

**GOSPEL LESSON**

35 The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One." 36 The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar 37 and said, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself." 38 There was a written notice above him, which read: this is the king of the Jews. 39 One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!" 40 But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? 41 We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." 42 Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. " 43 Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."

There was a land once. And all the people were such faithful subjects to the ruler of their land! They followed his laws. They honored his position as king, and they trusted he would always make decisions based on what was best for them. And he did. He did.

The time came when enemies attacked the people. The King went to face the enemy. He explained to his people that this was the only way. And though his people wanted to go too, and fight also, the King said: he alone must fight for them. And no matter how bad the battle got, no matter if all looked hopeless for him, he told them: don't question, don't despair, don't give up hope, only trust – to the end.

The battle indeed looked like all went wrong for the King. He was captured. He was trialed. He was hung out to die. All as his people watched. But they didn't lose faith in him: "Guess his power came to an end. Some king he turned out to be when we really needed him." No! That was not heard. They trusted, even as they saw him call out, "It is finished." Even as they heard him take his last shuddering breath before the silence of death, they didn't despair.

Their confidence and their hope were rewarded, when... Their King began breathing again! Full Life and complete strength coursed through his limbs that had hung dead. The enemies had spent all their effort, and the King left them defeated! He walked off the battlefield victorious! – He returned to his people.

Now that story is too-good-to-be-true. Not the part about the King. The part about the subjects, his people.

In fact, there is a real, historical account that we take a look at today. It tells just how poorly people treated their perfect King. Let's walk into the scene. He is in the midst of his battle against the enemies. Let's see how people – the very people for whom he fought – treat him:

As we walk up, we notice – vs.35 – people are watching the king hang there. Different groups among them offer *their* own explanation of the scene.

The leaders among the people (vs.35) use the Jewish titles for the highest King: Christ of God, the Chosen One. But while they are talking about Jesus, they are mocking: "Now everyone can see what we've said all along – he isn't the Promised One ~ the Messiah King ~ that so many held him to be!"

The soldiers on the scene (vs.36-37) add a little drama. Literally. As in, acting. Previous to this scene: they had cast Jesus as the "king" in their little play. They had crowned him ~ with thorns. They robed him in purple ~ over the top of his oozing flesh, brutally gouged by the flog. They placed a scepter, a staff, into his hand ~ snatching it away to cruelly strike his thorn crowned head. In their act, now they are holding up their "wine" to him, as if approaching him on his throne, as if serving as his royal cupbearers. Then they jest: "Hah, let's see if the king has any power, or if he was all just talk."

Another person's words are heard (vs.38). This time in writing. The Gospel of John informs us the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, had these words, which were nailed to Jesus' cross, written in Aramaic, Latin and Greek. So... anyone at the scene could see: the title "King" and Jesus were both affixed upon the cross together. But who among those that set eyes upon the sight would truly connect the title with the man breathing out, bleeding out his life there?

And on top of this: just listen to this astonishing exchange between condemned criminal and Jesus! (read verses 42-43)

Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. "

Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."

If you had no prior knowledge of Jesus, and you came upon the scene, what conclusion would you naturally think? If one of Jesus' followers were to take you through all that had happened to this point, and add that they actually believe him to be the Son of God, the King of Heaven, what would you naturally conclude? "Really? I don't think so! This is foolishness!" It *is* foolishness - to human wisdom.

Strip away everything... Strip Christianity down to its most naked/revealing point. What do you see? Jesus on the cross. He doesn't appear to be God - High King of heaven. True God, who in time took on flesh and shared in our humanity. Here is the one through whom the earth and everything in it was made – yet the very soil is now catching the blood dripping from his gashed body. Yet this is what He claimed he had to do to open the way to heaven. He says He is the only Way ~ mankind's only hope.

Behold your king! A king that looks like this – that suffered this fate. Who even now doesn't offer his followers worldly glory and power, fame, and a life of ease.

Ah! There's the thing. The critical issue for each of us to consider at this scene today is: What do I want from God? (What do I want him to be for me?)

If it were up to our wisdom, we'd make Christianity to be more glorious; we'd make our churches more powerful here on earth. We'd make our lives easier.

But that would be our downfall. For we'd be missing His entire purpose (for us).

Why doesn't he show his power more in those ways? [Pause] Why didn't Jesus show his power more on this day, when he mounted the cross?

The answer to such questions: 1 Corinthians 1 tells us... "the message of the cross - Christ crucified: foolishness to man, but the wisdom and power of God." Hidden from human eyes, to be sure. But true God.

Christ crucified. . . for me. (See 1 Cor.1:30)

We don't always like to hear how we really are no different from the condemned criminal who hung on the cross next to Jesus. Don't you inwardly cringe away from that? "Oh, I can't be that bad?"

Strip away ... peel away from you and me everything else, leaving only the soul (bare, revealed, naked). What do you see?

Dishonoring, unfaithful subjects. I ignore him at times. I half-way listen to His Word at other times. I forget to give Him credit for all the good in my life, and I get angry with him when everything doesn't go just right.

Yes, I would get what my deeds deserved, if Jesus had not given his life for mine. I am helpless. To save me it required everything from my King, and I can't offer a thing towards the effort ~ for the Bible tells me, "All my righteous acts are like filthy rags." And I know it. How often do I do good out of selfish reasons? For some return: praise, glory, or attention?

One voice spoke clearly on this day – at this scene described in Luke 23 – a confession: "We are getting what our deeds deserve - we are punished justly."

The condemned man then voiced an amazing, God-given, confession about Jesus... "This one has done nothing wrong." Yes, our Savior's complete innocence was stamped on the scene and on the souls of those who believe in Him as Savior. We hear an echo of what the Lord said through Jeremiah: "He will be called: the Lord our righteousness" (23:6).

The criminal offers a plea – a prayer – to his King, Jesus. The criminal is the first at this scene to call him "Jesus," the name given at his birth "because he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1). Now, before his death, one of those sinful people voices the name & places his hope in its meaning: "Jesus, remember me – rescue me."

Have you noticed something? All this while, up to this very moment, the King is the one yet to speak in the scene we've watched. He who holds the power of heaven and earth holds his tongue in the face of the lies, brutality and the insults. But in reply to this request: he speaks. He answers.

He is the King of heaven. And he shows it in the decree he issues: He holds the power to grant entrance to heaven, to give permanent citizenship in his eternal kingdom, to make a person part of his royal family.

He has done that for you. He has done that for me. The Holy Spirit has given his life to us. We call him Jesus, and we trust He is our Lord, our God, our Savior.

Now... praise God that you rest in the assurance: when he makes decisions, it is always what is best for you (Romans 8). Praise God: He has poured (baptism) & spoken (the Word) & fed (Lord's Supper) you to trust: his highest interest & priority is your eternal good (Eph.1). As He rules over the universe and everything in it, he operates with our good in mind. Praise God: He creates and brings forth from us hearts that honor Him as King.

So this is our prayer, "O great King: Give us strength to glorify your name and keep it holy. Daily help us to focus on the truth: Christ crucified & risen for me. Keep us in our faith in you. Help us to lift high your cross in this world. Work in us new confidence for each new day, to trust your will for our lives... To you belong the power, honor, glory and praise. Amen.