

The King's Final Hours

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Scripture: Luke 23:32–46

And there were also two other, malefactors, led with him to be put to death. ³³And when they were come to the place, which is called Calvary, there they crucified him, and the malefactors, one on the right hand, and the other on the left. ³⁴Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do. And they parted his raiment, and cast lots. ³⁵And the people stood beholding. And the rulers also with them derided him, saying, He saved others; let him save himself, if he be Christ, the chosen of God. ³⁶And the soldiers also mocked him, coming to him, and offering him vinegar, ³⁷and saying, If thou be the king of the Jews, save thyself. ³⁸And a superscription also was written over him in letters of Greek, and Latin, and Hebrew, THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS. ³⁹And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us. ⁴⁰But the other answering rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? ⁴¹And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss. ⁴²And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom. ⁴³And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise. ⁴⁴And it was about the sixth hour, and there was a darkness over all the earth until the ninth hour. ⁴⁵And the sun was darkened, and the veil of the temple was rent in the midst. ⁴⁶And when Jesus had cried with a loud voice, he said, Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit: and having said thus, he gave up the ghost.

—Luke 23:32–46

The passion and death of Jesus Christ bring out an unlikely aspect of His three-fold office. Oftentimes His sufferings are linked to His high-priesthood, but in the Gospel of Luke in particular we see the glorious kingship of Christ being affirmed from the beginning moments of His humiliation. Luke establishes the kingship of Jesus from the very beginning of his gospel. The Magnificat, or Song of Mary in Luke 1, parallels the Song of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2. Both of those songs speak of the humble being exalted. Indeed, in both of these books of the Bible, we see that God introduces the man after His own heart to rule and protect His people—and the king arises from humble beginnings. In 1 Samuel, we are introduced to David. In Luke, we are introduced to Jesus, the Son of David, the greater than David. Both come from humble beginnings—David from the fields of Bethlehem, Jesus in the manger at Bethlehem. Luke makes this linkage between David and Jesus clear. Joseph and Mary are both from the royal family of David, thus fulfilling the promise of 2 Samuel 7:12–16 that David’s throne would be established forever in the person of the Messiah. The angel’s words in Luke 1:30–31 also highlight the continuity of the Davidic dynasty culminating in the King of kings, “He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: and he shall reign over the house of Jacob forever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end.” Jesus is also born in Bethlehem, the city of David. Jesus’ humble beginnings and ties to the Davidic royal family affirm His kingship.

During His ministry, Jesus also confirms His kingship. He teaches about the nature of His kingdom through parables, “The kingdom of heaven is like....” He speaks and heals as a sovereign King over the created order. Jesus as King stands in contrast to Caesar Augustus and his *pax Romana*, ushering in true peace and prosperity

(Luke 2:1). The crowds jubilantly hail Him as King as He rides triumphantly into Jerusalem against the backdrop of His impending suffering and death: "Blessed be the King that cometh in the name of the Lord: peace in heaven, and glory in the highest" (Luke 19:38). His kingship is affirmed in His trial, where the kings of the earth and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and His anointed (Ps. 2:2). Their accusation comes down to this, "We found this fellow perverting the nation, and forbidding to give tribute to Cæsar, saying that he himself is Christ a King" (Luke 23:2). Jesus neither defends nor denies this claim, but simply refers His accusers back to Psalm 110 and their own witness: "Thou sayest it" (Luke 23:3). Though the verdict mocks Him, the truth of Jesus' kingship must be affirmed. He is robed; He is crowned with a crown of thorns, and His innocence is maintained by Pilate. The crowd is incensed with Pilate's claims of innocence and King Jesus sovereignly and willingly steps into the place of sinners as their substitute as Barabbas is released and Jesus is led away to His crucifixion. But even in the King's final hours, His kingship is proclaimed for the world to see and hear. The theme for this message is this: "The King's Final Hours." There are four things we need to see about His kingship in His final hours. First, His kingship is challenged. Second, His kingship is proclaimed. Third, His kingship is exercised. Fourth, His kingship is maintained.

His kingship is challenged. At almost every turn through His suffering and death, we find the kingship of Jesus challenged, but when it comes to the final hours of His life, this challenge is increased. All the forces of evil and darkness surround Jesus in His final hours and challenge His authority and power as the King of kings and Lord of lords.

