

Down the Drain and through the Door

Introduction

The Text

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!” 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.”

³⁹ One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, “Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!” 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.” ⁴² And he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” ⁴³ And he said to him, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.” (Luke 23:35–43)

A. I don't have a fancy introduction for us this morning. I just want to give you the four headings that mark out the path we'll be on together as we make our way through this text: (1) Bitter Allies; (2) Serpent Voices; (3) Hidden Glories; and (4) Open Doors. Let's get to it!

(1) Bitter Allies

Deeply Divided . . . and United

A. You look around and notice, don't you, that the world is deeply divided.

1. And it's easy, I think, for us to imagine it is so much worse in our day than it's ever been in the days gone by, but I'm not sure that's the case.
2. We've always been divided. That's what sin does.

a. Adam and Eve rise up against God and what happens? They quickly turn against and divide from one another. And they have kids and they do the same. And those kids have kids and they do the same. And on it goes.

B. But now, I've fashioned this heading “Bitter Allies” to bring out the fact that, in spite of all this division, there is still something running underneath it that fundamentally unites us.

1. You see, usually we think of “bitter enemies” not “bitter allies.”
2. But here in our text, with Jesus hanging there on the cross, and all these people round about him, scoffing and mocking and railing at him, we see a tragic illustration of that old saying: “The enemy of my enemy is my friend.” And I suppose that is essentially what I'm getting at.

- a. These are all bitter enemies here. The Jew and the Gentile. The religious and the political. The upper crust and the lower dregs. The soldier and criminal.
 - i. They can't unite on much of anything. Oh, but they unite on this: they all can't stand the likes of Jesus. They all want to see him dead. They all are, in this sense then, bitter allies.

The Various Groups

A. And I think this is part of what Luke is trying to bring out here by shuffling through all the various types of people around the cross at this point and highlighting their responses. Let me show you what I mean.

"The Rulers"

- A. In [v. 35](#) we meet a group whom Luke calls "the rulers."
 - 1. These are members of the Sanhedrin there in Jerusalem, leaders among the Jews (cf. [23:13; 24:20](#).)
- B. And what do they do? Well, they "scoff"—it's the Greek word, *ekmukterizō*, (from the Greek *muktēr* meaning 'nostril') and it refers to [using the nose as a means to ridicule](#).
 - 1. You can picture it, right? Looking down your nose, turning up your nose, wrinkling your nose, thumbing your nose, whatever. It's a gesture of disdain. You ridicule, you sneer, you scoff. That's what these rulers are doing.
- C. And they say: "[He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!](#)" ([v. 35](#)).

"The Soldiers"

- A. But next, in [v. 36](#), Luke wastes no time, he quickly introduces us to yet another group, here called "the soldiers."
 - 1. These, of course, are Romans now, servants of Caesar and Pilate. They are not so concerned about religious matters, but political. And yet they're response to Jesus is very much the same.
- B. They "[mocked him](#)," we're told. The Greek word translated "[mocked](#)" here can mean to [ridicule](#) or [make fun of](#), but it can also refer to trying [to trick someone so as to make a fool of the person](#).
 - 1. And I think that's what we see happening here. As they offer him "[sour wine](#)." Now what is that? To be honest, it's not entirely clear.
 - a. I guess wine vinegar was actually the wine drunk by soldiers, so some have thought perhaps this to be a gesture of kindness.

- b. But, in light of Luke’s connecting it here to this mockery, we should probably understand it as something sinister.
 - i. Perhaps they were giving him this cheap sour wine because it would have been harsh and unpleasant to someone suffering from severe thirst as Jesus was.
 - ii. Perhaps they gave it to him as a means of quenching his thirst but there desire with it was to thereby prolong his suffering. “We don’t want him to die of thirst or weakness. We want him to have enough strength here to suffer more.”
 - iii. It’s as David, perhaps unwittingly prophesies in Ps. 69: “²⁰ Reproaches have broken my heart, so that I am in despair. I looked for pity, but there was none, and for comforters, but I found none. ²¹ They gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me sour wine to drink” (vv. 20-21).

