

The religious system of Jesus' day could see their power slipping away as crowds increasingly followed Jesus. The jealous chief priest used the excuse of national security to justify arresting Him (John 11:48ⁱ). His disciples forsook Him. The religious leaders accused Him of claiming to be the Messiah which they called blasphemy, a crime punishable by death. Jesus would not deny who He is. They took Him to the secular rulers and insisted on an execution. Governor Pilate tried to resist, but he was in a political situation that caused him to yield to their wishes. A horrible scourging followed. A crossbeam was laid on Jesus' shoulders and He was led away to be crucified.

²⁶ And as they led him away, they seized one Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, and laid on him the cross, to carry it behind Jesus. Luke 23:26 Three-hundred years earlier, a hundred thousand Jews were moved to Cyrene which is the area of Libya. Simon was making a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. It may have been the only chance in his lifetime to do so. I acted out a one man drama about Simon one year for Good Friday and Easter that you can find on vimeo <https://vimeo.com/160541769>; <https://vimeo.com/160554053> Simon arrived in the city and came upon three Jews being led to their crucifixion.

The scourging of Jesus had left Him so weakened that He could no longer carry the crossbeam. During the occupation, a Roman soldier could at any time call upon a Jew to carry a burden. One of the soldiers in the group must have seen that Simon appeared to be an able-bodied man and called on him to carry Jesus' crossbeam. Simon followed along behind Jesus as Jesus staggered to the hill. Simon was surely converted by the experience as we read of his son being part of the church (Mark 15:21ⁱⁱ; Romans 16:13ⁱⁱⁱ).

²⁷ And there followed him a great multitude of the people and of women who were mourning and lamenting for him. Luke 23:27 There was in Jerusalem a group of women who took it upon themselves to offer aid to Jewish men on the way to their deaths. One way of helping was to offer a pain deadening drink of wine mixed with myrrh (Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 43a). They were being obedient to the proverb (31:6^{iv}), "give wine to those who are in anguish." But Jesus would not drink it (Mark 15:23^v). Since there was no other way to save mankind, He determined to drink the full cup of God's wrath on mankind's sins (Luke 22:42^{vi}).

This group of women in verse 27 appear to be a greater number than those who offered aid. Surely Martha and Mary, Jesus' mother, Mary Magdalene, and Jesus' women disciples made up part of this group, but it sounds like there were many more. They did not hide like the men did, for Rome did not see women as a threat. Why is it that women seem to be more receptive to Jesus than men? It is part of their nature to be receptive. Is it that they are designed to seek love and see it in Jesus more readily than men do?

²⁸ But turning to them Jesus said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. ²⁹ For behold, the days are coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!' ³⁰ Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us,' and to the hills, 'Cover us.' ³¹ For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?" Luke 23:28-31 Jesus uttered His longest statement during this ordeal to these women of Jerusalem. It was His last prophecy. Consider the compassion of Jesus

who was so weakened from the flagellation that He could not carry the cross, and yet He stopped to warn them and those listening of what was to come.

He told them that they should weep for themselves and their children, because conditions will be so bad that people will say in the future that it was better that the women of Jerusalem never had children. The women in Jerusalem will long for death, wanting to die by natural calamity. If the Romans kill the Prince of Peace while crowds were thronging to hear Him (represented by green wood), then what will it be like when it is dry (dried up and lifeless, unable to respond the message of Jesus through the church and still looking for a militant messiah)?

The horror of AD 70 described by Josephus fits Jesus' description. During the first Jewish revolt, infighting and starvation preceded a brutal assault by Rome and leveling of the temple and entire city (Hebrews 10:9^{vii}). Thousands were crucified. Those who were able bodied were made slaves. Excavations in Jerusalem are still revealing the extent of the carnage (Luke 21:6^{viii}). Just as Jesus had predicted, this destruction took place during the lives of the children of the women who were weeping for Him. We too should weep for our nation's flight from godliness. It mirrors that which we see in much of the world, turning nations into dry fuel for the coming fire (1 Peter 4:17^{ix}).

³² *Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him.*

³³ *And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left.* Luke 23:32,33 This fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah that the suffering servant of God would make His grave with the wicked and was numbered with the transgressors (Isaiah 53:9^x, 12^{xi}). The Lord who gives life and breath to all was staggering toward Skull Hill along with two criminals and then crucified between them.

³⁴ *And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." And they cast lots to divide his garments.* Luke 23:34 The first sentence is not in some manuscripts, however, we can be sure it is authentic for it fits numerically according to the amazing numerical patterns Panin found in the Greek texts.