In verses 32-33, we see His kingship challenged

through crucifixion: “And there were also two others, malefactors, led with him to be put to death. And when they were come to the place, which is called Calvary, there they crucified him, and the malefactors, one on the right hand, and the other on the left.” Think about this for a moment. Jesus, the perfect and sinless God-man, is crucified between two criminals. He is counted as a criminal with them—the One who knew no sin was numbered with the transgressors (2 Cor. 5:21; Isa. 53:12). The One who gave the law of His kingdom is now brought under the curse of that law for the sake of His subjects! He is crucified on Calvary or Golgotha—a name meaning “skull”—outside the city walls. He is brought outside the camp (cf. Heb. 13:13). The King who has come from glory is led to the shame and suffering of Golgotha. His crucifixion implies being made a curse for sin. Paul writes in Galatians 3:13, “Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is everyone that hangeth on a tree” (cf. Deut. 21:23). His kingship is thoroughly challenged in the very act of His crucifixion.

His kingship is also challenged when the soldiers disrobe Him and begin to gamble for His clothing. In verse 34b we read, “And they parted his raiment and cast lots.” What is significant about all this? The King is stripped naked and shamed before the entire world, again showing how He has borne the curse of sin for us. He was openly shamed and His only possessions in this world were gambled away at the foot of the cross. His kingship and royalty are challenged through this shameful treatment. How sad that the soldiers walk away from the cross with only some pieces of clothing; that was far more important to them than the King whom they had crucified. They challenge His authority and power by walking away from

the cross with only a few earthly possessions. What will you walk away with from the cross?

His kingship is also challenged when the people around Him ridicule Jesus. The challenge becomes more overt as insults and words are hurled at Jesus as He hangs on the cross. In verse 35, we read, "And the people stood beholding. And the rulers also with them derided him, saying, 'He saved others, let him save himself, if he be Christ, the chosen of God.'" This challenge touches the heart of the claims upon which Jesus was tried. "If he be Christ." They call into question His claim that He is the Messiah, the Anointed One of God. They mock Him, "He saved others, let him save himself." Let Him exercise His power and dominion if He is the Messiah. Let's see what He can do now that He's crucified on the cross. Oh, the depravity and darkness of the ruler's hearts. Jesus' words in Luke 19:42 ring true, "If thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things which belong unto thy peace! But now are they hid from thine eyes." Their hatred and depravity blind them to the glory, power, and grace of King Jesus.

The soldiers also mock Jesus by bringing vinegar to drink. Sour vinegar is no drink for a king. They accompany their mocking actions with words similar to the rulers, "If thou be the king of the Jews, save thyself." They make fun of the fact that Jesus is King of the Jews. These are foreign soldiers who mock, not only Jesus, but also the Jews. What a farce this king is, they think. If He is really a king, where are His troops, where are those who are going to rescue Him? Where is His power to come down from the cross? The rulers, the soldiers, and now also one of the malefactors join the growing chorus of those who challenge Jesus' kingship. Listen to what he says in verse 39, "If thou be the Christ, save thyself and

us.” Again the thief refers to Jesus as the Messiah, the Anointed One.

Perhaps you think that all these challenges are so far removed from us today. We don’t challenge Christ’s kingship in this way, do we? But what about our sin? Does that not challenge the authority and power of Christ in our lives? When you sin, are you not saying that you will not have Christ rule over you as sovereign King? When you sin, do you not challenge the power of King Jesus by living in such a way that sin is exercising its control over you? When you sin, do you not challenge the grace of King Jesus, sinning so that grace might abound?

His kingship proclaimed. Through all this ridicule, hatred, and evil, there is one thing that cannot be denied that remains an unalterable truth—Jesus is King. He remains in authority even on the cross. He will not exercise His power for His own benefit, but He will exercise His power by remaining on the cross, proving the very thing that His rabid enemies thought they were disproving. He is the King who brings salvation. That is obvious as His kingship is inevitably proclaimed to the world. It is proclaimed on three levels.

First, the rulers, the soldiers, and the malefactor proclaim it perversely. Though they ridiculed Jesus, they were speaking the truth. Even the mouths of these sinful men and women proclaimed the truth that Jesus is King. If the crowd at the triumphal entry would be silent, the stones would shout out the truth that Jesus is King (Luke 19:40). Well, here it’s not stones, but the very enemies of Christ speak the truth of His kingship. What they deny in their hearts and minds and what comes out of their mouths still witnesses to the fact that Jesus is King. Nothing can change that; that is why the unregenerate are so opposed to Jesus as King. No matter how they might try, they cannot escape the truth that stares them

in the face: Jesus is King. Those who will not kiss Him, He will laugh to scorn and hold in contempt (Ps. 2:4). Will that be said of you if you are unregenerate, violently opposed to Christ—perhaps not overtly, but in your heart and life? Will your scorn and contempt be met with the derision and contempt of the One who even now sits in heaven as universal King? What a warning if you are proclaiming the kingship of Christ perversely, knowing the truth and yet denying it with every fiber of your being. Know that nothing will change the fact that Jesus is King.

