



THE REJECTED CHALLENGE

AND OTHER ESSAYS BY JOE R. BARNETT

THE CHRISTIAN
Appeal

Preface



John Gulley

"If you really are the Son of God, come down off that cross!" taunted the rabble as they passed by. They hurled insults at Christ as he was dying for their sins—and ours. In this issue, Dr. Joe Barnett points us to the cross and the amazing truth that it was by choosing to remain in its terrible grip that our Lord opened his arms of love to save us. He rejected their challenge, carried out the Father's will, and beckons us to follow.

Christ

Chose to Stay ON THE CROSS



Jim Shelburne

Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?"

* The Lord Jesus
Matthew 26

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Jim Shelburne



the rejected CHALLENGE

TURNING HIS BRUISED and bloody face toward Jesus, he asked, “Are you doing this for me?”

“Yes. And for that soldier with the club hanging from his belt, that he’s going to use at sundown to break your legs. And for the one standing next to him, thumbing the tip of the spear

that he’s going to use to pierce my side. And for those four soldiers rolling dice in the dust for my clothes.

“And for all in the future who will accept my sacrifice . . . and for all who I wish would, but won’t.”

Cruel crowds came . . .

“Those who passed by hurled insults at [Jesus], shaking their heads and saying, ‘You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!’” (Matthew 27:39–40).

These rowdy gawkers had rushed to view the grisly execution—and picked up the abusive chant: *If you are the Son of God, prove it by coming*

down from the cross!

He could have—could have dropped from the cross, and with a point of his finger pulverized the mob. But he didn’t. With silent resistance, he

“ HE COULD HAVE—COULD HAVE DROPPED FROM THE CROSS, AND WITH A POINT OF HIS FINGER PULVERIZED THE MOB.”

rejected their challenge. For their sake—and ours—he stayed on the cross.

Religious bigwigs joined in . . .

“The chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him. ‘He saved others,’ they said, ‘but he can’t save himself! He’s the king of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him.

He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, “I am the Son of God”” (Matthew 27:41–43).

“He saved others, but he can’t save himself.” They

“THEY SAID THEY’D BELIEVE HE WAS THE SON OF GOD IF HE CAME DOWN FROM THE CROSS; WE BELIEVE BECAUSE HE DIDN’T.”

spoke the truth without realizing it—if he was to save others, he couldn’t save himself.

He put his trust in God, they hissed: *So let God rescue him if he wants to.*

God was silent.

Jesus had said that he could ask his Father, and he would dispatch more than twelve legions of angels—over 72,000—to rescue him. But Jesus

didn’t ask for the angels, and his Father didn’t send them. For their sake—and ours—Father and Son rejected rescue.

Both the jeering rabble and the religious leaders implied that weakness kept Jesus on the cross. They were wrong. It was strength that kept him there, the

strength of his love. It took more strength to stay on the cross than to come down from it.

They said they would believe he was the Son of God if he came down from the cross. We believe he is the Son of God because he didn’t come down from the cross.

The now-converted criminal said, “Jesus,

remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

“Today you will be with me in paradise,” Jesus promised.