There was never a more unjust act! Yet, Jesus' first prayer on the cross was for the forgiveness of those who had caused this injustice. He exemplified what He taught us to pray in Luke 11:4^{xiii}, that we should forgive everyone who is indebted to us.

The only possessions of Jesus were the articles of clothing He wore, which were shared among the soldiers fulfilling Psalm 22:18^{xiii}, "*They parted my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing.*" His cloak was a more valuable because it was woven as one piece (John 19:23^{xiv}). Most likely it was a gift of gratitude from a believer. The soldiers cast lots to see who would get it.

³⁵ *And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!"* Luke 23:35 Crucifixion is said to be the most humiliating death, for a person can linger naked in the elements for days in excruciating agony while going in and out of consciousness. To add to the humility, the rulers who had condemned Him mocked His claims to be the Messiah. They had silenced their consciences, and now they wanted to convince those looking on in sympathy that they had done the right thing while still trying to convince themselves. "If He is the Messiah, and really saved people, why can't He prove it by saving Himself?" they said. These leaders were adding to the fulfillment of that amazing thousand-year-old prediction by mocking Him. Psalm 22:6-8^{xv} predicted, "*But I am a*

worm and not a man, scorned by men and despised by the people. All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads: 'He trusts in the LORD; let the LORD rescue him. Let him deliver him, since he delights in him.'"

The rulers thought He was cursed for He was hung on a tree and the Scriptures declared that anyone hung on a tree was under God's curse (Deuteronomy 21:23^{xvi}). Instead of proving He was not the Messiah, without knowing it they proved He was by adding to the many fulfillments of that prophetic psalm about the crucifixion of the Messiah.

How strange that their taunts began by declaring the truth that He had saved others. The curse He was under on that tree was because of their sins and ours, and He willingly bore them for the salvation of all who would believe. *"To mock Christ as the rulers and elders did was sublimely misconceived: they might as well have mocked a literal Passover lamb (John 1:29^{xvii}) because, while it saved others, it could not save itself"* ^{xviii}

Jesus could have done what they demanded. He could have floated down from the cross and scared the daylighters out of them. They still would have rejected Him. Jesus told Peter He could call twelve legions of angels if He so desired (Matthew 26:53^{xix}). How tempting it would have been to lift oneself out of the human agony and prove to all those mocking Him that they were wrong. But Jesus held no animosity, only forgiveness, and He stayed and endured so that they could be forgiven - and we as well.

³⁶ The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine ³⁷ and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" ³⁸ There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews." Luke 23:36-38 The five Gentile soldiers joined in the mockery by offering Him sour wine, fulfilling another prophecy (Psalm 69:21^{xx}), and repeating the rulers' taunts. They focused on the crime posted above Jesus' head, King of the Jews (John 19:19-22^{xxi}). It was one way that Pilate could get back at the Jews for pushing him into ordering the crucifixion. After all, kingship was the crime they brought before Pilate.

"If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" they demanded. Religious elite and blaspheming pagan soldiers speaking in unison tells us a great deal about their hearts. And if we were there, we might have been tempted to yell at them. But Jesus showed us what we should do in His prayer asking them to be forgiven. Perhaps they were fighting against their consciences after hearing Jesus praying for their forgiveness.

³⁹ One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" Luke 23:39 Even the criminals joined in the mockery. Are they all listening to another's voice, the one who was waiting for another opportunity ever since he tempted Jesus in the wilderness (Luke 4:3^{xxii}, 13^{xxiii})? Perhaps it is just the tendency of man to make ourselves feel better by putting down another made in God's image; in this case it was in His exact image (Hebrews 1:1-3^{xxiv}).

We see the vulgarity of the human condition when we see these people's treatment of Jesus and realize that He only taught truth and showed love and kindness. *Wherever He went, He left behind the footprint of mercy.* ^{xxv} Even in His rebukes He was giving people a chance to turn from darkness to light. If humans can so brutally torment a man whose life always portrayed the love of God for mankind, who healed the sick, held the little children and blessed them, and even raised the dead for grieving families, then, in Jesus' words, *"what will they do when the tree is dry."* This is a revelation of the heart of

man. It is not evolving. It is not ascending in cycles. Since the fall in the Garden of Eden, we have and always will need a Savior.

