

STUDY GUIDE

ANTHONY QUINN

BARABBAS

A DINO DE LAURENTIIS PRODUCTION



JACK PALANCE • ERNEST BORGNINE



Crew Overview

Richard Fleischer (Director)

Christopher Fry (Writer: screenplay)

Pär Lagerkvist (Writer: novel)

Cast Overview

Anthony Quinn (Barabbas)

Silvana Mangano (Rachel)

Arthur Kennedy (Pontius Pilate)

Katy Jurado (Sara)

Harry Andrews (Peter)

Valentina Cortese (Julia)

Vittorio Gassman (Sahak)

Jack Palance (Torvald)

Ernest Borgnine (Lucius)

Using This Discussion Guide

Intended for use after viewing the film, this study guide provides catalysts for biblically based discussion of various themes found in *Barabbas*. The guide features three themes from the movie and is structured in such a way that groups can choose to discuss the entire guide at once or can focus on one or two themes at a time.

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Film Overview/Note to Group

Based on Pär Lagerkvist's novel of the same name, *Barabbas* tells the poignant tale of one man's long and harrowing journey from skepticism and defiance to grace and faith. While aspects of the story are historically accurate – Christ's trial, Barabbas' release, Christians' persecution and Rome's burning – the film's central premise is fascinating speculation, exploring the burden that the character of Barabbas (played by Anthony Quinn) might have borne in being the one man so inextricably linked to Jesus Christ on that most devastating and necessary of days.

The story begins in Jerusalem, at Christ's trial, when the people choose to release Barabbas, a hardened criminal, instead of Jesus Christ. Upon Barabbas' release, he briefly glimpses the Nazarene, but the brightness of the sun prevents him from seeing the condemned man clearly. Quickly regaining his senses, Barabbas leaves the crowd behind and returns to his favorite haunt, only to find his former lover, Rachel (Silvana Mangano), transformed by her belief in Christ. When Barabbas speaks of the crucifixion, Rachel insists that Christ's death is temporary, and that his body will be resurrected in three days according to Christ's own prophecy.

On the third day, Barabbas finds the empty tomb, but his skepticism prevents him from believing. In search of answers, Barabbas visits the disciples and speaks with Peter (Harry Andrews), incredulous as to Peter's faith and testimony and frightened by an experience with Lazarus, a man who lived through the resurrection process. Barabbas soon returns to the bottle, and later witnesses Rachel's arrest and stoning. Embittered by her death, Barabbas revisits his life of thievery, only to be caught and sentenced to the sulfur mines. After twenty years and several cell mates, Barabbas is shackled to Sahak (Vittorio Gassman), a fervent Christian.

Neither man can stand the other, but the two soon settle into a routine for fear of further backlash from the guards. Suddenly, the sulfur mines collapse, killing everyone except for Barabbas and Sahak, the former miraculously pulling the latter to safety. As Barabbas emerges from the darkness of the depths of the earth, his eyes can hardly adjust to the light that patiently awaits him. Upon recovery, the men continue their sentences in the fields, where Sahak frequently expresses his faith. Barabbas, using Sahak's silence as the bargaining chip, agrees to let his friend carve the image of the cross on his labor pendant. Soon after, the two men are called to Rome, and their paths lead to the dangerous and deadly world of gladiatorial combat.

(Warning – spoilers mentioned below.)

During an early gladiatorial exhibition, Sahak spares his adversary, resulting in a debate about the value of human life. When the Roman guards hear Sahak and Barabbas speaking of Jesus the Nazarene, they take them in for questioning. Sahak refuses to deny his faith and is sentenced to death, but Barabbas contends he has no faith and his life is spared. Soon after, Barabbas wins a match, earns his freedom and, upon his release, takes Sahak's body to the Christians in the catacombs. There, Lucius (Ernest Borgnine) questions Barabbas' true belief, leaving the confused man physically and spiritually lost. When Barabbas finally emerges, he sees that Rome is burning and believes the new world has come. He's thrown into prison and sees Peter, who speaks of God's love and the small suffering that they must face. Later, as Barabbas hangs on the cross, he finally comes to a place of faith and leaves his soul in God's hands.

THE RESPONSE TO GRACE

GUIDING SCRIPTURE: Matthew 16:25 (NIV):

“For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.”



