

THE PRICE OF FREEDOM

Sin implies deviation from a moral standard, and deviation from a moral standard implies guilt. Guilt means emotional pain, and our culture will have none of that. Or, it would like to have none of that. No matter how we try to get rid of guilt, it is still there, and it still haunts us. This was illustrated a few years back by Mike Weiss of the San Jose Mercury News, who wrote about receiving a phone-mail message that spoke of judgment. The voice was a woman's, and the message was left at 3:01 a.m. Weiss wrote:

Who could this be? I was straining to recognize the voice. But also asking myself, "Who had I wronged to such an extent that I had driven her to a dangerous edge?"

Like a lingering nightmare, the message jangled my nerves all that day and night. But the real revelation was yet to come. It was the next day when my local paper, the Palo Alto Daily News, ran a front-page story saying that hundreds of phone-mail customers in our area had received the same message.

What was revealing, though, was not the technical mastery of how the message had been distributed; nor even who the woman was, which remained unknown. What was eye-opening was how many people had believed the message was personal, addressed to them.

Somebody calls at three in the morning threatening judgment, and most of us think we've been caught out, that our transgressions have come home to roost. ...

Thinking about the state of that woman's torment at 3:01 a.m. drove me right into the arms of the book of Revelation. I am neither a Christian nor a student of religion, so I had never gotten around to reading the last book of the King James Bible.¹¹

Guilt, apparently, is something even we moderns can't quite escape.

Matthew tells a story demonstrating that all of us are responsible for the death of Jesus. All of us are guilty of sin, and the sin of humanity nailed Jesus to the cross. We may try to deflect responsibility or offload our guilt, but that won't help us when the phone call comes at 3 a.m. There is a better way: Confess our culpability in the death of Jesus, and allow his blood to cleanse us from sin and guilt.¹²

Matthew follows a narrative pattern similar to the one he employed in the previous passage. In Matthew 26:57-75, he wove together the stories of Jesus and Peter to show that both were, in a sense "guilty": Jesus was guilty of being the Christ, and Peter was guilty of being a follower of Christ. In Matthew 27:1-26, he weaves together the stories of Jesus and Judas in order to show that all are guilty of Jesus' blood. In so doing, Matthew climbs inside the heads of the players in his story and shows us how they deal with guilt. The story holds up a mirror to us to show us the ways we push away guilt.

The Sanhedrin, the Jewish council in Jerusalem, has just determined that Jesus is worthy of death.

Judas and the Jewish leaders

Matthew 27:1-10:

[1] Now when morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people conferred together against Jesus to put Him to death; [2] and they bound Him, and led

Him away and delivered Him to Pilate the governor. [3] Then when Judas, who had betrayed Him, saw that He had been condemned, he felt remorse and returned the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, [4] saying, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." But they said, "What is that to us? See to that yourself!" [5] And he threw the pieces of silver into the temple sanctuary and departed; and he went away and hanged himself. [6] The chief priests took the pieces of silver and said, "It is not lawful to put them into the temple treasury, since it is the price of blood." [7] And they conferred together and with the money bought the Potter's Field as a burial place for strangers. [8] For this reason that field has been called the Field of Blood to this day. [9] Then that which was spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled: "AND THEY TOOK THE THIRTY PIECES OF SILVER, THE PRICE OF THE ONE WHOSE PRICE HAD BEEN SET by the sons of Israel; [10] AND THEY GAVE THEM FOR THE POTTER'S FIELD, AS THE LORD DIRECTED ME."

The chief priests and elders hope that their charge of blasphemy convinces their Jewish countrymen that Jesus is deserving of death. Having no authority to carry out capital punishment, they hope to persuade Pilate to execute him. A charge of blasphemy against the Jewish "god" will carry no weight with the Roman governor, so the Jewish leaders must present him as a threat to Rome. At first glance, their task is by no means an easy one, because Jesus, at least up until his entry into Jerusalem, has been popular with the Jewish crowds, and Pilate, no friend of the Jews, was not in the habit of granting favors to the chief priests and elders. The Jewish leaders confer as to how they can persuade both their countrymen and Pilate.¹³

The leaders "delivered" Jesus to Pilate, a word that can also be translated "betrayed" and which has been applied to Judas up to this point in Matthew's gospel (Matthew 10:4; 26:15, 25). In using the same word again in connection with Judas in the following verse, Matthew ties the leaders to the sin of Judas.

