

- b. When the procession arrived at Golgotha, the soldiers tried to give Jesus wine mixed with gall (myrrh in Mark's account), but He refused to drink it. Myrrh has a narcotic effect when ingested and the soldiers' intent was to sedate the prisoners and dull their pain to make their crucifixion easier. Jesus refused it, even as He'd resolved Himself to drink His Father's cup without admixture; He'd come into the world to take Israel's judgment (and so the world's) upon Himself and He was not about to mitigate that in any way (cf. again 12:27, 18:11).

It has been popular in Christian tradition to portray Jesus as nailed to His cross while the other men were tied with ropes. This creates the impression that Jesus' execution was unique and He endured suffering beyond His counterparts. Such a portrayal fits well with certain aspects of atonement doctrine, but it has no concrete support. None of the gospel writers present their accounts this way and history and archeology indicate that the Romans commonly used nails in crucifixions. It's possible that Jesus' unique offense – claiming to be a rival king – caused the soldiers to single Him out for extraordinary punishment (ref. again 19:1-3), but the biblical text is silent in this respect. But whether or not Jesus' counterparts shared His nails, His execution *was* entirely unique in its purpose and significance: They were being crucified as criminals; He was being crucified as bearing the offenses of others (19:4-6; Luke 23:39-41; cf. Isaiah 53:4-8).

- c. The soldiers' division of Jesus' garments is another circumstance all four writers recounted (Matthew 27:35; Mark 15:24; Luke 23:34; John 19:23-25). All of them noted this, but only John identified its prophetic significance. Among the four, John was the most explicit in connecting the details of Jesus' crucifixion with the biblical text (ref. 19:24, 28, 36-37, also 20:9), which accords with his overall emphasis on Jesus having come to fulfill the Scriptures (5:39-40). Here, he saw in the soldiers' actions the fulfillment of David's words in Psalm 22, a messianic psalm celebrating the king's resolute faith in Yahweh's faithfulness in the midst of abject humiliation and unjust suffering – faithfulness that would bear glorious fruit for His kingdom and the world of men. Very shortly Jesus Himself would draw upon this psalm in His cry of dereliction (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34).

This connection between Psalm 22 and Jesus' crucifixion underscores a critical principle of biblical interpretation. New Testament writers typically reference a verse or statement from an Old Testament passage to demonstrate prophetic fulfillment and this has led to (and reinforced) a proof-texting approach to the Scriptures. But the fallacy of this approach is clear from the number of instances in which a New Testament writer employs an Old Testament reference that, in its context, has nothing to do with the point he is making. The only way to correlate the writer's argument with his citation is to draw in the larger biblical context surrounding the citation. Examples include Paul's use of Hosea 1-2 in his argument about the Gentiles (Romans 9:22-26) and the Hebrews writer's use of Psalm 2 in his argument concerning Jesus' priesthood (Hebrews 5:1-5). So John's intent was to interpret Jesus' ordeal in terms of David's struggle and triumph in Psalm 22, but with the understanding of David's own typological significance.

- d. Each of the four accounts of Jesus' crucifixion is unique, but there are two things in particular that John omitted and the three Synoptists recorded. Those are the taunts and accusations directed at Jesus and His interaction with the two men crucified alongside Him (ref. Matthew 27:39-44; Mark 15:29-32; Luke 23:35-43).

Taken together, the synoptic accounts highlight the Jewish nation's rejection of its Messiah. It wasn't only the ruling elite who joined the Romans in deriding Jesus; other Jews (and perhaps Gentile proselytes) passing by the gruesome scene as they walked along the road paused to hurl insults at the man they viewed as a pathetic imposter making a mockery of Israel's messianic hopes. Almost certainly more was said than the Synoptists recounted, but they chose to include statements that highlighted the ironic nature of Israel's unbelief: *Everything about Jesus' crucifixion seemed to prove that He wasn't Israel's Messiah (the very thing the rulers hoped to show), yet those were the very things which vindicated Him.*

The placard above Jesus' head was Pilate's back-handed swipe at the nation he despised and the Jews responded as he'd hoped with great offense and outrage. Pilate hadn't commissioned it because he had any interest in Israel's messianic theology or believed Jesus was indeed their Messiah; he simply wanted this rebel nation – and all observers (ref. 19:20) – to understand what Rome had in store for any and all supposed “kings,” messianic or otherwise. But the Jews were convinced that Yahweh's Messiah would triumph over Rome, not die on a Roman cross. From their vantage point, Pilate was making a mockery of them, their Scriptures and their God and they were furious that this Nazarene imposter had provoked all of this blasphemy, affront and humiliation.

And so Pilate's indignity in labeling Jesus the “King of the Jews” only heightened the hatred and scorn His countrymen felt for Him. He claimed to be Israel's messianic deliverer, but He couldn't even deliver Himself. He'd insisted that He had the power to destroy and rebuild the temple in three days (restoring Yahweh's temple was a key dimension of Messiah's mission), yet He lacked the power to prevent His own demise. Indeed, Jesus' messianic claim was stripped of all credence so long as He hung on that cross, moving inexorably toward His own death. Everyone – even His Roman executioners – recognized that a dead messiah could not give life to the Israelite nation. If Jesus truly expected His countrymen to embrace Him as their Messiah, He first needed to descend from His cross.

Not even the most knowledgeable Jewish scholar could grasp what was transpiring. It was inconceivable that defeat at the hand of the oppressing power should be the means of Messiah's victory over it. Neither could subjugation bring liberation any more than death can bring life. Everything about Jesus' ordeal on Golgotha argued against Him being Yahweh's Messiah, a conclusion seemingly supported by the Scriptures as well as common sense. But the truth was that the Scriptures advocated for the broken and dying Nazarene and not His detractors. In the most thorough and puzzling of all paradoxes, Israel's God was achieving His promised triumph in His messianic Servant-Son exactly as He purposed and revealed.

