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Luke 23:35-43
REPENT: TURN TO JESUS; HE HOLDS THE KEY TO HEAVEN

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There are times in life when we say that we were expecting something else. Sometimes it's good and sometimes it's bad. There are times that I have brought my taxes to my accountant. I expected to have to pay some big bucks. He told me that I qualified for certain tax credits and that instead of paying in, I would get a nice refund. Conversely, there have been times when I was expecting a refund and found out I would have to pay. I wasn't expecting that! There are times when we might go to a very nice restaurant expecting the meal of a lifetime. We pay a lot of money and end up with bad service and food that is just so-so. On the other hand we may go to a place that looks like a greasy spoon and have one of the best meals of our lives. "I wasn't expecting that!"

"I wasn't expecting that!" Surprises keep life interesting. We never know what will happen and as they say, you can't judge a book by the cover.

"I wasn't expecting that!" How many times don't we see this in the life of our Lord Jesus? Shepherds were out in the fields, tending their flocks by night when all of a sudden the skies were filled with angels and they would hear that the Savior of the world was born and was lying in a manger just down the road. Wise men would come from the East to Jerusalem, looking for the King of the Jews in a palace. They would bring their gifts fit for a king to a home far away from Jerusalem. Jesus told the disciples to give a crowd of 5000 something to eat. They found a small boy with a couple of fish and dinner rolls. They thought the situation was hopeless until Jesus started multiplying the food. They sure weren't expecting that!

I wasn't expecting that! Nowhere was that so true as on Good Friday as Jesus hung on the cross. To the world it looked just like a normal execution. A common criminal being crucified for unspeakable crimes! He was probably getting exactly what he deserved! But there was something much more to the story. He was not a criminal. He was the very Son of God. There was a sign over his head mocking him as the King of the Jews. We might expect that from Jesus' enemies. We would not expect that the criminal next to Jesus would come to realize that Jesus' crucified hands literally held the keys to heaven! No one saw that coming! That criminal never would have expected what would have happened to him that day. And that would carry over to all eternity!

During the crucifixion we see sin in full display. We see how open and blatant sin can be and no one was offended by it! Except God, of course! Pilate's sign said that Jesus was a king. He was a king ridiculed by all. "The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, 'He saved others; let him save himself if he is God's Messiah, the Chosen One.'" The religious leaders were all there. You couldn't keep them away. As far as they were concerned, this was one of the greatest days of their lives. They enjoyed watching Jesus being beaten and whipped, nailed to the cross and crowned with thorns. Now they could add insult to injury. Jesus was there on the cross and they could call him every dirty name they could come up with. Note that they didn't dispute the fact that he had helped others. They knew that he had given sight to the blind, cleansed lepers and raised Lazarus from the dead. That made them hate him even more. They mocked Jesus for who he truly is. We see the nasty human tendency to turn away from God and hate what is true.

Jesus was not only ridiculed by the religious leaders but also by the soldiers who carried out the execution. "They mocked him and offered him wine vinegar and said, 'If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.'" They were

having a great time. Earlier in the morning they had put a purple robe on him and gave him his crown of thorns. They slapped him and said, "Hail, King of the Jews!" We see the nasty human tendency to turn away from God and to prey upon the weak.

The mockery goes even higher. Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, certainly joined in the fun. "There was a written notice above him, which read: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS." Pilate had the opportunity to interview Jesus and ask him about his kingdom. He really wasn't interested in what Jesus had to say about a kingdom not of this world. He simply dismissed Jesus with the words, "What is truth?" Pilate was stuck with the unenviable job of governing the Jews. They didn't like him. He didn't like them. His little sign on the cross showed exactly what he thought of the Jews and their supposed Messiah. Pilate knew that Jesus was innocent, yet he would have him crucified to save his own skin. We see the nasty human tendency to turn away from God so that wrong can be right and right can be wrong.

Could it get any worse? How about if a common criminal joins in the insults? He probably wasn't so common. He would have been guilty of something really bad like murder, rape or armed robbery. Yet he was all too willing to mock the man next to him. "One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!'" A criminal insults the Christ. We see the nasty human tendency to have no real love for God or faith in God, yet expect everything from him when we want it.