Dramatic interlude

Verses 3 through 10 constitute a dramatic interlude in the story of Jesus' appearance before Pilate. Chronologically, this section does not follow verse 2, for the Jewish leaders couldn't have purchased a field in this time frame. Matthew's purpose in this interlude seems to be to demonstrate that both the Jewish leaders and Pilate are also guilty of the blood of Jesus, inasmuch as the same words applied to Judas in this section are also applied to the leaders and Pilate in different parts of Matthew 27:1-26.

In betraying Jesus, Judas fulfilled Jesus' words concerning him from Matthew 26:24, just as Peter in Matthew 26:69-75 fulfilled Jesus' words from Matthew 26:34. The word translated "felt remorse" is not the usual word for "repent" and, in this case, indicates regret but not a turning to God. However, Judas now acknowledges his guilt and wishes to atone for his sin by returning the 30 pieces of silver that the leaders paid him to betray Jesus (Matthew 26:15).

Judas confesses his sin to the leaders. The leaders understand that Judas is implicating them in the betrayal of innocent blood. Matthew, of course, sides with Judas in this instance, having already described the leaders as delivering, or betraying, Jesus to Pilate. The leaders respond, literally, "What to us?" First, they say this matter of betraying

innocent blood doesn't concern them. They also say, literally, "You yourself will see." Second, they say the matter is entirely Judas' responsibility.

The priests were charged with overseeing the sacrifices and interceding for the people before God, but here they want nothing to do with Judas, for to help him with his sins would mean to acknowledge their own. This is another sign that the temple system, which Jesus has declared ripe for judgment, is corrupt.

Judas' first attempt at freeing himself of guilt is unsuccessful. Next he throws the coins into the temple sanctuary in a dual effort to offload his guilt and implicate the chief priests and elders in the deliverance of Jesus by forcing them to pick up the money. Ridding himself of the money, however, doesn't rid Judas of his guilt. He leaves the temple, the place where sins were supposed to be dealt with, but he carries his guilt with him. The Jewish law, which called for the regular sacrifice of animals, has illustrated for him in rather graphic nature that the penalty for sin is death. This he knows in his bones. His sin, the betrayal of an intimate friend, was particularly abhorrent to the Jewish mindset. So Judas carries out the sentence himself. He hangs himself.¹⁴

Matthew juxtaposes Judas' betrayal with Peter's denial in the previous passage. Peter wept bitterly, but Judas doesn't shed a tear. Matthew sees something in Peter's response to the cock's crow that he doesn't see in Judas' response to his conscience. Peter's tears water the seeds of repentance, but Judas experiences remorse without turning to God.

Paul's words to the Corinthians may help explain the difference between Peter and Judas: "I now rejoice, not that you were made sorrowful, but that you were made sorrowful to the point of repentance; for you were made sorrowful according to the will of God, in order that you might not suffer loss in anything through us. For the sorrow that is according to the will of God produces a repentance without regret, leading to salvation; but the sorrow of the world produces death" (2 Corinthians 7:9-10). Judas' sorrow didn't turn him to God. It led not to repentance without regret but to death.

The Field of Blood

The story in verse 6 for the moment leaves behind the elders and focuses on the chief priests. The priests were in the business of dealing with sin, but they did nothing for Judas, and now they are forced to pick up the coins from the temple sanctuary, where only they could go. As they pick up the coins, Matthew shows us that they, too, have blood on their hands.

The priests, with no concern for laws against condemning an innocent man, nonetheless endeavor to keep a far less significant law so that the temple won't become contaminated by this blood money (Deuteronomy 23:18). At first, the priests conferred together about how to get rid of Jesus. Now they confer together to figure out how to get rid of the money they paid for the betrayal of Jesus, which, to their chagrin, is in their possession again. Just like Judas, they're having trouble getting rid of their guilt.