(1) As one commentator puts it: “What David was offered in metaphor, Jesus was offered in fact” (TOTC).

- C. And these soldiers too have some choice words of their own, words similar to the Jewish rulers but now with a bit more political overtones. Instead of mocking him as the Christ or chosen of God, they mock his claim to be a supposed king: “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” (v. 37).

“The Criminals”

- A. And quickly, yet again, Luke has still another group of people he wants us to meet, and this is certainly the lowest blow of all. Here is a kick beneath the belt.
 - 1. For it is not just those with prominence or power that are mocking Jesus now.
 - 2. Even those “criminals,” those “evildoers,” on the crosses next to him, take pleasure in railing at him. Even condemned criminals think themselves superior enough now to mock and condemn him.
- B. I thought of the chickens we are raising in our backyard right now. You know, the littlest always gets picked on. There really is a “pecking order” as they call it.
 - 1. And the little one, Levi named her Elliot, she’s taken the brunt of it for a while.
 - 2. But then we got two more little chicks, they hatched a bit later, and they were smaller. We kept them separate from the rest of the brood for a while, but then we were starting to introduce them to the rest of the flock, and what do you think happened? Elliot seized her opportunity to peck at these two that were even smaller than her. “I’m not the bottom anymore!” And it feels good.
- C. And I share this because that’s the sort of thing that’s happening here.
 - 1. Criminals would often be laughed at and mocked and shamed while they hung on the cross. That’s part of why Rome did it this way—to make a public spectacle of it all. So these guys would have had their fair share of being made fun of and laughed at.

2. And then here they find One that even they can feel superior to. So they start pecking, as it were, at Jesus.
- D. Now, I say that both criminals here are engaged in this kind of behavior, knowing full well that Luke only mentions the one.
1. But it's important that we not so quickly let the other off the hook. The other gospel writers tell us plainly, both men, at first at least, were engaged in this:
 - a. [Matt. 27:44](#): "And the robbers who were crucified with him also reviled him . . ."
 - b. [Mark 15:32](#): "Those who were crucified with him also reviled him." This is plural—"robbers," "those"—not singular.
- E. So both are railing at him, though Luke here focuses in on the one who kept at it, [v. 39](#): "One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him . . ."
1. The word translated "railed" there is the Greek [blasphēmeō](#). I think you know where that's going. Blasphemy. That's what's happening here in the fullest sense. God is being denigrated, disrespected, defamed.
- F. And here's what this criminal says: "[Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!](#)" ([v. 39](#)). "What's wrong with you? I thought you were supposed to be a Savior? If that's what you are, prove it! Get me down from here. If you're a Savior, save me." That's the idea.

"The People"

- A. But you know there's a fourth group here. I passed over them at first, but I wanted to bring it out now. Look back up at [v. 35](#). How does our text begin? "[And the people stood by, watching . . .](#)"
1. Listen. You don't have to be externally participating in evil to be an active participant in it. All you have to do is nothing—just stand by and watch, let it happen, keep your mouth shut. "I don't want to cause a fuss. I don't want to stick my neck out."
- B. It's kind of like what I've been learning about racism and things lately, right? I'd say, "Oh, I'm cool, I'm not a racist." Yeah, but am I anti-racism? You get that. It's one thing to not personally be a racist. It's another thing to be actively trying to stop it wherever it's found. That's the idea here.
1. To passively permit evil is to actively participate in it.
- C. So we're all indicted in these moments. It doesn't matter who you are. Jew or Gentile. Priest or politician. Religious or secular. High-class or low-class. Rich or poor. Clean-cut or criminal. They're all gathered around the cross . . . bitter allies, as it were, participating in this evil.

A Couple Implications

- A. Now, a couple implications from this before we move on . . .

