



I
WAS
CALLED
BARABBAS

A NOVEL

M.D.
HOUSE

I WAS CALLED BARABBAS



I Was Called Barabbas
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book has taken a long time to write and a lot of work to get right. I have a busy full-time day job, plus a family, plus church and civic responsibilities. The story of Barabbas came to me in small bursts over several years—usually as single scenes that I wanted to explore in my mind and write down. After completing a few of these, I started putting them together, and the project became interesting.

The first draft of the “completed” story had some powerful pieces, but overall it wasn’t very good. The second draft had major additions and revisions, but it, too, was lacking cohesion and overarching focus. The third draft felt like it was getting close, and so I set a timeline for publishing and laid out the remaining steps.

One of those steps was to get a cover designed. I used a website called reedsy.com for the first time, where one can outline a project and request bids from various vetted publishing industry professionals.

Lance Buckley was the design professional I chose, and I gave him a fairly complex set of instructions for what I envisioned (probably too complex). Not having worked with him previously, and not being super-excited with a previous experience using a different designer I had found elsewhere, I wondered what I would end up getting.

Lance blew me away with his design. We only ended up making one minor change to it. It was awesome and inspiring and as near to perfect as I could have hoped. He had taken my ideas, simplified and focused them, and let his artistry do the rest. Thank you, Lance!

I also knew I needed to have some professional editing done, and again I turned to reedsy.

Robin Patchen was the editor I selected, and she warned me that she was a “heavy” editor. I suppose some people don’t like that, but I wanted the best professional help I could get.

As with Lance, I probably gave Robin a bit more than she had bargained for. She was diligent and conscientious, though (and patient!), and the copy I received back from her was exactly what I needed. To wit:

There were tendencies in style that I needed to change, and I could see how the changes made the story read better.

There were some complex scenes that I needed help with. She helped me and taught me—and I could tell that sometimes it had been a slog for her.

There were thematic elements that either didn’t fit or were distracting, so I was able to alter or remove them.

There were a few gaps in storyline and purpose that she pointed out, which I was able to address, including some refocusing on the primary theme of the book, which is personal progress and redemption.

A thousand thanks, Robin.

My nephew Haden was also willing to step into the fray. He is a smart, thoughtful young man (young compared to me, that is), and he offered some interesting ideas that led to a couple of key additions to the final copy. Thank you, Haden.

My brother Brent and sister Michelle both read the first draft, courageously, and both offered key suggestions. As an example, it was Brent's idea to take the scene now found in the Prologue and bring it to the front, as it is a more powerful way to introduce the story.

A good friend, Russ Dart, also read the first draft, and his unbridled enthusiasm for the project was contagious and motivating. He took copious notes and then sat down with me to go through various ideas on how to move Barabbas forward. That was very useful and much appreciated.

My wife and our grown children have provided encouragement in various ways over the years, and my wife agreed with the monetary investment it would take to make the final push. It is for them, primarily, that I wanted to make this book the best it could be.

I hope you enjoy reading this as much as I enjoyed writing it. More importantly, I hope you find it helpful. This book was never meant to be just entertainment—a mere distraction from the daily grind that life can sometimes be. It is meant to be educational, inspiring, and empowering.

May you find it so. A sequel is already underway.

M.D. House
Aurora, IL, USA
September 2019

PROLOGUE

*Which none of the princes of this world knew: for had they known it,
they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.*

1 Corinthians 2:8, KJV

My given name was Jesus. I never liked that name, even as a boy. It didn't fit me somehow, and my later infamous connection to the son of Joseph the Carpenter made it unbearable. So, I chose another name. Not that it mattered, because after that fateful, momentous Day, everyone began to call me Barabbas—Son of Abbas in the Aramaic—some in scorn, some with indifference, and a few with feigned pity. Not in a thousand fevered dreams could I have predicted my life's eventual path, and it will be left to future generations—and to God—to judge me for who I truly am. I know I have been too hard on myself at times, and too lenient at other times, never fully understanding the great gifts of God to His children. But I leave here my story, unafraid to tell the bad with the good. Some say that my story is inspiring, but I hesitate to hope that it may be of great use, nor do I presume that it will be. What I write is true, however, and I believe that truth should be preserved as untainted as possible. Thus I write, thus have I lived, and thus am I judged.

Because my most vivid memories are of *that* Day, it seems fitting that I should tell that part of my story first. Relating it makes me feel differently than it used to, though it is hard to describe how. I still feel some of the confused and chaotic shame it heralded, but mostly I feel reverence and awe. I did not fit in that scene, much less did I comprehend it, and yet I had a hand in making it real.

