

HIM OR ME?  
PALM SUNDAY  
APRIL 12, 1987

Page 1

Could I speak? May I say a few words? I see there's a break in the "show" and I have something to say. I understand you are quite interested in why Jesus died, and that you have the custom of inviting persons who knew of him to visit you and explain their side of the story. I heard that you had Pontius Pilate come, the Governor who sentenced Jesus to die. He was a nothing, no backbone, and what a politician! He didn't want to antagonize the Jewish authorities because he wanted to be reassigned to a more desirable area than Jerusalem. Then, you had Judas come, the follower of Jesus who turned him in. He hasn't been too popular with you folks! But, after all, he only wanted Jesus to follow through with his promises. Then last year you had Caiaphas come, the High Priest who decided Jesus was dangerous. When I heard of your custom, I decided to ask if I could come. You asked for the others to come, but I volunteered. I know it's usually not too wise to volunteer for anything, but I really wanted to come. I circled April 12 on my calendar and here I am!

My name is Barabbas. Jesus got me out of jail. I'm indebted. If it weren't for Jesus, I would have had to stay in jail, and execution was inevitable. After all, I had committed murder--oh, it was done in the name of war, in the name of the revolution, but the Romans would have hung me on a cross. So I'm grateful to Jesus. It was "him or me!"

It was a suspenseful moment when I got released. The Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate, dramatically stood there in front of the crowd and asked, "Whom do you want me to release for you? Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Messiah?" It was "him or me." I held my breath, and shouted inside myself--do you remember how you would shout inside yourself when you were kids and they chose up teams, and you wanted desperately to be on a particular team? You would shout inside yourself, "Choose me! Choose me!" Well, that's what I did when Pilate asked the question. I shouted inside myself, "Choose me."

I could see I was not alone. The chief priests were "working the crowd." They were walking through the crowd telling them, "Choose Barabbas." If anyone argued with them, they said, "Shut up, you idiot, why do you think we hired you to come here? Quit thinking and do what we tell you. Don't ask questions. Just do what you are told." Have you heard that line before? So the crowd asked for me. I breathed a huge sigh of relief, I tell you. Whew!

But that didn't satisfy that idiot, the governor. He asked them again. For some reason, he was on Jesus' side. He really didn't want to sentence him. He used me to try to release him. I was used! The more I think about that, the angrier I get. Pilate used me, thinking that people would prefer Jesus to me. After all, Jesus hadn't murdered anyone. Jesus hadn't engaged in covert military operations against the Roman government. Jesus was not an overt hostile. But, the chief priests and elders had done their job well. There was no one there politicking for Jesus. And Jesus certainly didn't help himself. He wouldn't even answer the questions, almost as if he wanted to be a victim. You must admit Jesus wasn't too smart politically.

HIM OR ME?  
PALM SUNDAY  
APRIL 12, 1987

Page 2

So Pilate asked them again, "Which of the two do you want me to release for you?" Again I held my breath and shouted inside me, "Choose me!" And they did. They answered, "Barabbas! We want Barabbas!" The governor, who

was somewhat surprised and disappointed, then asked, "Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" And the crowd shouted, "Let him be crucified." It was a moving moment for me, I tell you. I was a free man.

So, why did Jesus die, and why was I freed? I was freed because I was in the right place at the right time. I've done a lot of thinking, and a lot of research. After all, if you were about to die, wouldn't you be curious about the fellow who took your place? You understand I am very indebted to him, but I have tried to be objective. I was really curious to understand how he had got himself into such a fix, and why the authorities were so much against him.

I am here today to tell you what really happened. Forget all that theology stuff you've been told through the years. You folks need to hear some simple talk in language we all can understand. You people even use words that are so old nobody knows what they mean anymore. Redemption, salvation, grace, justification, kingdom of God. Do you know what those old words mean? Let me tell you why Jesus died. He was way off base. He antagonized everyone except the poor people. They were beginning to follow him, and he--let's be honest--was teaching them nonsense. He was filling their heads with ideas that don't work!