SCRIPTURES REFERENCED:

- Matthew 16:25 (NIV): “For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.”
- John 1:14 (NIV): “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”
- Romans 3:23–24 (NLT): “For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God’s glorious standard. Yet God, with undeserved kindness, declares that we are righteous. He did this through Christ Jesus when he freed us from the penalty for our sins.”
- Romans 5:2 (NLT): “Because of our faith, Christ has brought us into this place of undeserved privilege where we now stand, and we confidently and joyfully look forward to sharing God’s glory.”
- 2 Corinthians 12:9 (NLT): “Each time he said, ‘My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness.’ So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me.”
- Ephesians 2:4–5 (NIV): “But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved.”
- Ephesians 2:7 (NIV): “...in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.”
- Titus 2:11 (NIV): “For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men.”
- Hebrews 4:16 (NIV): “Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”
- 1 John 5:11–12 (NLT): “And this is what God has testified: He has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have God’s Son does not have life.”

Scenes to Review

- One Man Set Free (00:04:55–00:11:11, Chapter 3)
- The Sulfur Mines (01:07:43–01:14:47, Chapter 16)
- Barabbas’ Crucifixion (02:15:27–02:17:00, Chapter 28)

Discussion Questions

The most precious gift that God ever gave was that of Jesus Christ, who was and is the manifestation of love and forgiveness to a sinful and fallen world. Christ, who fully embodies grace, desires that each person might come to know him as friend and savior. But, God’s *modus operandi* isn’t to bully people into accepting this precious offer; instead, he steadfastly presents the gift and patiently and faithfully awaits each individual’s response.

For Barabbas, Christ becomes the most literal form of grace – sacrificing his life so that Barabbas’ punishment is paid in full. While it’s evident that the turn of events impacts Barabbas to some degree, his overwhelming response to God’s grace is that of skepticism and uncertainty. Instead of embracing Christ’s gift, Barabbas chooses to return to his former lifestyle.



Scene to Review: One Man Set Free (00:04:55–00:11:11, Chapter 3)

- When Barabbas first sees Christ, he is nearly blinded by the sun. What does the light symbolism mean in regard to Barabbas and his relationship with Christ?
- Throughout this scene (and the rest of the opening sequence), the viewers – much like Barabbas – never see Christ clearly. What is the significance of this filmmaking choice?
- At one point, Barabbas washes his hands – hands that are covered in Christ's blood. How does this action reflect the way that Barabbas has chosen to respond to grace?
- As Barabbas' friends crown him king, he sees Christ carrying the cross and immediately becomes enraged. How does the power of grace impact Barabbas in that moment?
- Can you relate to Barabbas' initial response to grace? Has there been a time in your life when grace seemed overwhelming or undeserved? If so, what happened?





Read Titus 2:11 and 1 John 5:11–12 (see Scriptures Referenced).

- How do these verses relate to the character of Barabbas at the beginning of the film? What does Barabbas think of the grace of God that “has appeared to all men” (Titus)?
- The 1 John passage says, “Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have God’s Son does not have life.” How does this apply to Barabbas?

After Rachel’s stoning, Barabbas’ bitterness toward Christ’s legacy grows. Soon after, Barabbas returns to his band of thieves, quickly securing his leadership status among the men. During their first robbery, though, Barabbas is captured and sentenced to work in the sulfur mines of Sicily as property of the Emperor Tiberius. After nearly twenty years, God bestows upon Barabbas a wonderful reminder of ever-present and ever-waiting grace.

Scene to Review: The Sulfur Mines (01:07:43–01:14:47, Chapter 16)

- How does Barabbas’ decision to help Sahak, albeit reluctantly at first, demonstrate a positive change in his overall outlook and attitude?
- What are your thoughts on the light symbolism that resurfaces in this scene? What does the light represent and how does it relate to Barabbas’ emergence from the mine?
- How does Barabbas react to the light here as compared to the first scene “One Man Set Free”? What words would you use to describe the change?

Take a moment to read John 1:14 and Ephesians 2:4–5 (see Scriptures Referenced).

- In the Ephesians passage, Paul writes, “it is by grace you have been saved.” How does this phrase in its most literal meaning apply to Barabbas?
- What do these verses demonstrate about God’s grace? How do the verses encourage us to appreciate and respond to God’s precious gift of grace?

Toward the end of the film, after witnessing the death of a friend and enduring the deadly gladiatorial circuit, Barabbas comes to the end of his own life as he hangs upon a cross. In what might seem like the darkest moment in his life, Barabbas finally understands the overwhelming grace of God and entrusts himself completely to the Master’s care.