Endless was the name of each new day in the prison after those agonizing first few weeks of torture and terror. But one particular day more justly earned the name. I was restless and didn't sleep well during the night. There seemed to be some kind of commotion among a few of the other prisoners, but I was used to ignoring that sort of thing. Gossip wasn't that interesting, and it certainly wasn't useful. My fate was sealed. In a few days I would die. I dreaded it, but at the same time I welcomed it. People died all the time. Why not me, and why not then? I certainly deserved it. If there really was a god or gods in the heavens, maybe it was time for me to ask them a few questions face to face. Assuming any would see me.

I came fully awake at the break of dawn. I lay in the dirty straw on the cold, stone floor, and the first thing that struck me was how quiet it was. A perfect stillness had seemingly enveloped the entire world, with my breathing the only sound. It was a disturbing thought. When my breathing stopped for good, the silence of that place would be complete.

I tried to go back to sleep, but my body refused, even though I felt exhausted. The pains from torture were always difficult to ignore, and achieving even a fitful sleep once in a day was hard enough. Then there was the guilt, as consistent as the dawn at each day's awakening. I had given up almost

everything I knew about my brothers in the rebellion, desperate to stop the pain, my courage having fled under the expert ministrations of the final interrogator, an old former centurion with more scars on his face than I had on my back. More than once I had wondered if he knew torture so well because he had experienced it himself.

Perhaps hope had finally deserted me completely. Strangely, I didn't panic at that thought, as I might have expected. Hope was just...gone. Perhaps that had been inevitable all along. I had thought for a while after being arrested that there might be some way out of the prison, that my friends would be able to miraculously rescue me or secure my release, but hours turned into days, which bled into weeks, and I was broken.

Thinking about my brethren in the cause *did* invite panic. What would happen to them? How many others had already been caught? Were some of them in the same prison with me? There was no way to know. Oh, how I wished, in the midst of my dread, that there was something I could do, anything to help them. But there I was: trapped, weak, exhausted, and useless.

A loud rap of wood on wood at my door was immediately followed by a gruff, commanding voice. "Barabbas, on your feet, scum. We're taking a walk!"

I wasn't sure I recognized the voice, but between the Roman guards and the Sanhedrin officers, there were dozens who had taken pleasure in tormenting the 'pitiful Barabbas, impotent rebel.' I felt a brief pang of fright, then weary resignation. I couldn't even work up much anger anymore. Yes, they had broken me, and I didn't care.

With painful difficulty I slowly rose to my feet from the dirty floor, not even flinching when the door swung open. A gleaming Roman centurion loomed proudly in the doorway, gripping a tall

spear he must have appropriated from the spearless legionnaire standing a pace behind him. I had never seen this centurion before, but I had seen plenty of vine rods like the one he held in his other hand, and I wore the bruises to prove it. His *lorica hamata* chain mail glistened like a cluster of stars. It was the finest armor I had ever seen. Across his torso marched a double-handful of *torques* and *phalerae*, marking him a highly-decorated veteran who probably had at least three names. His imperial Gallic helmet was liberally embossed with gold and crested with brilliant white horsehair, and the greaves covering his shins glistened like a calm sea at midday. He wore no cape, which seemed a little odd given the rest of his magnificence, but many centurions chose not to wear capes, at least some of the time. The thin, straight scar under his left eye was another bold battle decoration, and I felt the urge to salute the man, even though he was the enemy...and my assigned executioner, whose face and manner I won't ever be able to forget.

He must have noticed the stupid, starry admiration in my eyes, because he gave a slight smirk. That produced a wave of shame inside me, and I quickly looked to the floor, noticing as I did the rich new leather of his sandals. My eyes flicked to the side and behind him at another pair of sandals of even richer leather, obviously new, peeking from below the intricately-brocaded hem of a fine white linen robe. I dared not look up so see who belonged to the robe, but it had to be one of the leaders of the Sanhedrin. Why a member of the ruling council in Jerusalem was standing with a decorated centurion at my cell I had no idea, but they were both my enemies. A spark of anger ignited in my belly, but I doused it quickly. I had no way—or will—to fight.

“Well, you're...less than I was led to believe,” said the centurion sardonically.

My cheeks burned in shame. I closed my eyes, then forced them open again, still aimed toward the floor. I didn't reply, of course. I didn't feel like getting beaten again.

"He is more than he seems," said the Sanhedrin official. His voice was high, reedy, and so full of self-importance I wondered if he had been born wearing those costly sandals.