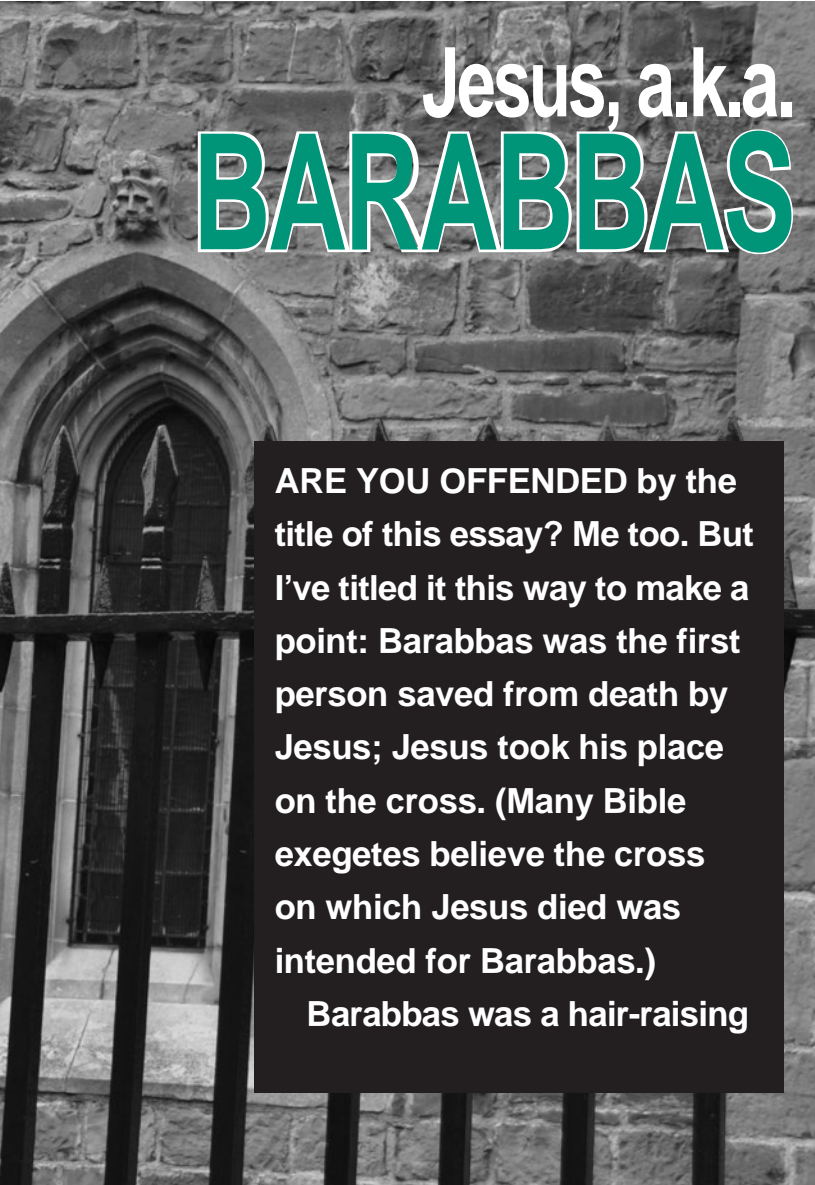
“Yes, I’m doing this for

you. And for someone I’m seeing centuries from now—I’m doing it for _____.”

The rejected challenge: “*Come down from the cross.*”



RRRRich B



Jesus, a.k.a. **BARABBAS**

ARE YOU OFFENDED by the title of this essay? Me too. But I've titled it this way to make a point: Barabbas was the first person saved from death by Jesus; Jesus took his place on the cross. (Many Bible exegetes believe the cross on which Jesus died was intended for Barabbas.)

Barabbas was a hair-raising

terrorist, a murderer. When he was cornered and arrested, the country breathed a collective sigh of relief. Finally, this notorious thug was off the streets, behind bars, destined for death. A cross with his name on it had been raised on the executioner's hill outside the city.

He would soon be taking his final walk to the death dune, never to terrify the nation again.

Early this morning, religious leaders, having conspired to do away with Jesus, had presented the Lord to Governor Pilate, demanding that he be sentenced to death.

Pilate knew that Jesus had done nothing deserving death and that it was jealous rage that had

“provoked them to bring Jesus to him” (Matthew 27:18). Savvy politician that he was, Pilate knew how to handle them.

It was Pilate's custom at the time of Passover

“IT WAS A NO-BRAINER. IT WOULD BE CURTAINS FOR BARABBAS, FREEDOM FOR JESUS. GAME OVER.”

to free one prisoner of their choosing. He would play Jesus and Barabbas against each other. It was a no-brainer. It would be curtains for Barabbas, freedom for Jesus. Game over.

“Which of the two do you want me to set free: Barabbas or Jesus?” the governor asked.

“Barabbas!” they answered.

The rattled ruler asked,
“So what should I do with
Jesus?”

“Crucify him!”

“Why? What wrong has
he done?”

Staying on message,

“BARABBAS BELONGED
ON THAT CENTER CROSS;
SO DO WE. BUT JESUS
TOOK HIS PLACE—AND
OURS.”

they shrieked, “Crucify
him!”

With a riot on his hands,
and minus moral backbone,
Pilate caved—freed
Barabbas and handed
Jesus over to be crucified.

No one was more
surprised than Barabbas.
He knew when Pilate sent
guards for him that he would
be nailed to a cross before
high noon, with two partners
in crime hanging beside him,

to his right and left.

He grimaced when Pilate
asked, “Which of the two
do you want me to set free,
Barabbas or Jesus?”

When the crowd shouted,
“Barabbas!” he couldn’t

believe his ears.