The rulers, soldiers, and malefactors are not the only ones to proclaim Jesus' kingship perversely. Notice also what Pilate does through all this. In verse 38 we read, "And a superscription also was written over him in letters of Greek, and Latin, and Hebrew, **THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.**" Other gospel writers give other details telling us this was Pilate's doing. Others show that this sign also identified who this King was, "JESUS OF NAZARETH." Placing this placard over the head of a criminal was common practice. The placard would identify the criminal along with their crime. Jesus is identified as the one who came from Nazareth. The accusation against Him is that He is the King of the Jews. In John's gospel, this did not sit well with the rulers and they wanted this placard changed to reflect that it was Jesus who claimed this. But Pilate's inscription and his firmness that it remain as he had written it reflect the fact that Jesus' kingship cannot be denied. It is a glorious fact that is proclaimed universally for all the world to see and hear, "This IS the King of the Jews!" It was written in the three most widely spoken languages for that day: Greek, Latin, and Hebrew/Aramaic. Everyone who came to Jerusalem that day would see the kingship of Christ universally proclaimed in the languages of the great empires and the language of the Jews. It would serve as a condemnation

for the Jews, “He came unto his own and his own received him not” (John 1:11). But it also serves to announce to the world that there is no salvation outside of King Jesus. That is the significance of this placard. What an encouragement for us as we engage the world in evangelism, as we speak to others about Christ. He is King. He is powerful. He is gracious. His salvation extends to the farthest reaches of the world. That is the truth which condemns and warns, but also saves.

But was all this lost that day on those gathered at the foot of the cross? Did no one rightfully acknowledge Jesus as King? No, there was one who proclaimed Jesus as King personally: the other thief on the cross next to Jesus. He has been silent until now, but he has been seeing things for the first time that he’s never seen before. The Holy Spirit opens his eyes even as he hangs there under judgment and fear of death for the crimes that he’s committed. He gloriously acknowledges Jesus as King. He proclaims that he has earned the judgment that he is under now, the meanwhile maintaining Jesus’ innocence. In verse 40b–41, he says to the other thief, “Dost thou not fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss.” But then he turns to Jesus and pleads with Him, “Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.” He comes into the throne room of Jesus seeking mercy. His eyes are opened in contrast to the blindness of the others to the kingly authority and power and grace of King Jesus. He addresses Him as Lord, as Sovereign. He acknowledges that Jesus has a kingdom that is not of this world. In the utter humiliation of Jesus, the thief saw this truth of His kingship and saw what he so desperately needed—entrance into the kingdom of heaven. In the supposed

weakness of Jesus in these moments, the thief saw the glorious reality of the power of King Jesus to save.

Paul calls the cross a stumbling block because of this fact. It displays weakness to the unregenerate heart, and yet what the thief witnessed and believed was anything but weakness. To him, Jesus on the cross became the power of God. This weakness of God was far more powerful than the strength of men. What do you see in this crucified King? Is He your salvation? Are you able, by grace, to see through the weakness and humiliation of Christ and see the One who has conquered sin, hell, and death? Is entrance into His kingdom your priority as you see the sentence of death you are under because of sin? Have your eyes been opened to see King Jesus? Do you personally proclaim Christ as King in your life? Does He reign over every aspect of your life?

His kingship exercised. Even in the midst of His greatest weakness and humiliation—physical, mental, emotional and spiritual distress—Jesus continues to exercise His kingship. He does so not for Himself, but for sinners around Him, His enemies. He prays in verse 34, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.” Does Jesus really mean these words? Is He really praying that those who were transgressing against Him so grossly should be forgiven? Yes; if He was praying anything else, what hope would there be of salvation? If Christ does not intercede for sinners even now, what hope do you or I have for salvation? Then both the worst and least sinner would be condemned to hell. Jesus exercises His mediatorial kingship in praying for His enemies. He not only prays for them, He prays that their sins would be forgiven. “Do not remit their sins to their charge.” It is staggering to the mind and soul to consider that the Savior is praying for sinners even as He dies for sinners. And is this prayer answered? Yes, indeed it is. At Pentecost, we find Peter

preaching to the crowds and three thousand are convicted and converted—even those who had crucified the King of glory. In Acts 3:17, after Peter and John heal the lame man at the Gate Beautiful, Peter is preaching again, pointing out the sin of the people in crucifying Jesus—and what does he say there? “And now brethren, I wot that through ignorance ye did it, as did also your rulers.” Jesus prays effectively for those who crucified Him with wicked hands. He fulfills the Scriptures again as He intercedes, “He was numbered with the transgressors, and he bare the sin of many, and he made intercession for the transgressors” (Isa. 53:12).