Nothing is known today of the Potter's Field, but it must have been a widely known place. The priests purchase the field as a burial ground for strangers, determining that benevolence was the best way to use the money and, perhaps, satisfy their consciences. Strangers, or aliens, thereby benefit from the death of Jesus. Jesus said welcoming strangers is one of the hallmarks of his disciples (Matthew 25:35).

The Potter's Field even becomes contaminated, though the coins never touched it, for its name was changed to the Field of Blood. In this story, the voice of Jesus' blood cries out even from the ground, just as the voice of the blood of the first victim, Abel, cried out (Genesis 4:10).

Matthew sees the fulfillment of scripture in the price of betrayal and the purchase of the Potter's Field. He attributes the scripture he invokes to Jeremiah, although most of it comes from Zechariah 11:13.¹⁵ In Zechariah 11, the nation rejected the prophet as a leader and paid him only 30 pieces of silver, the price of a slave (Exodus 21:32). Similarly, Israel rejected Jesus and the price of his betrayal is the same insulting sum. In Jeremiah 19, the Lord said that the nation's rejection of him in favor of other gods would lead to judgment, which was fulfilled when Babylon sacked Jerusalem in 586 B.C. Similarly, the nation's rejection of the Lord in the person of Jesus will lead to judgment, which will be fulfilled when Rome sacks Jerusalem in 70 A.D.

Jesus and Pilate

[11] Now Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor questioned Him, saying, "Are You the King of the Jews?" And Jesus said to him, "It is as you say." [12] And while He was being accused by the chief priests and elders, He did not answer. [13] Then Pilate said to Him, "Do You not hear how many things they testify against You?" [14] And He did not answer him with regard to even a single charge, so the governor was quite amazed. [15] Now at the feast the governor was accustomed to release for the people any one prisoner whom they wanted. [16] At that time they were holding a notorious prisoner, called Barabbas. [17] So when the people gathered together, Pilate said to them, "Whom do you want me to release for you? Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?" [18] For he knew that because of envy they had handed Him over. [19] While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent him a message, saying, "Have nothing to do with that righteous Man; for last night I suffered greatly in a dream because of Him." [20] But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to put Jesus to death. [21] But the governor said to them, "Which of the two do you want me to release for you?" And they said, "Barabbas." [22] Pilate said to them, "Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" They all said, "Crucify Him!" [23] And he said, "Why, what evil has He done?" But they kept shouting all the more, saying, "Crucify Him!" [24] When Pilate saw that he was accomplishing nothing, but rather that a riot was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this Man's blood; see to that yourselves." [25] And all the people said, "His blood shall be on us and on our children!" [26] Then he released Barabbas for them; but after having Jesus scourged, he handed Him over to be crucified.

Matthew doesn't report the Jewish leaders' presentation of Jesus to the Roman governor but leaves the impression that they depicted him as a would-be Jewish king who would challenge the power of Rome. To Pilate, the suggestion that any Jewish king could be anything more than a minor irritant was out of the question. Jesus, having been beaten up by the Sanhedrin, looked nothing like a king. To Pilate the suggestion that this prisoner standing before him posed any sort of threat to his authority, let alone Caesar's, must seem laughable. Pilate asks Jesus, "Are you the king of the Jews?" The words could also be translated, "You are the king of the Jews?!"

Jesus answers, literally, “You say.” The answer, as in Matthew 26:25, 64, is a qualified affirmative, implying that the answer to the question is within the question itself. By answering this way, Jesus puts the ball back in Pilate’s court and says, essentially, “You answered your own question, but you have no idea what the answer means.”

Jesus, just as in his trial before the Jewish leaders, refuses to defend himself against the accusations. In both cases he only speaks in addressing a question concerning his identity. He will go to his death as the Christ. His silence is that of a confident king – *the King* – who does not need to plead for people to believe him. In suffering silently, he suffers willingly, in obedience to the Father. He once again fulfills Isaiah 53:7:

*He was oppressed and he was afflicted,
Yet he did not open his mouth;
Like a lamb that is led to slaughter,
And like a sheep that is silent before its shearers,
So he did not open his mouth.*

Roman justice was rough, but its leaders at least gave subjects an opportunity to defend themselves (Acts 25:16). A Jewish prophet, much less one with supposedly violent messianic pretensions, would be expected to have plenty to say to a Roman governor. Amazed by Jesus’ silence, Pilate has no category for such a “messiah.” Pilate knows that the man standing before him is not the sort of troublemaker who would lead a military uprising. He had seen plenty of those types, and Jesus was not one of them.