Some folks say we are a much kinder people today. My step-father told me of some of the ugliness of men's hearts that he witnessed in World War 2. We can visit Yad Vashem museum in Jerusalem and see the photos of the darkness of hearts in what they did even to women and children. "Oh, but this is the Age of Aquarius," they say. Really? Read the Voice of the Martyrs magazine of the persecution against Christians around the world. Witness the riots in our inner-city streets, or the hatred in our politics. **Nothing is more empirically verifiable than the depravity of man.** It is depressing to realize that is the condition of the human heart, and it is not getting any better. But that is why Jesus did what we are reading about today. To transform hearts from darkness to light (Acts 26:28^{xxvi}), from selfishness to selflessness (Acts 20:35^{xxvii}).

⁴⁰ But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?" ⁴¹ And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." Luke 23:40,41 According to Mark's Gospel, the other criminal at first joined in on heaping insults on Jesus (Mark 15:32^{xxviii}). The thieves may have been zealots who were angry with Jesus for not using His power against Rome. They were dying for a passing political cause. In fact, efforts like theirs would eventually have all Jews removed from Jerusalem and cause the end of the nation for almost two millennia.

Something caused one of the thieves to have a change of mind. He knew he was about to die and that he would face the Judge of all mankind. Perhaps these two had cooperated in a crime against Rome and he was genuinely concerned about their eternal fate. He confessed that they deserved this punishment and acknowledged that Jesus did not. The thief had awakened to his true spiritual state and was repentant. Had he heard of Jesus' miracles? Perhaps it was the way Jesus conducted Himself, not responding to the verbal insults and how He forgave those who crucified Him that caused the thief to believe in Him.

He owned his own crucifixion as a just civil punishment. The thief likewise knew he had no merit to which he could appeal for Jesus' help. Such a clear awareness of sin is a profound advantage over most of humanity. Most people live in a foggy world of ambiguity and relativism, falling in love with the dark contours of their lives, convincing themselves their sins are noble and glorious—that their pride is "dignity," their unwillingness to forgive "character." No such haze clouded this man's soul.

He feared God—that is, God's just judgment of his sins. In those moments on the cross he had become profoundly humble. He had come to possess the bankruptcy of spirit that Jesus requires: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:3). He knew he had nothing within himself to commend him to God.^{xxix}

⁴² And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Luke 23:42 This criminal had more sense than everyone at the scene. The rulers thought the present was more important. They and the other thief really did not have a fear of God. The women that followed Jesus thought it was the end of the story. This thief did not. His approaching death and the way Jesus faced His death seem to have convinced the thief of what the rest could not yet see. The hope of the kingdom was not lost because of Jesus' death. It was realized! He asked to be remembered when Jesus came into His kingdom.

⁴³ And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

Luke 23:43 Jesus' response must have been a great comfort! That very day they would both die physically, but their spirits would not die. They would be together in the paradise of God. Paradise meant the Garden of God to the Jews. It is only used in two other places in Scripture, Paul's spiritual revelation (2 Corinthians 12:3,4^{xxx}), and where the overcomer will find the tree of life (Revelation 2:7^{xxxii}).

This is one of the verses that clearly refutes the idea soul sleep. When we die, we are with the Lord. Our bodies sleep in the ground until they are rebuilt in the resurrection. But to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord (Philippians 1:23^{xxxiii}).

"Jesus gave the wretched thief life! The man hung writhing next to Jesus in mortal agony. He too was gasping for breath. The same severed nerves screamed. He moaned in agony. He was probably mocked too-for his deathbed conversion, his ridiculous faith in this helpless king-"Save you, you fool? He can't even save himself." The man hung with his own sins heavy upon him, and darkness covered the land. But in that darkness Jesus took the thief's sins upon himself, necessitating the cry, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" The thief heard and watched Jesus die. Soon he too would be dead, but somehow he felt peace. The earth grew dimmer to his glazed eyes as a soldier approached to break his legs and hasten his death. He collapsed in suffocation. The spear was hardly a prick. At last his body hung relaxed.

Where was he then? Far away. Released from his agony and his sin. He was, as Alexander Maclaren so wonderfully expressed it, "a new star swimming into the firmament of heaven, a new face before the throne of God, another sinner redeemed from earth!"

The thief's redemption dramatizes for us the immediate bliss of the departed. Sinners who cast themselves into the arms of Christ go into the presence of God-"away from the body and at home with the Lord" (2 Cor. 5:8^{xxxiii}). Paradise Lost is reopened to us-a better paradise is flung wide open forever. And there the angels rejoice with us.^{xxxiv} Our last breath here is followed by our first breath of the atmosphere of heaven.

Do you have the comfort that thief found when Jesus promised him heaven? Jesus freely offers to take your sins and give you His righteousness. Meet Him in prayer and make that exchange and start a life in Him. Daily grow in the knowledge of Jesus and His love for you (Matthew 12:28,29^{xxxv}). And then help others find that new life and help them grow. This is life abundant (John 10:10^{xxxvi}). Jesus laid down His life so that His life could be in you!

