

The Mocked Crucified King

Mark 15:25–32
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Everything that we've seen so far in Mark's gospel has prepared us for Jesus' death. Jesus foretold it several times. Mark laid out everything that led up to it. But now that it's finally here, Mark wrote very little about the actual nailing of Jesus to the cross. He said only that it took place at the *third hour* or 9 AM.

Maybe we should be thankful that God spared us the gory details. After all, the most important thing is that *they crucified him*.

The King of the Jews

When the Romans crucified offenders in the first century, they usually nailed a copy of the charges upon which they were convicted above their heads. They did this with Jesus. His crime, according to verse 26, is that he was *THE KING OF THE JEWS*. Of course, this wasn't really a crime. No Roman court or official had the authority to outlaw the Son of God's reign. In fact, they allowed the limited self-government of subjugated nations. Herod the Great was king when Jesus was born.

So, where did this accusation come from? Our first inclination might be to say that it came from the chief priests, who had earlier accused Jesus of *saying that he himself is Christ a King* (Luke 23:2). But the priests didn't write the accusation on the cross. On the contrary, they were appalled when they saw it. They even ran back to Pilate and said, *Write not, The King of the Jews; but that he said, I am King of the Jews* (John 19:21). The sign on the cross sounded too much like a statement of fact. No, the accusation came from Pilate himself. John 19:19 says, *And Pilate wrote a title, and put it on the cross. And the writing was, JESUS OF NAZARETH THE KING OF THE JEWS* (John 19:19). And regarding the Jews' request to change the wording, he replied, *What I have written I have written* (John 19:22), i.e., what he wrote will stand forever as a record of what happened. Pilate unwittingly affirmed an eternal truth about Jesus Christ, viz., that he always was and always will be heaven's appointed King.

Everyone familiar with the four gospels knows that various persons identified Jesus as King several times during his life. At his conception, the angel said to Mary, *The Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David* (Luke 1:32). When he was born, the angel announced the same thing to the shepherds: *For unto you is born this day in the city of David [i.e., in fulfillment of God's*

promise to David to set up his Son as king] a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord (Luke 2:11). The wise men from the east asked, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him (Matt. 2:2). The five thousand whom Jesus miraculously fed wanted to make him their King (John 6:15). The multitudes declared him king on Palm Sunday, crying out, Blessed is the King of Israel that cometh in the name of the Lord (John 12:13). And even Jesus himself said to Pontius Pilate, My kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36). He didn't deny being the King, but insisted that Pilate had a wrong opinion about the nature of his kingdom.

But the accusation on the cross went even further. Being nailed to a cross, it announced that Jesus' reign was grounded in his death on the cross, i.e., he reigned over a kingdom he had redeemed with his precious blood. One commentator notes that virtually every reference to Jesus' reign in the New Testament is accompanied by a reference to his cross. After all, it was at the cross where the amazing love of God for his people was most clearly displayed. And not only this, but John's account adds that the accusation on the cross was written in three languages: Hebrew (or Aramaic), Greek and Latin so that anyone who saw the sign and could read it knew exactly what it said (John 19:20). Pilate did this under God's providential guidance to declare the universal reign of the crucified King. As John wrote later in the book of Revelation, *And he hath on his vesture and on his thigh a name written, KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS (Rev. 19:16).*

Two Thieves

The mockery of Jesus continued even after the Roman soldiers crucified him. At first, it came from the thieves who were also crucified. Verse 27 of our text says, *And with him they crucify two thieves; the one on his right hand, and the other on his left.* And verse 32 adds, *And they that were crucified with him reviled him.* These men had no right to mock Jesus because they suffered under the same condemnation. Yet, Jesus endured their mocking and submitted to being counted as one of them, according to verse 28, to fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah 53:12, which says, *He was numbered with the transgressors; and he bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.* Jesus identified with them because he took our sin upon himself.

This is all Mark wrote about the thieves, but Luke recorded a fascinating exchange between them. He wrote that one of the thieves rebuked the other for mocking Jesus. He then asked Jesus to remember him in his kingdom, and Jesus assured him he would. In fact, he told this thief would be with him in paradise that very day (Luke 23:42–43). That's who goes to heaven — men who are sinners before God and sometimes criminals in the eyes of the law, but forgiven because they trust the King on the cross.

The Passersby

Then came the passersby in verse 29. These men *railed* on Jesus — the Greek word used here is literally ‘blasphemed.’ They also wagged their heads and scoffed at Jesus’ promise to rebuild the temple in three days. Of course, he was talking about his own resurrection. John wrote, *But he spake of the temple of his body. When therefore he was risen from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this unto them (John 2:21–22).* In any case, the passersby couldn’t imagine how a condemned criminal could rebuild the temple, much less raise himself from the dead.

The passersby also demanded that Jesus save himself and come down from the cross. But do you see their two mistaken assumptions? First, they assumed Jesus wanted to save himself, that he was his own most important concern. But he hadn’t come into the world to find an easy life, but to obey his Father. On one occasion, he said, *For I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me (John 6:38).* To be more specific, he came to save those who could not save themselves. He said, *For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost (Luke 19:10).* His mission was to give his life as a ransom in our place.