Pilate seeks to release Jesus not in the interest of justice but in the interest of snubbing the Jewish leaders, as he was wont to do. He invokes a Passover custom by which the Roman governor released for his Jewish subjects a prisoner of their choice. In this way, Pilate hopes to appear magnanimous.

Barabbas enters the story

Matthew sets the stage for Pilate’s offer by providing background information concerning “a notorious prisoner called Barabbas.” Matthew is content to call him notorious, or, more likely, “widely known,” but Mark and Luke identify him as an insurrectionist who was fomenting rebellion against Rome (Mark 15:7, Luke 23:19). He was, essentially, a terrorist.

He is “called” Barabbas, while Pilate says Jesus is “called” Christ. Barabbas, whose name means “Son of the Father,” may have been the son of a rabbi. Matthew has presented Jesus as the Son of the Father, the Son of God (Matthew 3:17, Matthew 17:5). The title “Son of God” was used of Israel, but also of the king of Israel and the Messiah (Exodus 4:22, Psalm 2:7). Some manuscripts, which probably portray Matthew’s original words, report the prisoner’s name as “Jesus Barabbas.”¹⁶ With these parallels, Matthew wants us to see a connection between Jesus and Barabbas.

We can perhaps imagine Pilate laughing under his breath as he says Jesus is “called” Christ, the Jewish king. In Pilate’s mind, this bedraggled excuse for a king would make a worthy leader for such a sorry lot. Nevertheless, he expects the crowd to choose Jesus over Barabbas, knowing that the leaders wanted to dispense with Jesus because they were envious of him. Pilate figured that the Jews would prefer their “Christ” and that he could gloat over the Jewish priests and elders again.

At this point a surprising messenger enters the story. When Pilate's wife advises the governor to "have nothing to do with" Jesus, she employs an idiom that means "have nothing to do with condemning him." She calls Jesus "that righteous man," declaring his innocence. In this story, Jesus is the only innocent man. All the others – Judas, the chief priests and elders, Pilate, Barabbas and the crowds – are all shown to be guilty in some way. Jesus is innocent, and even a pagan woman can see it, even if no one else can.

Pilate's wife was influenced by a dream in which she suffered.¹⁷ Whether God had a hand in the dream of Pilate's wife is unclear. Whether or not the dream came from God, Matthew would have us believe that Pilate, sitting on the "judgment seat," is subject to a greater judge. Pilate's wife interprets the dream to mean that the governor may bring harm upon himself if he judges wrongly. In Matthew's reportage, the testimony of women is considered trustworthy (Matthew 28:8).

The choice: Barabbas

The Jewish leaders, evidently pointing to Jesus' claim that he would be enthroned alongside God, were effective in depicting him before the crowds as guilty of blasphemy. Crowds of people followed Jesus when he entered Jerusalem, but since then he has spoken about, and acted out, God's judgment against the city, not against Rome. In the end, it wasn't too difficult to get them to choose against – and even ask for the execution of – a would-be messiah who spoke against his people and blasphemed their God.

When the crowds choose Barabbas, Pilate hopes to let Jesus off with a lesser sentence, but they insist on crucifixion. This is a striking request coming from Jews who hated their Roman oppressors, who ruled with an iron fist and wooden crosses. It means that Jesus has not only fallen from favor but that he is perceived to be a threat to the aspirations of the crowds.

Pilate, fearing the dream of his wife, resists the request of the crowds, but they become all the more insistent. The governor sees that he is accomplishing "nothing." Jesus, literally, said "nothing" in response to the charges against him, and would have accomplished exactly what the governor was accomplishing had he spoken up: nothing (Matthew 27:12, 14). Pilate's wife told him to have "nothing" to do with condemning Jesus, but he is unable to keep events from spinning out of control. What Pilate sees, even more than the futility of his efforts, is that his protests are starting a riot. If it's one thing that a Roman governor doesn't want to see, it's a riot. Caesar isn't likely to look kindly upon one of his governors who can't keep the peace. Now Jesus, or at least the uproar caused by his arrest, has become a threat to Pilate.