Scene to Review: Barabbas' Crucifixion (02:15:27–02:17:00, Chapter 28)

- Why is Barabbas so fixated on the darkness? What is the significance of his comments about the darkness, given his own crucifixion?
- At one point, Barabbas says, “I give myself up into your keeping.” What does this statement represent in terms of Barabbas’ response to God’s grace?
- As Barabbas nears his end, his final words are, “It is Barabbas.” Why is this last line important to the story of Barabbas’ life? What message does it convey?

Read Matthew 16:25 and Romans 3:23–24 (see Scriptures Referenced).

- How does the Matthew verse seem to perfectly express Barabbas’ life story? Even though Barabbas meets a physical death, what happens to his spiritual life?
- The Romans passage tells us that Christ “freed us from the penalty of our sins.” How is this freedom evident in Barabbas’ final decision to embrace God’s grace?
- What can we learn from these verses? How can we respond to God’s grace in such a way that we allow God to show us true freedom from sin?

As you conclude this theme discussion, think about Barabbas’ journey and God’s faithfulness along the way. Consider the different ways that God reminds Barabbas of the wonderful concept of grace, and discuss the various ways that Barabbas responds. Read Romans 5:2, 2 Corinthians 12:9 and Ephesians 2:7 (see Scriptures Referenced), and think about the beauty of Christ’s sacrifice and how we can respond to such a life-changing gift.



THE BURDEN OF GUILT

GUIDING SCRIPTURE: John 3:16–17 (NIV):

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”



SCRIPTURES REFERENCED:

- Psalm 103:12 (NLT): “He has removed our sins as far from us as the east is from the west.”
- Matthew 11:29–30 (NIV): “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”
- John 3:16–17 (NIV): “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”
- John 5:24 (NLT): “I tell you the truth, those who listen to my message and believe in God who sent me have eternal life. They will never be condemned for their sins, but they have already passed from death into life.”
- John 10:10 (NIV): “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”
- Romans 5:8 (NLT): “But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners.”
- Romans 8:39 (NLT): “No power in the sky above or in the earth below – indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.”
- Philippians 3:13–14 (NIV): “Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”
- Hebrews 8:12 (NIV): “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”
- 1 Peter 5:7 (NIV): “Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.”

Scenes to Review

- The Crucifixion (00:13:10–00:19:16, Chapter 5)
- A Defensive Response (00:34:04–00:37:09, Chapter 8)
- Mankind’s Redemption (02:11:06–02:14:59, Chapter 27)

Discussion Questions

There is nothing more beautiful and sacred than the reconciliatory work that Christ performed on the cross. And while the Bible assures us that God “did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him” (John 3:16–17, see Scriptures Referenced), there remains for some a significant guilt attached to Christ’s death.

In Barabbas’ life, Christ’s crucifixion is a constant and haunting reminder of the penalty Barabbas was supposed to pay. Even though Christ’s death isn’t meant to inspire guilt, the burden descends upon Barabbas like a fog, and his spirit is paralyzed with shame.



Scene to Review: The Crucifixion (00:13:10–00:19:16, Chapter 5)

- How does the eclipse add to the gravity of the crucifixion? What does Barabbas say about the darkness and his ability to see?
- As you think about this scene, discuss how the crucifixion and its solemnity add to Barabbas' guilt. What are some indications that Barabbas does indeed feel guilty?
- How would you describe the silent interaction between Barabbas and Christ's friends and family when Christ's body is taken down and carried to the tomb?
- Why does Barabbas feel compelled to go to the crucifixion? Why does he then linger and follow the procession toward the tomb? What prompts him to do such things?

Read Romans 5:8 and 8:39 (see Scriptures Referenced).

- What do these verses say about the depth of God's love for us? How do these passages encourage us to look toward God's love instead of toward our own shame and guilt?
- Why do some people feel guilty for the death of Christ? How can these verses begin to work toward healing some of that pain and encouraging us to embrace Christ's gift?

Barabbas' guilt quickly becomes like a second skin, seemingly protecting him from the jeers and accusations of the masses, but mostly just preventing him from being able to appreciate the message of salvation. Over a fairly brief period of time, he also allows his guilt to evolve into a defensiveness that fuels his overarching bitterness and resentment.

Scene to Review: A Defensive Response (00:34:04–00:37:09, Chapter 8)

- As Barabbas leaves the tavern, he says he's going to see what "brought back to life" means. What does this sarcastic comment suggest about his guilt?
- How is guilt at the root of Barabbas' behavior in this scene? Consider the different diversions (e.g., fighting) that Barabbas so meaninglessly pursues.
- Barabbas mutters, "It's not my fault they let him get killed. You can't hang that around my neck!" How do these comments reveal Barabbas' bitterness?
- At this point in the film, how has Barabbas' burden of guilt become an impediment? What is it preventing him from doing and experiencing? How so?