Implication #1: There's Something Deeply Broken in Us

- A. As we take in this scene here, we like to imagine if we were there we'd be the one objecting voice sounding out from the crowd. We think of ourselves as Peter once did: "All the world may turn on you Jesus, but never me!"
 - 1. But Luke doesn't leave us any such option. There's no group we tuck into here. "Ah, here's the faithful." No. The picture is that everyone is in on it, in one way or another. And that's what we must come to grips with.
- B. We cannot be so excusing and coddling and rose-coloring of human nature. We must not entertain this popular notion that there is some essential core of goodness that is just waiting to emerge from us all, that deep down we all are upstanding people.
 - 1. We must not think that the natural disposition of the human heart is love for God and others. No it is love for self at the expense of God and others. That is what you see, if you're willing to take an honest look. There's something crooked within.
- C. This is why Paul says: "The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him" (1 Cor. 2:14). Or as he puts it most pointedly in Eph. 2:3: We are all "by nature children of wrath." We don't want God, we want to be God.
 - 1. And yet still he's moving towards us in love. Because, whether we want God or not, he wants us . . .

Implication #2: There's Something Startlingly Beautiful in Him

- A. We don't notice it at first.
 - 1. We confuse the filth Jesus is wearing for his own. We misinterpret the guilt and shame he's carrying as something rightly belonging to him. We see him there struck by God and assume he must have done something to deserve it.
 - a. But the glove doesn't fit. This isn't his filth. This isn't his guilt and shame. This isn't his wrath to bear. It's mine.
 - i. We don't see it until God opens our eyes and, when we does, it startles us. How could it be?!
- B. There's a girl who just lit up America's Got Talent, she's a Christian, and she's been going through a massive fight with cancer. And I came across this blog post she'd written, where she puts it so wonderfully: "I have heard it said that some people can't see God because they won't look low enough, and it's true. If you can't see him, look lower. God is on the bathroom floor."
 - 1. She's talking about how she was just in the depths and God came to get her there. He went low, lower than anyone would expect.
- C. And that's what's happening in this text, right?

1. The Jewish rulers think this can't be the Christ, look at him.
2. The Roman soldiers think this isn't a king anyone would follow.
3. The criminals think this man can't save anyone.
4. And to all the people standing by it just seems a bit pathetic.

a. But this is Jesus hitting the bathroom floor, going down the drain, to get to us.

(2) Serpent Voices

Luke 4 and Luke 23

- A. For this, I simply want to point out the fact that the mocking words these various groups are dishing out all sound strangely familiar, don't they? They all sound a bit like things we've heard before.
1. They all sound not a little like the devil.
- B. You remember, perhaps, what we covered way back in [Luke 4](#) where Jesus is led out by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted and tested by Satan himself. There were three temptations there, as there are likewise three temptations, we could say, here.
1. The first, Satan capitalized on the weakness and hunger of Jesus after having fasted for forty days and he says: "[If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread](#)" (v. 3). But Jesus pushes back, quoting Scripture.
 2. So he takes him up, we are told, and shows him all the kingdoms of the world and says: "[6 To you I will give all this authority and their glory, for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will. 7 If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours](#)" (vv. 6–7). But again Jesus pushes back, quoting Scripture.
 3. So finally, the devil, seeing that Jesus values Scripture, decides to try quote and twist Scripture himself. He takes him to Jerusalem, sets him on the pinnacle of the temple and says: "[9 If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, 10 for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to guard you,' 11 and 'On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone'](#)" (vv. 9–11). In other words, Satan takes him to the very place he knows there's going to be a showdown coming soon, Jesus will be crucified in Jerusalem for the sins of the world, and he says, "Now think of it, if you are the Son of God, there's no way God will let you suffer, right? That's what the Scripture says, right? If you throw yourself down from here every angel in the heavenly quarters will soon be rushing to your protection, right? A good dad wouldn't let you get hurt." But Jesus sees what he's up to and pushes back one last time, quoting Scripture.
 4. And the whole narrative there ends like this: "[And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time](#)" (v. 13).
- C. Well, brothers and sisters, in [Luke 23](#), now more than ever, that "[opportune time](#)" has arrived!