"Humph." The centurion's voice dripped with scorn, betraying his disbelief that I was anything more than gutter trash. "Bring him," he barked at the legionnaire. He turned and started walking, and with alacrity the soldier stepped into my room, grabbed me firmly by the elbow, and dragged me along with him. The Sanhedrin official followed, the whisk-whisk of his stately steps in stark contrast to my uneven stumbling shuffle along the dim subterranean hallway. The smell was awful, as usual, but neither the centurion nor the Sanhedrin commented on it as everyone else from the outside did. They kept quiet, and so did I. My doom was upon me.

I heard the sound of a great and restless crowd as we emerged from the highest basement level onto the first floor, but given the thick walls it was muted to a low buzzing. We turned down an interior colonnade, then up a narrow set of stairs to the second floor, where we continued toward the slowly growing sound. It sounded like an execution crowd, where anxiety rode the edge of bloodlust. I had witnessed such a thing before, and I had felt it myself, to my disgrace. I swallowed hard, my heart nearly freezing upon realizing it was nearing its last beat.

Why should I be afraid, though? Why should I panic? I had known it was coming. I should be rejoicing that my torment was finally going to be over. I would at last pass from that prison to the

prison on the other side. It couldn't be any worse, could it? At least I wouldn't be hungry, and I wouldn't hurt so much. Maybe I would finally get some decent sleep...if sleep was even necessary after death.

Suddenly I dreaded the thought that I might never be able to sleep again. It was a horrifying image.

I stumbled, earning a rough knee to the back of my left thigh to keep me focused on marching to my execution. The painful distraction helped, and when the dread returned, it wasn't as sharp. I was numbing to my fate.

I must have closed my eyes and drifted, because I was surprised when a gust of cool wind hit me and caused me to stumble again. I realized I was outside, shuffling along a raised wooden platform. Loud, disjointed chants rose from a teeming mass of people gathered in the large outer courtyard of Herod's fortress. I stopped and blinked, turning my head to determine where exactly I was, which earned me a slug in the back and a muttered Roman curse. I staggered forward again, following the gleaming centurion and his Sanhedrin accomplice. I gazed upward, noting the overcast gloom, the clouds streaked in odd colors and shapes. Despite the invigorating freshness of the air, the sights made me dizzy, so I looked back down. The wind was strong, punctuated occasionally by gusts that caused even the centurion to alter his footfalls to maintain his balance. He finally stopped and turned toward the crowd, scowling as his eyes settled upon them briefly. He glanced at the sky, his dark mien deepening, and then he looked at me.

"Step forward, traitor," he commanded.

I wasn't entirely sure which way was forward, but the legionnaire at my back let me know clearly. I was shoved toward the

edge of the platform, stopping inches before I fell headlong off it. The people, their heads just an arm's length below the level of the platform, seemed to grow more frenzied, and I could see the spittle flying from some of their mouths as they shouted incoherently, some jumping up and down and raising their fists. There were no commoners among them that I could see, and it startled me that I had never seen the genteel class behave this way, at least not en masse. I wondered if hands would suddenly reach up to grab me and pull me into the crowd, where I would be torn apart like a lamb caught by a pack of wolves. Distressing as that thought was, I dared not step back because of the soldier behind me.

The surging shouts continued a few moments longer, and then the centurion blew a small horn and shouted for silence. The crowd quieted, and then in almost perfect unison snapped their heads toward the other side of the platform. My eyes and head followed. I saw a man being led by a rope around his neck—and not gently. His simple gray robes looked dusty and slept-in, though mine were worse. His gaze paused briefly on me as he calmly took stock of the situation, and in that instant I felt a shiver—not of fear, but of a strange, far-distant awe that I couldn't define. I bore him some resemblance physically, but that was the extent of our similarity.

He was led to a similar position near the crowd, about eight paces to my left, and then he straightened to his full height, fixing his eyes on a spot above the human maelstrom, seeming to see beyond the thick walls of Herod's fortress. The assembled scribes, elders, and nobles rustled and murmured anew, just as the wind gusted hard again, causing everyone to pause and look up at the sky momentarily. The other prisoner did not move. In fact, even his long, bedraggled hair was still. His face was the personification

of both intense focus and tranquility, though I will never be able to adequately describe it. After a few more buffeting gusts that refused to touch him, the eyes of the fidgety crowd turned again, this time toward the large archway at the back of the platform. I dared not turn in that direction, so I gazed at my feet, noting with detached curiosity that they were cleaner than I remembered, and they didn't seem to hurt at the moment.

The centurion's voice rose again, this time to announce the Roman prefect, Pontius Pilate. In the eerie silence that followed I heard the soft, slippered footfalls of the august representative of Rome as he walked forward until he was between me and the serene prisoner. I wondered only briefly at why the proud but superstitious ruler had come there rather than having everyone go to him. Not that it mattered at that point. It appeared that the Romans were preparing for two executions.