The other mistake of the passersby is that they thought Jesus wanted to come down from the cross. They couldn’t have been more wrong about this. It wasn’t iron nails that kept Jesus on the cross; he had the power to come down anytime he wanted. No, it was his love for us that kept him there. Paul wrote, *Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweetsmelling savour (Eph. 5:2).* And Jesus refused to allow anything to interfere with or thwart this mission. Isn’t this what Paul meant when he wrote, *For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (vv 38–39).* Nothing in the universe could have made Jesus come down from the cross even one second before his work of love had accomplished its mission.

The Chief Priests

Next, we have the chief priests in verses 31 and 32. They had already been a big part of Jesus’ suffering, but they weren’t done. In our text, they mocked him. Even after he rose from the dead, they tried to re-bury him, figuratively. Matthew wrote, *Now when they were going, behold, some of the watch came into the city, and shewed unto the chief priests all the things that were done. And when they were assembled with the elders, and had taken counsel, they gave large money unto the soldiers, saying, Say ye, His disciples came by night, and stole him away while we slept (Matt. 28:11–13).*

However, the priests were far more cunning than the others. The two thieves mocked Jesus to each other, and everyone could hear them. The passersby also blasphemed Jesus publicly. But verse 31 says that the chief priests laughed *among themselves*, along with the scribes. They weren't brave enough to mock him publicly, perhaps fearing what others might think. So, they poked fun at him only in the privacy of their own little circle.

The things the priest said about Jesus were as silly and wrong as the mockery of the passersby. They began by saying, *He saved others; himself he cannot save*. They had seen his miracles, how he delivered men from all kinds of diseases and spiritual oppression. They couldn't explain how he did these things, but that he did them was indisputable. So, why couldn't he save himself? In their minds, the only answer was that he didn't have the power.

How absurd! The one who gave sight to the blind and cast demons out of the oppressed is the same God who made the world and everything in it simply by calling it into existence. John 1:3 says, *All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made*. A lack of power wasn't the problem. No, Jesus didn't save himself because it wasn't his will to save himself.

Then the priests went even further than the passersby. The passersby insisted that Jesus come down from the cross, but the priests demanded that he, *Christ the King of Israel*, come down and thereby prove his identity. Only if and when he were to do this would they believe, or so they said, but they would never have believed in him no matter how many miracles he did on the cross.

No amount of miracles would ever save the chief priests or anyone else. Jesus made this clear in the story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16. The rich man wanted Abraham to send someone back from the dead to help his brothers — of course, a resurrection is a much greater miracle than simply coming down from the cross. But Abraham replied, *If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead* (v. 31).

The chief priests proved Jesus was right. They refused to believe in him even after he raised himself from the dead. They tried to cover their unbelief by bribing the soldiers to bear false witness about what happened to Jesus' body.

The Gospel

The gospel of Jesus Christ is usually greeted with mockery and scorn. We see this not just in today's text, but throughout Scripture. Noah's contemporaries laughed at him. "A worldwide flood," they said. "Really?" And can you imagine how the men of Sodom and Gomorrah must have laughed when the two angels threatened their cities with fire from heaven? And what about the Egyptians,

the most powerful nation on earth? Did they chuckle when the Israelites tried to protect themselves by painting lambs' blood on their doorposts?

Paul wrote, *For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God* (1 Cor. 1:18). Yet, *it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe... Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men* (1 Cor. 1:21b, 25). Why did God ordain it to be like this, knowing people would laugh at him? Wasn't it to show the power and wisdom of our salvation originate with him and not with us? We can't take credit for any of it because, before our conversion, we thought it was just as silly as everyone else does.

But sadly, there are still a lot of men today who profess the Christian faith and yet mock Jesus, just like the chief priests did. Pejoratively, they describe Christianity as a 'bloody religion.' It is, but they think that's a bad thing. It might have been good enough for people who lived a long time ago before our modern scientific age, when man's understanding of the world was less refined, but we've moved past all of that now. Today, Christianity has to be understood differently. But if they're right, Jesus died on the cross for nothing, except to give us an example of self-sacrificing love. We didn't really need an atonement to cover our sins. God would have loved us anyway.

We should never ridicule the gospel. Nor should we laugh at those who make fun of it. They need our pity. Their unbelief only proves how desperately they need the life the gospel of Jesus Christ offers sinners.

Last week, we looked at the abuse Jesus suffered from the Roman soldiers as they flogged him, mocked him and eventually led him to the place of crucifixion. But today's text reveals the responses of others: the thieves who were crucified with Jesus, those who passed by as he hung on the cross, and the chief priests. It shows the full range of mankind — everyone from the most revered religious leaders (the chief priests) to ordinary citizens (the passersby) to condemned felons. Yet, there was no difference in how they treated the Lord. One after another, they mocked and ridiculed the crucified King.

Jesus endured all this mockery for us. The second person of the Godhead suffered as the worst of sinners to give us everlasting life. The realization that he took our sins upon himself should make us run to him — when we sin, when doubts and fears plague our souls, when we simply don't know what to do. Those who stood at the cross laughed at the King, but this didn't make him any less the King. Then and now, he governs the entire universe for his glory and the good of his church. Run to him today. Waste no time seeking his mercy and grace. Look to him alone for everything you need.

He's not just your King; he's the King who died to bring you into his kingdom of love and grace.
Amen.