1. So he's on him: "If you're the Christ, if you're God's chosen, why don't you save yourself? Come on down" (Luke 23:35).
 2. "If you are the King of the Jews, flex your regal strength and save yourself. Come on down" (v. 37).
 3. "If you're really the Savior, you should be able to get us down from the cross and come on down yourself" (v. 39).
- D. In every instance it's the same thing: "Jesus, if you're the Christ, if you're the chosen of God, if you're the King like you say you are, prove yourself, glorify yourself, not by going through with the cross, but by escaping it!"
1. The devil knows if Jesus goes through with the cross he himself will be undone by it. The cross of Christ is the deathblow of Satan. So he's desperately trying to stop it.

Walk by Doubt

- A. Now, there are some things we can learn from all this about the way Satan tries to get at the children of God.
- B. For one thing, he tries to get us to question, to doubt.
1. That's why you noticed it, didn't you? In almost every instance we've looked at there's this sort of question mark left hanging in the air: "If you are the Son of God . . ." we saw twice in Luke 4. And then in Luke 23: ". . . if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!" (v. 36); "If you are the King of the Jews . . ." (v. 37); "Are you not the Christ?" (v. 39).
 - a. There's a question mark snaking through all of these statements. There's an invitation to doubt both God's word and God's heart.
 - i. "Did God actually say at your baptism that you're his Son, that he loves you? If that's true, why does it seem like he's abandoned you? What kind of dad treats his boy like this?"
 - ii. "Did God actually say you're the Christ, you're the King, you're on a mission to save the world? Really? Look at the joke that your life has become. I mean look out in between breaths Jesus. No one loves you. Not any of these people. And certainly not your Father."
- C. So, first, he tries to get us to doubt. But, secondly, he tries to get us to act. Just like Paul says we can "walk by faith" (2 Cor. 5:7), well so also the devil knows we can "walk by doubt"—meaning: we act on these doubts, we take the bait as it were.
1. For Jesus this would mean coming down off the cross, saving himself if his Father won't, proving his strength in the face of these naysayers, that sort of thing.
- D. But what might it mean for you? Where is Satan tempting you to question God's word and heart? Where is he baiting you to act and "walk by doubt"?

1. Maybe it has to do with your work. You're trying to be faithful, trying to be true to God and his ways, but you feel like you're getting nowhere. You watch others climb up that ladder, success, money, whatever. You want it. And in comes the devil: "Did God actually say you were his kid, that he would provide for you, that you were justified in his sight in Christ, adopted, loved? It sure doesn't seem like that to me. Why would everyone else prosper while you struggle to get by if God is really here for your good? I think it's time to be done with integrity and generosity and even wasting your time on church and Home Group or whatever. Let's go after the prize. If God won't give it to you, you go out and get it yourself."
 - a. That's just one example to get the wheels spinning.

(3) Hidden Glories

Irony in Every Instance

- A. Now, of course we know that all that these various groups are questioning Jesus on, animated as they are by Satan, really holds no weight. In fact, there's a certain irony to it all.
 1. They point to this or that and say: "See, you must not be the Christ or God's Chosen or the King or the Savior . . ."
 2. But in reality it's the opposite. The suffering, the cross, the shame and the pain of it all, far from evidencing he is not these things, it is all evidencing the very fact that he is!

