoner

Barabbas could not step out of prison and claim that justice had proved his goodness. His record did not become righteous because his chains were removed. He walked away because another Person was delivered to condemnation. In that limited but powerful sense, his release gives us a picture of grace.

We are tempted to enter the Passion story only as judges of Pilate, the crowd or the disciples. Before a holy God, however, we stand with Barabbas. Romans 3:23 says all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. Our particular histories differ, but none of us occupies the place of the innocent Christ.

Salvation is not God's reward for people who repair their own record. Ephesians 2:8 and 9 says it is by grace through faith, "not of works, lest any man should boast." Grace does not mean sin costs nothing. It means Jesus paid the cost the sinner could never pay.

Barabbas did not earn the opening of his cell, yet physical freedom could not reconcile him to God. In the same way, outward relief, religious activity and a second chance are not substitutes for conversion. Every sinner must repent and personally trust Jesus Christ.

PERSONAL APPLICATION Barabbas is not our co-redeemer. He is a mirror in which guilty people can see their need for the innocent Substitute.

18. Forgiven People Must Not Return to the Cell

Assurance Rests on the Sufficiency of Christ

Some people delay coming to Christ because they are trying to become worthy of grace. Others believe their guilt is too great for Christ to forgive. Both responses look at the sinner rather than the Savior. Hebrews 7:25 says Jesus is able to save to the uttermost those who come to God by Him.

Believers may also continue carrying shame as though forgiven sin remained chained to them. Repentance does not minimize wrongdoing and assurance does not eliminate appropriate consequences in earthly relationships. Yet faith takes God seriously when He promises cleansing. First John 1:9 says God is faithful and just to forgive and to cleanse.

The living goat did not circle the camp and return through another gate. It carried the confessed burden into a land not inhabited. Christ provides something greater than that annual picture. His one offering is sufficient, His resurrection confirms the victory and His intercession continues.

Freedom is not permission to return to rebellion. Grace teaches the believer to walk in grateful obedience. We do not obey in order to purchase release. We obey because Christ has released us from condemnation and made us His own.

PASTORAL ENCOURAGEMENT Do not carry chains Christ has broken. Confess sin honestly, rest in His completed work and walk in the new life He gives.

Questions for Personal Reflection

- Can I explain the difference between the modern use of scapegoat and the ceremony in Leviticus 16?
- What did the sacrificed goat display and what did the living goat display?
- Why is the confession of sin over the living goat essential to the title question?

- Which parallels between Leviticus 16 and Matthew 27 are real, and where does the comparison reach its limit?
- Have I allowed a disputed textual reading or later tradition to become more certain than Scripture?
- Do I understand why Jesus alone fulfills the roles of High Priest, sacrifice and sin-bearer?
- Am I trying to earn freedom that can be received only by grace through faith?
- Have I continued punishing myself for guilt Christ has forgiven?
- Have I personally repented and trusted Jesus Christ alone?

A Personal Invitation to Salvation

Barabbas received release from a Roman prison, but the Bible does not tell us that he received eternal life. Physical freedom, religious knowledge and proximity to the crucifixion could not save him. He needed what every sinner needs: repentance toward God and faith in Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the sinless Son of God. He died for our sins, was buried and rose bodily from the dead. He is alive and able to save completely everyone who comes to God through Him. You do not need to make yourself worthy before coming. You cannot erase guilt through church attendance, baptism, generosity or moral effort.

Admit that you have sinned against God and cannot save yourself. Believe that Jesus died for your sins and rose again. Repent of sin and every false object of trust. Place your faith in Jesus Christ alone. Receive the release He purchased, not because your guilt is small, but because His sacrifice is sufficient.

“That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved.” Romans 10:9

“For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.” Romans 10:13

There is no magical prayer formula. Speak to God honestly in your own words. Confess your sin, tell Him you believe Jesus died and rose again and ask Him to save you because of Christ alone. The prayer does not save. Jesus saves the sinner who trusts Him. If you have trusted Christ, speak with a faithful Christian pastor or contact Reason Together Church through www.ReasonTogether.Church. We would be honored to pray with you and help you begin walking with Christ.

A Closing Prayer

Our Heavenly Father,

Thank You for giving us Your Word and for allowing us to bring difficult and interesting questions beneath its authority. Teach us to recognize genuine connections without carrying them farther than Scripture permits.

Thank You for the Day of Atonement and its solemn witness to Your holiness, the seriousness of sin and the mercy You provide. Help us understand the blood that makes atonement and the living goat that pictured guilt carried away.

Thank You for Jesus Christ, our sinless High Priest, sufficient sacrifice and true sin-bearer. Thank You that He offered Himself once, rose from the dead and lives forever to intercede for those who come to You through Him.

We confess that we are not the innocent observers in this story. We are guilty people who need grace. Draw unbelievers to repentance and faith. Strengthen believers who still carry shame for sins You have forgiven. Teach us to rest in Christ's completed work and to walk in grateful obedience.

May we leave this study remembering that Barabbas bore no one's sins. Jesus bore our sins. Barabbas received an undeserved release. Jesus purchased eternal freedom for every sinner who trusts Him.

In Jesus' name we pray.

Amen.

Selected Sources

Primary Scripture

Leviticus 16:1-34; Leviticus 17:11; Psalm 103:12; Isaiah 53:4-6; Matthew 27:15-26; Mark 15:6-15; Luke 23:13-25; John 1:29; John 18:38-40; Romans 3:23-26; Romans 10:9, 13; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Ephesians 2:8-9; Hebrews 7:25-27; Hebrews 9:6-14, 24-28; Hebrews 10:1-14; 1 Peter 2:24 and 1 John 1:9 KJV.

Later Jewish Ritual Tradition

Mishnah Yoma 6:1. This later source describes the two goats as alike in appearance, height and value and purchased together when possible. It also states that the rite remained valid if they were not alike. It is used as evidence for later Jewish practice, not as a command contained in Leviticus 16.

Textual Study of "Jesus Barabbas"

Jongkind, Dirk. "Jesus Barabbas or Just Barabbas?" Tyndale House, Cambridge. This discussion explains the textual question and argues for the shorter reading.

Moses, Robert E. "Jesus Barabbas, a Nominal Messiah?" Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus. This study argues for the longer reading while appropriately recognizing the limits of historical conclusions drawn from the variant.

Day of Atonement and Scapegoat Interpretation

Olanisebe, Samson O. "The Scapegoat Ritual and Its Ancient Near Eastern Parallels." This study surveys interpretations of Azazel and the function of the living goat in Leviticus 16.

Maclean, Robert Berenson. "Barabbas and the Scapegoat Ritual." This study develops a proposed relationship between the Barabbas narrative and the Day of Atonement and is treated here as a scholarly interpretation rather than an explicit Biblical identification.

Interpretive Cautions

This commentary distinguishes the explicit instructions of Leviticus 16 from later Jewish ritual description. It treats "Jesus Barabbas" as a disputed textual reading, not a doctrinal foundation. It acknowledges real narrative parallels while rejecting any redemptive role for Barabbas. It does not claim that the cross used for Jesus had been constructed for Barabbas and it does not assign collective guilt to Jewish people.

Pastoral Note

This commentary accompanies the approved Reason Together Study. It does not replace the sermon transcript or internal Study Vault. Its purpose is to provide a readable public explanation of the

principal Biblical reasoning, preserve interpretive and pastoral cautions and help readers place their confidence in Jesus Christ, our High Priest, sacrifice and sin-bearer.