And when Pilate
told him, “You’re
free to go,” he was
dumbfounded.

There is no
record, biblical or
historical, of what

happened to Barabbas after
he was set free. Surely he
overheard conversations
about Jesus’ crucifixion,
reflected on his escape
from death—and wondered
about the one who took his
place. The innocent died;
the guilty went free. It made
no sense.

Maybe he crept out of the
shadows, latched on to a
disciple and said, “Tell me
about this Jesus.” He had

been saved from physical
death—and, because
Jesus died for sinners, it’s
not out of the question that
he became a convert and
was saved from spiritual
death as well. I hope so.

A mental scene-shift
lands you and me in the
company of Barabbas.
“There is no one righteous,
not even one . . . All of us
have sinned” (Romans
3:10, 23)—and the

sentence for sin is death
(Romans 6:23).

Barabbas belonged on
that center cross; so do we.
But Jesus took his place—
and ours. In our case, no
less than in his, the innocent
died; the guilty was set free.
The just was crucified; the
unjust was justified.

Jesus, a.k.a. [your name].

Thank you, Jesus.



John Gulley



“because you SAY SO”

JESUS SAT in Simon’s boat and preached to the beach bunch. Then he turned to Simon and said, “Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch” (Luke 5:4).

Say what?!

On the face of it, there were two things badly off base with this suggestion. One, the timing was wrong: nighttime was the

right time to fish; it was now noontime—exactly the wrong time. Two, the location was wrong: Jesus ordered Simon to go where the water was deep—exactly the wrong place.

Jesus was a carpenter. What did he know about fishing compared to Simon Peter, a professional fisherman? It

would be like me telling LeBron James how to up his game. After he stopped laughing, he might well ask . . .

“Have you ever played professional basketball?”

“No.”

“College basketball?”

“No.”

“High school?”

“No.”

Here is a carpenter telling a fisherman how

to fish: “Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch.” Simon had a boatload of reasons not to do it: exhaustion said don’t do it; experience said don’t

“ JESUS WAS A CARPENTER. WHAT DID HE KNOW ABOUT FISHING COMPARED TO PETER, A VETERAN FISHERMAN?”

do it; common sense said don’t do it.

If he did it, people were sure to question his judgment: “Is Simon losing it?”

But he’s going to do it anyway: “Master, we’ve worked hard all night and haven’t caught anything. *But because you say so, I will let down the nets*” (Luke 5:5).

Can’t you hear the

howls of his companions?

“Aw c’mon! We fished all night and didn’t net a single sardine. We’ve just washed the nets and put them away. You’re telling us to unpack them at the

“I WOULD LIKE TO LEARN HOW TO STOP BEING BOTHERED BY WHAT OTHERS ARE THINKING OF ME.”

wrong time and sink them in the wrong place. That’s nuts!”

Cramming the shoreline was a multitude of people, shaking their heads and guffawing at simple Simon. “Fool!”

Are you sensitive to what others think of you? Aren’t we all?

The image remains vivid in my mind: Princess Diana visiting a children’s

hospital, where she encountered an AIDS-afflicted child. When she made eye contact with him, he said, “Please don’t make fun of me.”

“How could I?” she said, pulling the child into a warm embrace.

Dr. Raj Raghunathan, a professor at the University of Texas, teaches a course about happiness.

At the beginning of the semester, he asks his students to tell him what they hope to get out of the class. Dr. Raghunathan says one answer—variously worded—consistently tops all others: “I would like to learn how to stop being bothered by what others are thinking of me.”

The desire to be accepted drags thousands of teens into drugs, drink, and sex—even though they know it’s wrong and don’t want to go there. Peer pressure is the primary recruitment tool for gangs.

Nor are adults immune. We crave approval and are pulled to go with the flow to gain favor and avoid censure.

The apostle Paul was going against the grain of our sensitive

psyche when he told the Corinthians, “I care very little if I am judged by you” (1 Corinthians 4:3).

Vox populi vox Dei—the voice of the people is the voice of God—is far from true.

Stand strong! Lord, sometimes I don’t understand, but I’m going to do what you tell me to—*just “because you say so.”*



John Gulley

why this WASTE?

FOLLOWING MATTHEW'S chronology, the dinner given in Jesus' honor in Bethany was the last supper before the Last Supper. There were seventeen people present: Simon the Leper, Mary, Martha, Lazarus, the twelve apostles, and Jesus.