The Christ and God's Chosen One

- A. So the rulers scoff and say: "Look at him. There's no way he could be the Christ, the Messiah, or God's Chosen One. He's hanging there lifeless on the cross and seems powerless to do anything about it. We know those whom God anoints and chooses, God blesses. Whatever this is . . . it's not that!"
- B. But they missed it. They missed overlap of texts like [Isa. 42:1](#) and [Isa. 53:10](#), where the prophet, looking forward to the ministry of Jesus, says: "Listen, this servant is God's chosen one in whom he delights . . . and God will delight to crush him as a guilt offering for the forgiveness of sinners."
 1. Is he God's anointed and Chosen One? Oh you better believe it. But he's been anointed and chosen, not to escape death, but to go to it and through it . . . for us.
 - a. This is why Peter describes Jesus in [1 Pet. 2:4](#) as "a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious . . ." The two go together! Rejected and chosen!
- C. The cross isn't evidence of God's abandoning him but of God's choosing him! It's not the failure of the Christ's mission but the fulfillment of it!

The King of the Jews

- A. And so it is with what the soldiers say about him as well. They mock him and say: “Surely this is no King of the Jews. What kind of a king is ever crucified? The only crown he’ll ever wear is that crown of thorns.”
- B. And I love this. All the gospel writers at this point reference the inscription that was set up over Jesus on the cross, it was the charge against him, the reason he was being crucified by the Romans, so all those passing by could know what the man had done. And it says: [“This is the King of the Jews” \(Luke 23:38\)](#).
 - 1. And there’s this scene in John’s gospel where all the Jews are arguing with Pilate about the wording of it.
 - a. And they’re saying: “No, no, that’s not it! Don’t write: ‘This is the King of the Jews.’ Write: ‘This man said he is King of the Jews.’” That’s a big difference. Don’t give the impression that he actually is who he claimed to be.
 - b. But Pilate responds, and I love this: [“What I have written I have written” \(John 19:22\)](#). Now, we know he’s just doing that to upset the Jews, but for the Christian reader it’s just dripping with irony, right? Why? Because he really is the King, and not just of the Jews, but of the world!
- C. The cross doesn’t undercut Jesus’ royalty, it establishes it!
 - 1. That which was identified as his crime on earth will be sung to his praise in heaven. He is the Lamb of God and the Lion of the tribe of Judah—the promised king in the line of David who God said would sit on that throne forever ([Rev. 5:5-6](#))!
 - a. The two go together—the Lamb slain and the Lion reigning . . . the cross and the crown!

The Savior

- A. And so, lastly, it is with the railing of the criminal as well: [“Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!” \(v. 39\)](#).
 - 1. But, again, you see the hidden glory don’t you? The irony in these words. The truth is Jesus, as the Christ, is saving them by not saving himself. He could’ve turned to that criminal in this moment and said, “Oh brother you’ve got it all wrong. If I save myself I can’t save you!”
 - a. As one commentator rightly remarks: [“It was the power of love, not nails, that kept him there.”](#)
- B. The one criminal never seems to get it. But the other finally does . . .

(4) Open Doors

- A. Let me just read [vv. 40-43](#) to you once more. We’ll come back to this next week, but I’ll start to wrap things up here: [“⁴⁰But 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.’⁴² And he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’⁴³ And he said to him, ‘Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.’”

1. This is why Jesus is hanging there. This is why he’s resisting the devil. This is why even though he is the beloved Son of God, the Christ, the Chosen One, the King, the Savior, he’s still willing to give himself over to death.
 - a. He’s going down the drain to hell so he can come and open up the door to paradise for us . . . so sinners like you and I can come back into relationships with God.
- B. You know, we were helping out at City Team yesterday and I got to meet a brother who was a part of the program there. He was coming out of addiction and he was just on fire for Jesus. And he was saying: “I was so burdened under my guilt and shame for all that that I’d done, all that my life had been about. I thought there was no hope, right. And then I met Jesus. I couldn’t believe God could love me and forgive me.” And he just starts crying. That’s what this is about.
- C. So I wonder where you are?
 1. Are you scoffing, are you mocking, are you railing on Jesus?
 2. Or are you crying out: “Remember me!”?