Washing one's hands as a symbol of innocence was common in Jewish history (Deuteronomy 21:6-7; Psalms 26:6, 73:13). It may have been a Roman custom as well. At any rate, Pilate maintains that the responsibility for Jesus' death is not his but the crowds'. He says, literally, "You will see," the same words the Jewish leaders used when Judas implicated them. In this way, Matthew is showing us that Pilate shares the guilt of the Jewish leaders.

Pilate also, like the Jewish leaders, shares the guilt of Judas. Pilate declares that he is "innocent" of the "blood" of Jesus, whereas Judas said he had betrayed "innocent blood." The innocent blood had been betrayed, or delivered, into the hands of Pilate. Then Pilate, literally, "delivered" Jesus for crucifixion. He, too, has blood on his hands, and no amount of scrubbing will remove it.

Matthew says that “all the people” answered Pilate. The word “people” is often used in the scriptures in reference to the people of God. The people of God – of all people! – take responsibility for the crucifixion of God’s Messiah. Give them credit for taking responsibility for their actions instead of denying culpability, as Pilate did. The people answer Pilate, literally, “His blood on us and our children.” There is no verb in the sentence. It would perhaps be better translated, “May his blood be on us and our children.” By itself, this statement says nothing about the future. It simply says how eager they are to see Jesus crucified. They’ll tell Pilate what he wants to hear in order to get what they want. Peter invoked a curse on himself if he was lying (Matthew 26:74). He was, in fact, lying. The scriptures give us no reason to believe that he was cursed. Even if he was at one time cursed, he was forgiven.

On the other hand, Matthew records Jesus as saying that the scribes and Pharisees would kill prophets, wise men and scribes and thus be guilty of “all the righteous blood shed on earth,” from the first to the last martyr in the Old Testament. The scribes and Pharisees had maintained, “If we had been living in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partners with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.” Jesus tells them such is not the case and tells Jerusalem that “your house is being left to you desolate,” a prophecy that was fulfilled in 70 A.D. when the Romans destroyed the temple. God’s judgment would come upon “this generation” for its rejection of Christ and his messengers (Matthew 23).

Matthew would have us believe, then, that Israel’s rejection of its Messiah would result in God’s judgment on it a few decades later. He certainly wouldn’t have us believe that all Jews for all time are cursed because some Jews at one time rejected Jesus. Matthew himself was a Jew, as were all the disciples and the first followers of Jesus.

Peter, not many days from now, will tell Jews in Jerusalem, “Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for *you and your children*, and for all who are far off, as many and the Lord our God shall call to himself” (Acts 2:38-39). Both the Jews who took responsibility for the death of Christ and their children can have their sins washed away through faith in Christ.

Matthew takes great pains to show us that everyone in this story is guilty of the blood of Jesus: Judas, the chief priests and elders, Pilate, the crowds and even the most intriguing figure in the story, who makes little more than a cameo appearance: Barabbas. Pilate orders Jesus to be flogged and crucified, but he releases Barabbas. Barabbas shares responsibility for the death of Jesus, for Jesus died in his place. Barabbas offers a counterbalance to Judas in the story. Judas could not offload his guilt and therefore hanged himself. The guilty Barabbas looks as if he’s going to die for his sins as well, but someone else dies in his place.

Jesus, the Son of the Father, is crucified so that the one named “Son of the Father” can go free. Israel is supposed to see itself in Barabbas, a rebel who has rejected any vocation that hints at being the light of the world. Jesus goes to the cross to suffer for Israel’s sins, which Jesus in his teaching made widely known, so that Israel, like Barabbas, can go free – so that Israel can fulfill its destiny as the Son of the Father. Jesus goes to the cross so that any who would believe in him can have their sins forgiven, join this Israel and become children of God (Ephesians 2:11-13, John 1:12-13).