Read Matthew 11:29–30, Philippians 3:13–14 and 1 Peter 5:7 (see Scriptures Referenced).

- How are the Matthew and Peter passages encouragement to those who are heavily burdened and looking for rest? What would these verses recommend about guilt?
- In Philippians, Paul writes, “Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead.” Could this advice work to alleviate the burden of guilt? If so, how?

Perhaps one of the best antidotes for guilt in relation to Christ’s suffering is the undeniable truth that God is love. In being love, God views man vastly differently than man views himself. As Barabbas sits in a prison cell awaiting execution with the rest of the Roman Christians, Peter tells him that Christ’s death was borne of a love for mankind, and that is no small thing.

Scene to Review: Mankind’s Redemption (02:11:06–02:14:59, Chapter 27)

- When Barabbas chuckles sadly and says, “All for nothing,” what does his comment mean? What does his remark reveal about his current perspective?
- How has Barabbas’ guilt held him captive all these years? What does Peter say to address the burden that Barabbas has carried and nurtured for so long?
- What does Barabbas’ ongoing physical captivity demonstrate about his emotional and spiritual captivity? Does one relate to the other? Why or why not?

Read John 3:16–17 and John 5:24 (see Scriptures Referenced).

- What does the John 3 passage demonstrate about the depth of God’s love for us? How does the passage relate to Peter’s claim, “It wasn’t for nothing that Christ died”?
- How does the John 5 passage address the guilt attached to the condemnation of sins? What does this verse say about freedom and forgiveness in Christ?
- How about you? Do you shoulder the heavy burden of guilt in your life? If so, can you think of some ways that you can begin to find peace in Christ?

Christ’s death isn’t the end of his story. Three days later, he rose from the dead, and his work on the cross became the only hope for a fallen world. Instead of focusing on guilt and shame, focus on the resurrected Christ, whose victory defeats that very guilt and shame. Spend some time reading Psalm 103:12, John 10:10 and Hebrews 8:12 (see Scriptures Referenced), and consider God’s love for mankind – a love that surpasses death and brings reconciliation to the world.

THE POWER OF A WITNESS

GUIDING SCRIPTURE: 1 Peter 3:15 (NIV): “But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.”



SCRIPTURES REFERENCED:

- Matthew 28:18–20 (NIV): “Then Jesus came to them and said, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.’”
- Luke 9:23 (NIV): “Then he said to them all: ‘If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.’”
- John 3:3 (NLT): “Jesus replied, ‘I tell you the truth, unless you are born again, you cannot see the Kingdom of God.’”
- Acts 1:8 (NIV): “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”
- Romans 10:17 (NLT): “So faith comes from hearing, that is, hearing the Good News about Christ.”
- 2 Timothy 1:9 (NLT): “For God saved us and called us to live a holy life. He did this, not because we deserved it, but because that was his plan from before the beginning of time – to show us his grace through Christ Jesus.”
- Hebrews 2:3 (NLT): “So what makes us think we can escape if we ignore this great salvation that was first announced by the Lord Jesus himself and then delivered to us by those who heard him speak?”
- Hebrews 12:1 (NIV): “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.”
- Hebrews 13:6 (NIV): “So we say with confidence, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?’”
- 1 Peter 3:15 (NIV): “But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.”

Scenes to Review

- Rachel (00:19:19–00:25:16, Chapter 5)
- Sahak (01:14:49–01:18:00, Chapter 17)
- Lucius (02:01:58–02:06:53, Chapter 25)



Discussion Questions

Barabbas' journey toward faith takes a great deal of searching, time and patience and his path of redemption is marked by a series of encounters along the way. These encounters – in the form of Rachel, Sahak and Lucius – help guide and shape Barabbas' understanding of Jesus Christ and salvation. Even though Barabbas' skepticism and guilt often impede his belief, God is faithful to place people in his life that will point Barabbas toward making peace with Christ.

The first witness that Barabbas encounters is Rachel, his former lover. When he's released from prison, he returns to find that Rachel has changed her lifestyle based on Christ's teachings. Later, at the tomb, Rachel challenges Barabbas to return the morning after next, and their conversation on that third day whets Barabbas' appetite for answers and commences his search for the truth.