Listen to some of the nonsense he taught his followers. "Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." The poor are blessed?? Heaven will be for poor people, and not those who work for a living? Come on, now. Here's a ridiculous one, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." Have you heard of anything so impractical? Wishful thinking. But dangerous thinking. "Blessed are the peacemakers." The peacemakers! We had a Roman army we had to defeat. We had the Roman occupation forces to drive out of our country. We should be peacemakers? What would happen, I ask you, if everyone was a peacemaker? What good would that do you today? Who would fight your enemies?

Here's a rich one. Listen to this subversive nonsense. "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also; and if any one would sue you and take your coat, let him have your cloak as well; and if any one forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles." In case you don't understand that phrase, let me explain it. In my day a Roman soldier could conscript a passerby to carry his pack for one mile. But Jesus taught that if a soldier forced you to carry his pack for one mile, carry it for two miles. Have you ever heard such nonsense? I'm not through yet either. Listen to these teachings, "Give to him who begs from you, and do not refuse him who would borrow from you. You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

HIM OR ME?  
PALM SUNDAY  
APRIL 12, 1987

Page 3

The man was actually saying those things. He actually believed them and expected people to believe and live that way. No wonder he was killed. The man was a dreamer, a loony. He had his head in the clouds. I had my feet on the earth. And I was released. He went to the cross. That should tell you something about who was right. I was freed. He died, executed. God didn't save him, but God freed me.

Jesus was upsetting the way things were done. Why, he was even attacking our own Jewish leaders, rather than the Romans. We all knew that Rome was our enemy. Sure there was corruption in our local government. Sure there was graft, but you always have that. Don't you? Look at your government! And do you stick your neck out trying to clean house? Are you so impractical as to try to hold your officials accountable to some higher moral authority? Get with it. Hey, that's what Jesus' problem was! Jesus wasn't "with it." He was against the wrong people. You should have heard how he attacked the scribes and pharisees, our religious leaders. Whose side was he on? Hey, Rome was our enemy, not our own people.

Now, I had it straight. Sure I got arrested. I got thrown in jail, but not before taking some Roman soldiers out of action. I was arrested for insurrection and murder. I was a Zealot. Zealots were Jews who were tired of the Roman rule. We were tired of being occupied by a bunch of foreigners. We wanted our own land. We wanted our own government. We felt we could do something about it, too. We didn't just talk. We did something. We instigated terrorist activity. You think there is terrorism over there now. You should have seen it in my day. We didn't have the army or the resources to launch a military attack on the Roman soldiers, but we sure knew how to make life miserable for them.

What? Yes, I know it backfired. In 70 A.D. Rome had had enough, and sent a huge army that destroyed Jerusalem, including the temple---our temple, the center of not only our religious life, but our nation, our spirit, our identity. They demolished it! Our strategy didn't work, you say, but what else is there to do? You've got to fight. You've got to strike back. There's no other way to handle enemies. What alternative is there? You folks certainly aren't serious about Jesus' way, are you?

There's one thing I can't understand. As I've been talking to you, I've been wondering about something. I've never stood in a building like this before. We didn't have anything as grand as this. Even the temple was nothing like this, and it is in honor of Jesus. Amazing! What I can't understand is why very few people know my name, but the whole world has heard of Jesus. Not many people remember the Zealots. We were a notable, impressive force in our day, but not many today know who we were; yet, the whole world today has heard of Christianity. And I can't understand why the great military heroes of history--those who led war, those who got the victories--have no buildings like this one named after them. I see monuments and statues erected to their honor, but there aren't buildings after buildings erected to their honor, like there are to Jesus. Why, in your town alone, how many buildings are dedicated to the name of Jesus? I haven't seen one building named for me--Barabbas--nor any for the Zealots.

HIM OR ME?  
PALM SUNDAY

DOUGLAS NORRIS  
FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH  
PALO ALTO, CALIFORNIA

APRIL 12, 1987

It doesn't make sense to me. I know I'm right. I have to be right. After all, I was released. I was chosen. But, why are there are so many people who follow Jesus? You heard the nonsense he taught. Do you believe it? Why, this building is full this morning. Must be 500 here. How many are here? Can anyone tell me? That many! And you didn't come to hear me. You didn't even know I was coming. Why did you come? I can't understand that. Why do you come to these meetings? Why do you join Jesus' movement? You don't look like poor people, like those who followed him then. What is in it for you? Don't you believe in fighting back? Do you actually believe Jesus and follow him?