Questions:

- 1 Why wouldn't Jesus drink the drugs?
- 2 What was His prophecy to the women?
- 3 How was His crucifixion between the thieves fulfilling prophecy?
- 4 What other details of the crucifixion were predicted?
- 5 Why do you think they felt the need to mock Jesus?
- 6 What does the inhumane treatment of Jesus tell us about man?
- 7 Is man any different in our day? Why or why not?
- 8 What do you think caused the thief to repent?
- 9 When we die, where are we?
- 10 Are you sure of where you will be?

ⁱ **John 11:48 (ESV)**

⁴⁸ If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.”

ⁱⁱ **Mark 15:21 (ESV)**

²¹ And they compelled a passerby, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to carry his cross.

ⁱⁱⁱ **Romans 16:13 (ESV)**

¹³ Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; also his mother, who has been a mother to me as well.

^{iv} **Proverbs 31:6 (ESV)**

⁶ Give strong drink to the one who is perishing, and wine to those in bitter distress;

^v **Mark 15:23 (ESV)**

²³ And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it.

^{vi} **Luke 22:42 (ESV)**

⁴² saying, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done.”

^{vii} **Hebrews 10:9 (ESV)**

⁹ then he added, “Behold, I have come to do your will.” He does away with the first in order to establish the second.

^{viii} **Luke 21:6 (ESV)**

⁶ “As for these things that you see, the days will come when there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.”

^{ix} **1 Peter 4:17 (ESV)**

¹⁷ For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?

^x **Isaiah 53:9 (ESV)**

⁹ And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.

^{xi} **Isaiah 53:12 (ESV)**

¹² Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors.

^{xii} **Luke 11:4 (ESV)**

⁴ and forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation.”

^{xiii} **Psalms 22:18 (ESV)**

¹⁸ they divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots.

^{xiv} **John 19:23 (ESV)**

²³ When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his garments and divided them into four parts, one part for each soldier; also his tunic. But the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom,

^{xv} **Psalms 22:6-8 (ESV)**

⁶ But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by mankind and despised by the people. ⁷ All who see me mock me; they make mouths at me; they wag their heads; ⁸ “He trusts in the LORD; let him deliver him; let him rescue him, for he delights in him!”

^{xvi} **Deuteronomy 21:23 (ESV)**

²³ his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God. You shall not defile your land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance.

^{xvii} **John 1:29 (ESV)**

²⁹ The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!

^{xviii} Gooding as quoted in Preaching the Word - Luke, Volume II: That You May Know the Truth.

^{xix} **Matthew 26:53 (ESV)**

⁵³ Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?

^{xx} **Psalms 69:21 (ESV)**

²¹ They gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me sour wine to drink.

^{xxi} **John 19:19-21 (ESV)**

¹⁹ Pilate also wrote an inscription and put it on the cross. It read, “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.”

²⁰ Many of the Jews read this inscription, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and it was written in Aramaic, in Latin, and in Greek. ²¹ So the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, “Do not write, ‘The King of the Jews,’ but rather, ‘This man said, I am King of the Jews.’”

^{xxii} **Luke 4:3 (ESV)**

³ The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread.”

^{xxiii} **Luke 4:13 (ESV)**

¹³ And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time.

^{xxiv} **Hebrews 1:1-3 (ESV)**

¹ Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.

³ He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high,

^{xxv} From The Weekly Pulpit

^{xxvi} **Acts 26:18 (ESV)**

¹⁸ to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.’

^{xxvii} **Acts 20:35 (ESV)**

³⁵ In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’”

^{xxviii} **Mark 15:32 (ESV)**

³² Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe.” Those who were crucified with him also reviled him.

^{xxix} Kent Hughes -Preaching the Word - Luke, Volume II: That You May Know the Truth.

^{xxx} **2 Corinthians 12:3-4 (ESV)**

³ And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows—

⁴ and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter.

^{xxxi} **Revelation 2:7 (ESV)**

⁷ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.’

^{xxxii} **Philippians 1:23 (ESV)**

²³ I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better.

^{xxxiii} **2 Corinthians 5:8 (ESV)**

⁸ Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord.

^{xxxiv} Kent Hughes - Preaching the Word - Luke, Volume II: That You May Know the Truth.

^{xxxv} **Matthew 11:28-29 (ESV)**

²⁸ Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

^{xxxvi} **John 10:10 (ESV)**

¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.