Christ is the King we simply don't expect. We don't expect kings to be mocked by governors or religious leaders. We don't expect army privates to brutalize the Commander in Chief or men on death row to lip off to the Lord of life. We expect kings to be on thrones, not crosses. We expect kings to be acknowledged by both rich and poor. Christ is King, but he is a king ridiculed.

Does this anger you? Do you get upset when you see how Jesus was treated? Do you ever say, "If I were there, things would have been different? If I were there, I would have told the religious leaders that Jesus was exactly what the Scriptures had foretold about the Christ. If I were there, I would have stood up to the soldiers. If I were there, I would have ripped down that stupid sign from the cross. If I were there, I'd tell that criminal to keep his mouth shut. If I were there, I would have knelt at the foot of the cross, and thanked Jesus for his love. Or would I?

Would you or I really have done anything different? I have a feeling that we just might have been joining in with the others. Would we really have stood up to the religious leaders? When was the last time we invited someone to church? Do we look for excuses to get out of reading the Scriptures or attending Bible classes? Would we really have told the soldiers to be nice when we love to violate the Eighth Commandment, not taking people's words and actions in the kindest possible way and tearing them down with our words and actions. Would we really have torn down Pilate's sign when we like to hide our light under a bushel? Would we really rebuke a criminal, knowing that the only difference between his crimes and mine is that I haven't been caught yet? Or do we console ourselves with the thought that God can't really read our hearts and know what we truly think? We see the nasty human tendency to turn away from God so that we can go along with the sinful crowd.

But then something happened that no one was expecting. In the midst of ridicule and rejection, we hear a voice of repentance. "But the other criminal rebuked him. 'Don't you fear God,' he said, 'since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.' Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.'"

If there is such a thing as a living hell, this man was living it. He was on a one-way trip to hell and he no one to blame but himself. He chose to live a life of crime and he was caught. He lived in jail and now his time was up! He too was crucified, an example to the rest of the people as to how not to live your life. He would feel the pain of the nails in his hands and feet. He would feel the hot sun and the insults of the people. And his sins troubled him! He knew deep down that there was something waiting for him after death, something that he really didn't want to face.

Yet in the middle of this living hell, he caught a glimpse of heaven. This man on the middle cross spoke words of forgiveness for the very ones who had nailed him to the cross, for the very ones who were mocking him. Was it possible that forgiveness could be extended to a man like him? He spoke a humble request: "Jesus, remember me." He didn't even know what to pray for. Just, remember me…

And remember him, Jesus did. "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise." There was no ridicule here, only redemption. This man's prayer was answered immediately, beyond his wildest dreams. "Today you will be with me in paradise." Jesus shows us the power of God's incomparable grace, giving us the very opposite of what we deserve. Jesus is the key to heaven, even for criminals on crosses, yes especially for criminals on crosses. With a single sentence, Jesus turned the key and opened the gates of heaven for this man.

How can that be? Because Christ came to save sinners by not saving himself! Did you catch the common temptation that winds itself through all the mockery? "Let him save himself if he is God's Messiah…If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself…Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!" Save yourself…Save yourself…Save yourself…Jesus could have easily saved himself. He could have blinked an eye and wiped out all his enemies. He could have summoned twelve legions of holy angels to do his bidding. But instead of saving himself, he sacrificed himself. His forsakenness is your forgiveness. His judgment is your justification. His humiliation is your glory. His pain is your peace. His wounds are your healing. His death is your life.

Jesus, remember me too. Remember me in depression, when loneliness seems my only companion. Remember me in heartbreak when everything seems to hurt. Remember me in sickness when I feel awful. Remember me as I deal with the death of family and friends and tears fill my eyes. Remember me every day because I'm not in heaven yet.

And Jesus does remember us. He knows us and he forgives us. He does not remember our sins and rebellious ways. He gives us the promise that we too will be with him in paradise. Turn to Jesus; he holds the key to heaven! He unlocks it for us…today! AMEN.