This story shows us that we all have blood on our hands. We are all guilty of sin. Our sin sent Jesus to the cross, just as surely as Judas’ betrayal, the plans of the Jewish

leaders, the cowardice of Pilate, the cries of the crowd and the crimes of Barabbas. Mel Gibson understands this. Like an artist who paints himself into the corner of the painting, Gibson inserted himself into his film “The Passion of the Christ.” His left hand holds the first nail that is driven through the hand of Jesus.¹⁸ We’re all responsible.

None of us likes the pain of guilt or the feelings of restriction that come with it. Therefore, like the players in the story, we seek to push it away from us. The story, then, invites us to see ourselves in the drama, and to understand the specific ways in which we seek to salve our bleeding conscience.

The guilt of Judas

Like Judas, we may seek to atone for our guilt by making amends. If we have profited by some sin, we seek to return the profit. We seek to make it right. But that didn’t work for Judas, and it doesn’t work for us. It doesn’t change what we have done, and it doesn’t stop Jesus from going to the cross.

We may, like Judas, seek to share our guilt with others, to implicate them in our sin. Our sin, we think, is at least in part someone else’s fault. “If you hadn’t offered me the money, I wouldn’t have betrayed him,” we say. “If you hadn’t treated me badly, I wouldn’t have treated others badly.” Still, though we try to throw away our guilt as Judas threw away the silver coins, it stays with us.

We may, like Judas, seek to punish ourselves for our sin. We may not go the extreme of killing ourselves, but we know in our bones, just as surely as Judas knew it, that wrongdoing deserves punishment. So, fearing God’s punishment, we get in first: We carry out the sentence on ourselves. We flagellate ourselves emotionally, whipping ourselves with self-critical thoughts: “You’re worthless. You’re no good to anyone. You’ll never amount to anything.” This is nothing more than self-pity, and it has little to do with either God or repentance. We feel bad not for what we’ve done to others or to God but for how what we’ve done makes us feel.

Do we see ourselves in Judas?

The guilt of the Jewish leaders

The Jewish leaders went to elaborate lengths in order to get rid of Jesus. Some of us do the same. We do everything we can to expunge all vestiges of him from our minds, not to mention from our culture. Or, we eliminate the challenging aspects of his teaching and reduce him to a “god” we can manage. If someone were to suggest there’s something wrong with this, we would say, as the leaders said, “That’s your opinion. It’s no concern of mine. What is that to me? See to that yourself.”

If that’s our position, then we are, of course, in no position to help anyone else with his or her guilt. To do so would mean to acknowledge our own guilt, which we haven’t begun to confront. Anyone who came to us for some kind of assurance that his sins were forgiven would leave with same burden with which he came.

Oh, we abide by laws, of course, and that gives us a sense of security – a false sense, as it turns out. We pick the laws that we think are the most important, which also happen to be the ones that are easiest for us to obey, and we stick to those. If we break some law and we, say, condemn an innocent man to death, well, then that’s not a law, or we didn’t know it was a law, or it’s really not a big deal anyway.

We'll do the best we can to prop up our self-worth, which helps us not in the least with our guilt. It doesn't matter how good you feel about yourself if you think – if you know – you're guilty. Sooner or later, we may find ourselves having to pick up the coins from the temple sanctuary, so to speak. We send our guilt away from us, but it returns like 30 pieces of silver.

Like the Jewish leaders, we must come up with a plan to relieve ourselves of this burden. We commit ourselves to good works, like buying a field as a burial place for strangers. Through good works we seek to separate ourselves from our guilt. We send it away, to the field outside of town, but the voice of Jesus' blood cries out even from the ground.

Do we see ourselves in the Jewish leaders?

The guilt of Pilate

Like Pilate, we may think of ourselves as the ruler of our domain. The proposition that some prophet from 2,000 years ago has some kind of claim on our kingdom seems utterly laughable. Somehow, though, questions about Jesus keep coming back. We investigate Jesus a little further and find we have no category for him. In some way, he amazes us.

We try to let him go. Jesus, whoever he is, can go his way, and we'll go ours. If others want to believe in him, good for them. Live and let live, we say. We even think ourselves quite magnanimous for our remarkable tolerance of people of all stripes. In fact, we align ourselves against people like the intolerant Jewish leaders of Jesus' day. We're tolerant of everyone, except, of course, those who are intolerant. And if we can at the same time let Jesus go and tweak those intolerant bigots, so much the better.