Scene to Review: Rachel (00:19:19–00:25:16, Chapter 5)

- Even though Barabbas laughs at Rachel's claims of Christ's resurrection, how does the prospect preoccupy his thoughts during the next couple of days?
- How does Rachel's account of Christ's resurrection impact Barabbas? What are some of his responses in regard to her experience at the tomb?
- When Rachel tells Barabbas about the disciples' meeting place on the street of the potters, how is she demonstrating the power of a witness to point people toward truth?
- How does Rachel's witness contribute to Barabbas' ultimate faith? Even though he doesn't acknowledge Christ's authority in her lifetime, what seed does she plant?

Take a moment to read John 3:3 and 1 Peter 3:15 (see Scriptures Referenced).

- What does the John passage suggest about the difference between Barabbas and Rachel? How might it account for Barabbas' skepticism and Rachel's belief?
- How does Rachel embody the message of the 1 Peter verse? Consider the different ways that Rachel presents her testimony and the manner in which she does so.

Just as Barabbas resigns himself to life and death in the mines, God intervenes and shackles him to Sahak, a most fervent Christian. Despite their initial hostility toward each other, Barabbas saves Sahak's life and the men continue their labor in the fields. Here, amidst what Sahak sees as a new beginning, he revels in God's goodness and challenges Barabbas to do the same.



Scene to Review: Sahak (01:14:49–01:18:00, Chapter 17)

- Why does Barabbas insinuate that Sahak is naïve? Why might it be easier to accuse Christians of being gullible than to believe in the truth of the Gospel?
- What do you think of Sahak's comment that perhaps Barabbas is the one being swindled? Why does Sahak say this? What's the greater meaning behind this remark?
- Sahak raises a great point when he says, "What other man's death could have troubled you so long?" Barabbas doesn't have an answer. What are your thoughts?
- Why does Barabbas allow Sahak to carve the cross on his pendant? What might the gesture reveal about a potential change of heart in Barabbas?
- Consider other scenes from the movie – how else does Sahak's witness serve to make a difference in Barabbas' life? How is he an important part of Barabbas' journey?

Read Romans 10:17 and Hebrews 13:6 (see Scriptures Referenced).

- What does the Romans passage reveal about the power of a witness? About Sahak's witness in Barabbas' life?
- How does Hebrews 13:6 relate to Sahak's optimistic and undefeatable attitude? Can you point to specific ways that Sahak fully lives the message of this verse?

While Rachel and Sahak – and their lives and deaths – are vital to Barabbas' pursuit of the truth, it is the adamant and compelling Lucius who forces Barabbas to confront his unbelief. Lost in the Roman catacombs, Barabbas struggles to find his way, but when he emerges from the darkness and depths of the tunnels, his faith experiences a similar emergence.





Scene to Review: Lucius (02:01:58–02:06:53, Chapter 25)

- What are some of the things for which Lucius rebukes Barabbas? Do you feel that Lucius' words and attitude are appropriate to the situation at hand?
- Why does Barabbas require a more abrasive witness at this point in his life? Why is Lucius' speech crucial to Barabbas' faith journey?
- What are your thoughts on Lucius' assertion that Barabbas is just looking for something tangible, something to make it easier to believe in God? Is it true? Why or why not?
- What is the symbolism in Barabbas getting lost in the catacombs? How is his physical confusion representative of his spiritual turmoil?

Read through Luke 9:23, 2 Timothy 1:9 and Hebrews 2:3 (see Scriptures Referenced).

- How do the Luke and Timothy passages speak to Barabbas' struggle with faith? At the same time, how can these verses be an encouragement for those struggling to believe?
- Take some time to study Hebrews 2:3 and evaluate the verse's meaning in light of both Barabbas' circumstances and your own.

As you conclude this theme discussion, take some time to read and discuss Matthew 28:18–20, Acts 1:8 and Hebrews 12:1 (see Scriptures Referenced). Think about the importance of witnessing and how a single testimony has the power to impact many lives. Consider, too, the power of witnesses in your own faith development and, subsequently, your own testimony.





Final Thoughts

- What do you think about the film's musical score? What kind of mood does the music create? How does this mood contribute to the overall feel of the film?
- Discuss the character of Torvald (played by Jack Palance). What purpose does he serve in the story? What is the significance of his grudge against Barabbas?
- What are your thoughts on Barabbas' encounter with Lazarus? How do the filmmakers portray the resurrected man? How does this encounter impact Barabbas?
- Why is martyrdom prevalent throughout the film? What do Rachel's and Sahak's death demonstrate about Christian persecution during that specific time period?
- What do you think about the way that the script balances fact and fiction? Do the events of Barabbas' life seem plausible, given the history of the time period? Why or why not?



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