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Revelations About Our King

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TEXT: Luke 23:32-43 (ESV)

Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. 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. And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." And they cast lots to divide his garments. 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!" The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."

One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise."

With the recent death of Queen Elizabeth, we have been inundated with many articles and news reports regarding the new king who was ascended to the throne of Great Britain, King Charles III. Many journalists are asking the question, "What kind of a king will Charles be?" Now we live in a democracy, might be a bit puzzled at all the excitement over this ascension of King Charles. Our thinking about kings is limited to burgers and Elvis, Game of Thrones or B.B. and Martin Luther King. In America, in fact, we actually fought against living under a king in the Revolutionary War. Because history is shown, kingship is about having unlimited power and authority over people's lives. And that kind of set up was not appealing and still is not appealing to Americans.

We do use that kind of language, though, in the Christian church, royal language, as we talk about God, Jesus. In fact, Christian churches around the world today are observing Christ the King Sunday, a special day set aside to worship and honor Jesus and declare him as king of kings and Lord of Lords, the one who has power and authority over his church and all the world. So, on this Christ the King Sunday, it seems reasonable to ask two important questions.

First, what kind of a king is this Jesus? When Jesus arrived on the scene, there was all kinds of speculations about him as he carried out his ministry and announced his kingdom. People hoped he might be a military type of king, that he would organize a great army and throw out the Roman oppressors, destroy and enslave Israel's enemies, and established them as a world power. Some were hoping for a great economist king, [under] whose leadership they would have great abundance in their land. That's why they got so excited over his feeding of 5,000 with five loaves and two fish, as they said, "Here's our king." But as we know, Jesus didn't live up to those expectations. In the end, he was rejected by his own people. Abandoned. Sentenced to death on a cross by the political authorities who were pressured by a religious establishment and bloodthirsty mob to crucify him. He was not the kind of king they expected or wanted. They did not understand him or his kingdom, as he points out in his prayer on the cross, on their behalf, "Father, forgive them for they don't know what they're doing."

So now we see the king on his throne. He's nailed to a cross. There's a sign posted over his head instead of a banner, kingly banner, and this sign sarcastically declares the King of the Jews. His crown is made of thorns. His Royal court are on each side of him. Two thieves hanging on their own crosses. At the king's feet were soldiers gambling for his royal robe, of which he had been stripped. His cup bearer is a smiling Roman soldier who offers him cheap, sour wine to drink. The crowd gathered around him, instead of paying him homage, mocks him and scoffs at him cruelly. They shout at him to come down and save himself, if he's the king. His body, instead of being clean and glowing with health, is beaten, bleeding, and his lungs gasp for air due to suffocation.

As we read the story, we ask what kind of a king is this? Well, on the surface, it's a sad, pathetic picture of Jesus the King. But underneath all of this, there's something greater taking place. You see, Jesus could have come down from that cross as they told him to, but he did not. He could have called down an army of angels to protect him, but he did not. He could have cursed them for his misery. But he did not. Why not? Because God's

redemptive rescue plan for his sinful world was being carried out and accomplished by Jesus on that dark Friday at the cross. And the Easter Sunday resurrection of Jesus was God's affirmation of that. The sign over his head was absolutely true: Jesus is king.

We learn in this Good Friday passage as we asked that question “What kind of a king is he?”, that Jesus is a gracious king. I mean, catch that prayer for his opposers, “Father, forgive them. They don't know what they're doing.” He was asking God to forgive those who are actually executing him and making him suffer. And that is pure grace, unmerited favor and love. His suffering and dying upon the cross make forgiveness a possibility for all of us. His death was a ransom, a sacrifice for sin, an act of reconciliation, for the forgiveness of our sins, for all of us have sinned and falls short of God's glory. We're all separated from Him. But God's son, the innocent one, not the sinner, he's innocent, laid down his life for the guilty ones so that we might be forgiven of our sins. And listen again to the king's gracious promise to his newest subject, the thief who asked him to remember him when he came into his kingdom. Jesus said to him “Today, you'll be with me in paradise.” Trusting in Jesus, he would be with Jesus in his new kingdom forever. And that's Grace. This guy with an awful past didn't have a leg to stand on before a holy and righteous God. And yet Jesus gave him Heaven. That's what all believers can look forward to when we breathe our final breath as subjects of Christ the King. It's not because of anything we have done for God, but because of what God in Christ has done for us in that sacrifice for our sin upon the cross. He's all about grace.

The famous evangelist D.L. Moody once candidly remarked,

Someday you'll read in the papers that D.L. Moody of East Northfield is dead. Don't you believe a word of it! At that moment, I shall be more alive than I am now. I shall have gone up higher, that is all out of this old clay tenement building into a house that is immortal, a body that death cannot touch, that sin cannot taint – a body fashioned likened to his glorious body. I was born of the flesh in 1837. I was born of the spirit in 1856. And that which is born into the flesh may die. And that which is born of the spirit will live forever.

That's grace. D.L. Moody's counting on God's grace offered through Jesus Christ.