The crowd remained hushed, as did the fickle winds.

"I have received the request made by your elders," Pilate began in a stentorian voice, addressing the crowd as he pointed toward the other prisoner, "and I have examined this man called Jesus of Nazareth to satisfy myself that your demands are just under Roman law." He paused as if looking for some reaction, but there was none. If anything, the crowd grew quieter, achieving a heightened sense of expectancy. He dropped his hand and turned his head to look directly at the smoky-haired member of the Sanhedrin standing with him on the platform. His voice lowered, though it could still be heard clearly. "I find that they are not, Master Amalek." Many in the crowd muttered angrily at that, and he turned again toward them and boomed, "He has broken no Roman laws and is worthy of no Roman punishment!"

The protests grew louder and angrier. Amalek seemed to gather their energy as he stepped up to Jesus of Nazareth and

backhanded him viciously across the face in an insult to his manhood. Then Amalek raised his arms as if he were Moses with the tablets of God and declared, “He has blasphemed against the loyal Jewish subjects of Rome and caused sedition among us! He has energized mobs. He claims to be a king with no master but himself!” He gestured toward Pilate, both hands open and head slightly bowed, though his face was stern. “Esteemed governor, you have trusted us to help you maintain peace and prosperity in this region, and so have we done, rooting out the traitors and the spies among us. Trust us now that this man, this imposter who has even claimed to be a god, must be executed for his dangerous crimes against your loyal Jewish subjects, that peace may continue to progress and your tenure may be blessed and prosperous.”

I was still processing how this could be *the* Jesus of Nazareth, the man whose growing legend of invincibility was oft whispered among the other prisoners. I had only seen him once, briefly, as he was teaching in what seemed a faraway place a very long time before, and he had seemed uncommonly powerful.

Pilate frowned. “He has committed no crime worthy of death.”

Amalek seemed taken aback by the response, almost as if a script had been agreed upon and the prefect had departed from it. “We have judged him worthy of death, and in the past you have honored our judgments and traditions in your wisdom as prefect.”

“I have indeed honored *sound* judgment and *worthy* tradition,” responded Pilate coolly, “and I will continue to do so.” He shifted his attention again to the crowd, his voice rising. “You ask for a noteworthy prisoner to be released at the celebration of your Passover feast, and I give you Jesus of Nazareth that you may show your great mercy and forbearance in sparing his life while

you denounce his claims. This will raise your esteem among your people, and lessen his. Is that not fair? Is that not wise? At the same time, I heed the words of your High Priest, Caiaphas, that the blood of a man is required as a sacrifice for your people at this time, and since you cannot shed this blood, I do it for you. I shall execute the murderer Barabbas, also called Jesus, as an example to all those who fight against Rome, betray your people, and sin against your god. *This is the true path forward.*"

The crowd appeared stunned, flummoxed like a goat hit between the eyes with a stone. Some appeared to be considering Pilate's words as they conversed in sharp whispers, while others began shaking their heads and stamping their feet like jilted toddlers, their faces going red. I looked to see Amalek's reaction. His brow was furrowed in frantic thought and apparent anger, which he attempted to keep in check in the presence of the Romans.

Pilate lifted his chin slightly and smiled at Amalek. Beyond them, I noted that Jesus remained as composed as before, his eyes tinged with sadness instead of fear.

Finally, Amalek spoke, again paying obeisance to Pilate. "Your proposal has merit, wise prefect, but our scribes and elders have been out among the people, finding out their minds, weighing their reactions to what we might do today. Many of those scribes and elders are here, and their counsel is much greater than mine, so we should ask them which choice is best...by your leave, of course." He said the last with a deep but brief bow, and Pilate stared at him a moment before giving a curt nod.

Amalek turned to address the crowd. "You have heard our wise governor's reasoning, and I ask you now to weigh it against the present mind and mood of the people that many of you have been diligently and privily finding out. Which prisoner should

be executed, that goodwill may be maximized across the entire province, this peaceful land of the children of Abraham?”

In ragged but energetic unison the gathered elites yelled, “Jesus of Nazareth!”

“Are you sure?” asked Amalek theatrically.

“Crucify him!” they shouted again, even louder. “Crucify him!” They continued to chant that boisterously for nearly a full minute, until Amalek raised his hands again, quieting them. He turned to Pilate, gesturing at the crowd.

“We believe in the *Pax Romana*, most honored prefect. And the voice of the people believes that the blood of the false king Jesus of Nazareth is required for that peace to be maintained.” I detected a threat in his tone, which was daring.