Then we receive a message from a strange source – a dream, a stranger, maybe even someone who doesn't even know Jesus. As we sit on the judgment seat of our lives, we get some inkling that maybe we're subject to a greater judge, and that if we make the wrong decision about Jesus, we could bring great harm on ourselves. We feel the pressure of those around us, as Pilate felt the pressure of the crowds. As much as we'd like to think we're in control, the opinions of those around us carry great weight with us. Events spin out of control, and we can't let that happen.

Jesus has become more than an intriguing nuisance; he's become a threat to our domain. Anyone who threatens the peace will not be tolerated. (That is not to say, of course, that we're not tolerant!) Jesus must not go free. He must die. And if some claim that he's risen from the dead, they're living in a dream world. But his death, we insist, is not our responsibility. After all, what did we have to do with the death of someone 2,000 years before we were even born?

Any one of us who insists that he is the ruler of his own life has sent Jesus to the cross, just as surely as Pilate did. We share in the guilt of Judas and the Jewish leaders, just as Pilate did. We too have the blood of Jesus on our hands, and the scrubbing of denial will not remove it.

Do we see ourselves in Pilate?

The guilt of the crowds

Like the crowds, perhaps we're enthusiastic about Jesus at first. Then we find that he doesn't give us the help we're looking for. Later, he even becomes a hindrance. Finally, he threatens our aspirations. If it's one thing we can't stand, it's a tease – someone who gets our hopes up only to shoot them down. In the end, we're pushovers. Mark us down in favor of crucifixion. We'll take the blame. You can even blame our children, if you like. May his blood be on us and our children.

Do we see ourselves in Judas, in the Jewish leaders, in Pilate, in the crowds? According to the scriptures, the blood of Jesus is on us, and on our children – on all children.

Unless ...

The freedom of Barabbas

Unless we find ourselves in Barabbas.

Our sins, if they're not widely known, as Barabbas' sins were, are at least well known. God knows them well. Not one of them has escaped his notice. We are Barabbas, "Son of the Father." We humans are God's representatives on earth. That's what it means, in one sense, to be created in the image of God. But we have rejected our assignment.

Barabbas was a rebel, and so are we. We have mounted a rebellion against our Creator and his vocation for us. God is the rightful ruler of our lives, but we won't stand for it. Therefore, we "sin." With every sin, we have tried to kill God and regain control of our lives. For this God's judgment rightly falls on us. For this we deserve death. For this we deserve to be separated from God eternally. Then along comes another Son of the Father. We see the connection between him and us, just as Matthew saw the connection between him and Barabbas. Jesus, who shares our humanity, takes our place. We go free. He's scourged. We go free. He's crucified. We go free.

As we see Jesus hanging on the cross, we see a graphic picture of what human sin looks like. We see what we have done to humanity – what we have done to ourselves. This is rebellious humanity. Twisted humanity. Mangled humanity. This is not what a human is supposed to look like. We are rebels, and Jesus dies the death of a rebel in our place.

The price of our freedom is his blood. He takes our place, and we take his place. We become sons of the Father, not just in name but in actuality. All it takes is faith: Giving your life to the Jesus. "For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:26). We are free to be what God intended: His worshipers, and his representatives on earth. The blood of Jesus, which we are by all appearances guilty of, is not charged against us. In fact, his blood "cleanses us from all sin" (1 John 1:7).

A voice cries out

The writer of Hebrews says that in coming to Jesus, we have come to "the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel" (Hebrews 12:24). The voice of Jesus' blood is still crying out, though not from the Field of Blood, and not for judgment. It's crying out from a hill outside Jerusalem, and it's crying out for forgiveness. It's crying out for all of us to quit playing games with guilt. It's crying out, strong and clean, to all who would hear its voice, believe in Jesus and have their guilt washed away.

It's crying out, "Please come home. All is forgiven."

Questions

1. Have you, in any sense, felt guilty in life?
2. How have you sought to deny or minimize your guilt?
3. How have you sought to compensate or make amends for your guilt?
4. What does it mean to you that you are forgiven because Jesus takes your place on the cross?