The synoptic gospels also provide accounts of Jesus' interaction with the criminals crucified on either side of Him. Yet they differ in their details, most notably in their treatment of the two men. Matthew and Mark have both hurling insults at Jesus and added nothing further. Luke, on the other hand, sharply distinguished them, but in a particular, critically important way: *Both men appealed to Jesus under the premise that He was Israel's Messiah, but they did so with two very different perspectives and expectations* (ref. 23:39-43).

- Luke captured the first thief's words to Jesus in a form which highlights Israel's national expectation of their Messiah: His concern in Jesus being the Messiah was his personal deliverance from Rome's indomitable and lethal power. His messianic theology, like Israel's, was framed by the Scriptures, but was actually the product of natural human thinking. People's instinctive interest in the divine focuses on their own personal well-being; the value of a "god" is its ability and willingness to serve the self-perceived good of the "worshipper." At bottom, all religion is magic.
- Luke presented the second thief as the antithesis of the first. He intended that his readers would see in this man a depiction of the repentance and faith to which Jesus had called His own. He represented the believing remnant within Israel – the remnant who discerned in Jesus of Nazareth the long-awaited Messiah, while his counterpart embodied the rebellious, self-seeking nation now appointed for destruction at Rome's hand.

The differing accounts might seem to present a problem, but not when it's remembered that the three men hung alongside each other for several hours. It's perfectly reasonable to conclude that the second man's insight and change of heart came about as he observed Jesus' demeanor and reaction to those who reviled and mocked Him – including himself. If a hardened, pagan Roman centurion saw in Jesus something that distinguished Him from other men (Mark 15:39; cf. Matthew 27:54 and Luke 23:47), why should that not be the case with a Jew who'd been taught to expect Israel's Messiah and His kingdom?

Luke summarized the repentant man's interaction with Jesus in terms of a humble plea that He'd remember him when He inaugurated His kingdom (ref. 23:42-43). Every Israelite held the undying hope that Yahweh would grant him entrance into His kingdom when He established it in the messianic Son of David (cf. Luke 13:22-30) and this son of Israel was expressing this very hope to the One he'd come to believe was that royal seed.

At that moment he didn't comprehend the thing he sought; he only knew that, if Jesus was indeed the Messiah, the King of Israel, the messianic kingdom must be close at hand ("remember me when the time comes that you assume your kingly power and reign"). Thus Jesus spoke to his ignorance: He would grant this petition, but the man's entrance into His kingdom was not going to come in the form and manner he expected: *"Today you shall be with Me in Paradise."*

This succinct pledge conveyed an entirely new vision of the messianic kingdom – “the kingdom of God” promised in the Scriptures. Theological thought and formulation are always influenced by historical and cultural circumstances and the same was true of second-temple Judaism. The demise of David’s kingdom and five centuries of exile and Gentile rule had produced a nationalistic vision of the messianic kingdom in which the nation of Israel would find deliverance from its Gentile rulers through military triumph. Like his father, David’s messianic son would establish his kingdom as a mighty warrior-king. Moreover, this kingdom was to be the revival of David’s kingdom (cf. 2 Samuel 7; Isaiah 9:1-7; Amos 9:11-15; also Luke 1:26-33), which only reinforced the Jewish expectation of an earthly, Israelite kingdom of the sort the nation had known in the past. This kingdom expectation is evident in all of the gospel accounts and the repentant thief no doubt embraced this vision. And so he must have been shocked by Jesus’ reply: *The kingdom He held out to him – the kingdom actually promised to David – is a spiritual and transcendent kingdom entered by means of death – first and foremost, the King’s death and then the death of the “sons of the kingdom.”*

This kingdom is *spiritual*, not in the sense of being immaterial, but in the sense of being of, by and in the Spirit. Far from lacking material substance, it is the kingdom of the *new creation* brought into existence, as the first creation, by the power of the Creator-Spirit (cf. Genesis 1:1-2 with Zechariah 4:1-10; John 3:1-6; Acts 1:1-8; Revelation 22:13-17). Thus the grant of the kingdom is the grant of *Paradise*, a concept hearkening back to Eden and its Creator-creature intimacy (cf. Revelation 2:7 with Genesis 2:9, 3:22-24; ref. also Revelation 22). For this reason Paradise speaks of the end of exile – not Israel’s national exile, but the relational exile of God’s image-bearer and the entire creation (Romans 8:18-23).

So also this kingdom presupposed the death of its King: *Today you shall be with Me in Paradise*. But it equally presupposed His resurrection; only a living king can rule a kingdom. The messianic kingdom was to have its ground in Jesus’ death, but its substance in His resurrection as first fruit (1 Corinthians 15:20-53).

And as this kingdom was to emerge out of the death and resurrection of its King, so it embodies the scriptural principle of *life out of death* which permeates all of God’s covenant dealings and promises culminating with His Messiah. Life out of death had a pronounced physical quality in Jesus’ case, but for the sake of the ultimate spiritual reality it served: Death defines creational existence outside of Paradise – death as alienation from the God in whom life exists and from whom it proceeds (Genesis 2:7-8, 15-17, 3:22-24; cf. Ephesians 4:17-18). So life out of death involves the return to Paradise and restored, free access to the tree of life.

Partaking in this “tree” brings life and healing and it has its substance in the Living One (John 1:1-4, 5:19-26, 39-40, 6:43-58, 11:20-27; Revelation 1:9-18). Thus union with Jesus in His death and resurrection is the essence of participation in the kingdom: *Today you shall be with Me in Paradise*. Ingathering into Paradise is being restored to God where He dwells through union with His Son.