I had nearly turned my entire body toward the scene playing out between Pilate and Amalek, and the centurion was so focused on them as well that he either didn’t notice or didn’t care. Pilate stared at Amalek for several long moments, then at the crowd, full of men and women of great influence and wealth in what had always been a restless province. Finally, he turned and gestured to someone behind him. A young boy hurried forward carrying a small basin of water which he held in front of Pilate. The prefect thrust in his hands, then removed them and rubbed them together vigorously as if washing them. Then he raised them, palms outward as he faced the crowd.

“Rome will execute your chosen prisoner,” he intoned solemnly, “but his blood is not on Rome, and it is not on me. His blood is your responsibility alone.”

Amalek nodded gravely, though I could tell he was trying not to gloat in front of his audience. “We accept this responsibility, prefect. God requires his blood, so let it be upon us as a gift for our obedience.”

A loud shout of victory arose from the throng amid jumping, waving of fists, and gleefully vicious smiles peppered with laughter. “Let it be upon us! Let it be upon us!” they chanted.

I shivered suddenly, and then it struck me like a bolt of lightning out of a clear sky. Jesus of Nazareth was to be executed in my place. *My* place. I was a murderer and a thief. I had abandoned my family. Jesus was a teacher, and, if the rumors were true, a healer. He had never harmed anyone. He had never shed blood. And yet his would be spilled while mine would be spared. To what purpose? Why would God countenance such a thing? And why would my people demand it? My weary mind could find no answers, and while I should have felt peace, I was deeply unsettled.

Pilate barely spared me a glance as he turned and left, a disdainful, disgusted look on his face that I doubt was meant for me. As he passed the centurion, he gestured toward Jesus and said, “Take him to the Praetorium and prepare him.”

The centurion saluted, then barked out orders to soldiers who jumped to comply. Then he turned toward me, the repulsed look on *his* face causing me to instinctively cower.

“You are free, scum...for now. But I will be watching, and I’m sure we will meet again.”

I’ve always had a hard time telling that part of my story. That day was at once starkly unforgettable and an indiscernible blur. When I think about how I found myself outside the walls of my prison, a free man once again, I shudder at how little I knew—at how little I *still* know—about the redemption I have so earnestly and yet often unknowingly craved.

The Roman guards tossed me onto the dusty street outside the prison like a cartload of refuse. At first I wandered aimlessly,

probably in circles. Part of me wanted to flee the city, escape into the hills, hide in a cave, and get that long sleep I so desperately craved. But another part of me felt...something bigger, something momentous and powerful, something dreadful and inevitable and...hopeful? I had realized I was becoming delusional, perhaps mad, before the first massive peal of thunder nearly knocked me to the ground. When the rain started falling in sheets and the earth rumbled beneath my feet, I thought maybe I actually *had* died, that maybe my mind was just blocking the memory of my execution.

How I found myself at that cursed place I do not know. It was very dark, and the tempest had recently calmed. All was quiet except for the sounds of soft weeping from the women who remained. They shouldn't have been there. It was long past time for them to be safely home, though two men stood silently to the side, heads bowed, shoulders slumped, seemingly oblivious to the fact that they were drenched and it was unusually cold. The Roman soldiers had withdrawn, but a few might still have been watching from a shelter nearby.

It was hard to make myself look upon those three crosses, especially the one in the middle, but with some effort I did. There was the man who had taken my place, the famous Jesus I knew so little about. The crude sign nailed to the top of his cross mockingly proclaimed him King of the Jews in three tongues, and some had said he truly was. But he was dead. Perhaps, I thought, if he had lived and I had died, he could have rallied enough of the people against their Roman masters. Perhaps he could have been the Messiah that would lead the long-suffering Jewish people to victory over all their enemies and make them once again the most powerful and prosperous nation under heaven.

But his own had turned on him, and I suspected Roman strategems may have been involved as well, despite Pilate's seemingly odd actions. Some Romans were haughty and stupid, but most weren't. They knew the Jews didn't like them, and they were always looking to either expose rebel plots or infiltrate the resistance and turn those plots against them. I had been a victim of such an infiltration—betrayed by my brethren for Roman coin, the remembrance of which had made me seethe with anger until I in turn had betrayed others.

I stared at the lifeless body of Jesus, and soon hot tears trailed down my cheeks. The great Jesus of Nazareth was dead, the rebellion I'd fought for was rudderless and fragmented, and I was without hope and direction. I was alive, yes, but what was that worth? My parents and sisters would be waiting for me, but only out of duty. I expected no love, nor did I deserve it. With that last somber thought tumbling around in my mind, I turned my back on the grisly hill of hopeless death and made my way toward the place I used to call home.