We also learned from this story that Jesus is the all-powerful king, endowed with all authority from God. In this story, he speaks with kingly authority to that repentant thief. He says, “Today you'll be with me in paradise.” You're in, no ifs, ands, or buts

about it. I know where I'm going and I know where you're going. Now, how can you just say that? Because at the cross, Jesus was doing battle with sin and death and the power of the devil in order to liberate us from them. The victory was his, and it still is. He will be raised from death on Easter Sunday. Death cannot hold him or any of his subjects. The sting of death, which is sin, has been forgiven through Jesus. And yes, Satan might be prowling around, stirring up trouble as Christ's kingdom's mop up operations continue in this world, but He is defeated and will be destroyed in the end. And our risen King in the meantime gives us strength to stand firm against him.

And as he promised that he will, he will come again in glory and majesty to judge the living and the dead, and he will sit upon his heavenly throne and people of every tongue, tribe, and nation will bow before him. And Jesus shall reign as Lord and King over all forever. This all-powerful king is the Church's basis for hope and confidence, even in the midst of chaotic and challenging times. It's our – as part of that church – our basis for hope and confidence as well.

I came across a reflection regarding this great truth in *1517* magazine that was written by Professor Chad Byrd. And it really did move me. He wrote,

Neither this global pandemic, the gross injustices, the racial tensions, the mad riots, the macabre political theater, not even Tiger King should have shocked anyone, especially those skilled in the Torah and prophets. All human history from Cain and Abel onward has amply demonstrated that destruction and stupidity, navel gazing and bloodshed, the ubiquity of fools and the thin veneer between civilization and anarchy is the norm, not the exception. This past year just happens to be a rather colorful sampling of our commonly shared low anthropology. Welcome to Humanity 101. And yet, we are not the Church of Chicken Little, but the Church of Jesus Christ. We do not run around screaming, "The sky is falling." There is no panic in Heaven over the chaos of this world reigns the King of Kings, Jesus, the resurrected, before whom every knee will eventually bow, whether they like it or not. Every governmental authority now: presidents, kings, prime ministers, you name it, are in lame duck administrations. Their time is ending. Put not your trust in politicians or parties or ballot boxes. Christ and His kingdom are everlasting. And into that kingdom, He calls us all to find his forgiveness, life, and peace.

So that first question's answered for us in this passage, "What kind of a king is Jesus?" He's gracious and he's all-powerful. Now, the next question we must ask on this Christ the King Sunday is this question: "What are we to do with this king?" In the passion story, we see a variety of responses to him. The women wept and felt sorry for him. The leaders in the crowd rejected him and the soldiers mocked him, and both thieves at first reviled him. But a while later, while Jesus hung on that cross, there was one person on that hill called Calvary who knew exactly what to do with Jesus the King. It was the thief on the cross next to Jesus who said, as his partner was continuing to rail against Jesus, he couldn't join in. He saw something in Jesus. Something, or should we say someone stirred his spirit. Perhaps it was the prayer that Jesus prayed, asking for his Heavenly Father to forgive this hostile crowd. Perhaps he had heard stories of Jesus in his miracles prior to that day. We don't know for certain, but we do know what he did with Jesus. He said to his fellow thief, "Don't you fear God?" He sensed God's judgment. He knew his guilt. "We deserve to be up here. But Jesus doesn't. He is innocent." There's the gospel. Then he looked over at Jesus and said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And Jesus received him.

In this scene, then, we have repentance and faith which led to the promise of Heaven from Jesus the King. And we're given the answer to that question: What are we to do with this king? First, we acknowledge our sinfulness, and we humbly turn to him in faith, asking him to bring us into his kingdom. Like the thief, we repent, admitting our sin and our need for forgiveness and mercy. And we believe in him and receive eternal life with him, which begins now and lasts forever.

There is a choice being made in this story that every human being has to make about Jesus in order to receive his promise. There were two criminals who made different choices that day. One rejected him. That was his choice. And one repented and believed in him. And only one received the promise of paradise, didn't he? Someone noted one time one thief was saved on the cross that none should despair, and only one that none should presume. Eternal life is given freely to those who choose to entrust themselves to this King, Jesus.

I need to ask this of all of you. What choice have you made in regard to Jesus the King? What does your relationship with him look like? Are you one of his subjects, a citizen of his kingdom, trusting in him for eternal life? He wants to give that to you, you know, that's why he came. Would you say that you're enjoying life under his leadership now?

Because he came to give life abundantly to those who bend the knee to him as king. Does he have your ultimate allegiance and loyalty? Have you become convinced from experience that his word is true, and he really does know what makes life work best as you have learned to submit to his authority and obey him and make his values and priorities your own as you live your life? For that, my friend, is what this gracious and all-powerful king is worthy of: our faith, our obedience, and our loyalty.

Let's pray. Worthy are you, Christ our king, the lamb who was slain. Worthy are you to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing from us and every person that exists. To you be the glory and honor. Amen.