While they were eating, Mary broke the seal of an alabaster

jar of expensive perfume and anointed Jesus.

"Why this waste?" howled Judas. Other disciples joined in: they were indignant and harshly rebuked Mary, fuming that the perfume—

worth more than a year's wages—should have been sold and the money given to the poor.

These critics had often experienced the hospitality of the Bethany home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Did they ever high-five their hosts and quip, "Why this waste?"

"Leave her alone," Jesus said. "She has done a beautiful thing to me. The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me."

Was Mary's action extravagant? Yes. Was it

wasted extravagance?

No. Mary's act of devotion honored Jesus. A "beautiful thing" done for Jesus is never wasted and never forgotten.

Judas bristled at Jesus' rebuke to "Leave her

"WAS MARY'S ACTION EXTRAVAGANT? YES. WAS IT WASTED EXTRAVAGANCE? NO. MARY HONORED JESUS."

alone!" He left the table, slithered out the door, and cut a deal to deliver Jesus to the enemy. A few hours later he would leave the Passover table, slip out the door, and make good on the traitorous transaction.

Judas had been given a privileged position. Of the thousands of residents of Judea, he was the only one chosen to be an apostle; all the other apostles

were from Galilee. He had been a close companion of Jesus for three years, had seen the miracles and heard the parables. He was one of the few commissioned by Jesus to heal the sick,

“YOU CAN USE YOUR LIFE WISELY OR WASTE IT. . . . GOD’S GRACE TO MARY WAS NOT WASTED; GOD’S GRACE TO JUDAS WAS.”

raise the dead, and drive out demons. And he held the trusted post of treasurer for the apostolic group.

He squandered all of that. The question he asked about Mary’s deed is the question that should be asked of his: “Why this waste?” His wasn’t the waste of a pint of perfume, but the waste of a position of influence and trust. It wasn’t the waste of things, but the waste of

life. Jesus called him “son of perdition” (John 17:12), which Dr. Warren Wiersbe translates “son of waste.”

The actions of Mary and Judas both had far-reaching (think eternal) consequences.

Mary’s act of love filled the house and the world with a fragrance that will last forever. Judas’ act of betrayal left a stench that will

also last forever.

Of Mary’s deed of love, Jesus said, “Wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.” Of Judas’ deed of betrayal, Jesus said, “It would be better for him if he had not been born”—the eternal epitaph etched over the gate of his final purchase, the “Field of Blood.”

Mary’s devotion inspires us to live up to our best. Judas’s disloyalty warns us of the tragedy of living down to our worst. We have choices. And choices have consequences.

Life is a gift. It isn’t purchased. It isn’t earned. It isn’t deserved. It is given. And each life is custom-made. There are no mass-produced, assembly-line, off-the-shelf, one-size-fits-all lives. Your life is unique, one-of-a-kind, the only you in history. It’s your life. You can spend it however you choose—you can use it wisely or waste it.

The apostle Paul wrote: “God’s grace has made me what I am, and his grace to me was not wasted” (1 Corinthians 15:10).

God’s grace to Mary was not wasted; God’s grace to Judas was.

By the grace of God, you are what you are. “We beg you who have received God’s grace not to let it be wasted” (2 Corinthians 6:1).

Pray that examination of who you are, what you have, and what you do will never kindle the question, “Why this waste?”



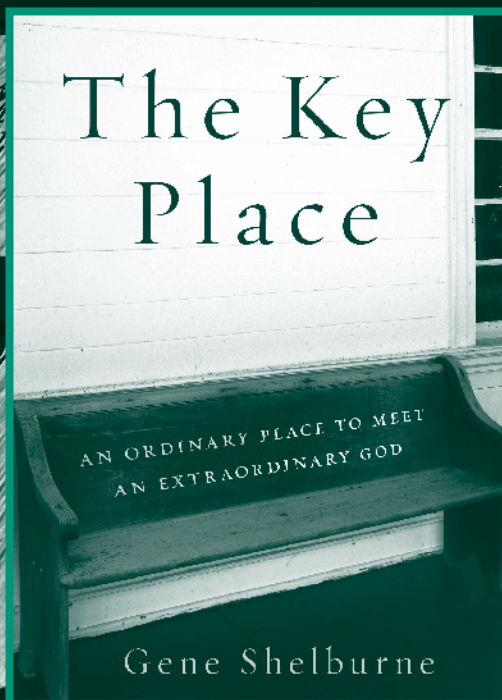
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