The good news is that Jesus not only exercised His mediatorial kingship then, but He continues to intercede for sinners even now—for those who sin willfully and those who sin in ignorance. What a glorious King we serve, who in the moment of His greatest weakness and facing death is praying for sinners like you and me. Is that not humbling? Is that not convicting? Does this sight of Christ not draw you to Him broken for your sin, seeking His lordship over you like the thief on the cross?

We see His kingship exercised as He intercedes for His enemies, but we see it again in His granting of a royal pardon to the thief who petitions Him. In verse 42, the thief petitions the King for mercy: “Remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.” And, in verse 43, we read Jesus’ response: “Verily, I say unto thee, Today thou shalt be with me in Paradise.” Jesus undergirds this royal pardon with an oath—“verily, truly.” He speaks sovereignly as King—“I say unto thee.” He speaks assuredly as King. There is no reason to doubt the King’s word, “Today, thou shalt be.” He speaks possessively as King, taking to Himself another subject from the kingdom of darkness, literally plucked from death and destruction, “You shall be

with me.” He opens the door of the kingdom to receive sinners; the thief is ushered into Paradise that very same day.

He grants this pardon to the thief on the cross, but this is the pardon He grants to all those who petition Him for mercy. Believers, this is the pardon you have received from King Jesus because of His work on the cross. “Verily, I say unto thee, today thou shalt be with me in Paradise.” Remind yourself of the great cost of this pardon. It was the King’s own death! Remind yourself of your duty now as a result of this pardon, and live to His glory and honor. Here is pardon set forth for those who are under condemnation and conviction. Find relief in King Jesus. Your and my sin nailed Him to the cross, but see His mercy even from that shameful cross. He exercises His kingship for sinners like you and me. What a King!

His kingship maintained. Jesus’ kingship is maintained even in the midst of His deepest humiliation and suffering. He is no martyr who dies passively; as the humiliated and suffering King, He goes willingly and in firm control of His own life. This is also seen in the moments and final act of His death. As the King of creation hung in humiliation and forsakenness, even His creation retreats from the awful specter of death, destruction, and judgment. Thick darkness descends as the fury of the wrath of God against sin is poured out upon Christ, “There was a darkness over all the earth until the ninth hour” (Luke 23:44). The sun is obscured, and in the midst of this heavy darkness and suffering, the King in His glory is never diminished. Rather, as the King of heaven and earth, He remains in control of His life.

Even in the hour of His death, the significance and power of His death are not lost. As the King lays His life down on the altar for a sin offering, the offering is made, the blood of atonement is shed—and what do we read? In verse 45b, “And the veil of the temple was rent in the

midst.” The Holy of holies is exposed; the King is in His Temple! The Holy of holies where the train of the LORD of hosts filled the temple in Isaiah’s vision is opened. The King rends open the way into the royal, holy, and august presence of God for offenders and rebels. The kingly High Priest carries in the blood of atonement, sprinkling it on the mercy seat. Through the irresistible power of that blood, He draws those from obscurity and banishment of sin into His royal court. In His holy presence, He raises up those who confess to be dead dogs (2 Sam. 9).

His kingship is maintained so that you and I may enter into the Holy of holies. O blessed thought, that the way of salvation has been opened! Sinners can come into the throne room of the Most High God. In His sovereign and almighty power, Jesus opens up the entrance to God. He is the conquering King over sin, hell, and death.

Finally, He maintains His kingship in laying down His life. The life ebbs out of Jesus as the excruciating pain courses through His body and the wrath of His Father presses down upon Him in wave after wave. The King is spent and yet still firmly in control even to the very last breath He takes. We see that when He cries with a loud voice and says, “Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit” (Luke 23:46). His life is not taken from Him, but He gives it to His Father. This is the final act of His kingship on this side of death—He sovereignly places His life in His Father’s hands. And then we read in verse 46b, “And having said thus, he gave up the ghost.” Again, Jesus *gave up* the ghost. He breathed out His last, speaking to His own words of John 10:18, “No man taketh it [my life] from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have the power to lay it down, and I have the power to take it again.” Jesus maintains His kingship in death.

Through all this, He proclaims that He is King of heaven and earth. He rules victoriously over death,

anticipating His resurrection. He rules victoriously over your sin, child of God, because of His death. He rules victoriously over the tempter, over your remaining sinful flesh. Such suffering and yet such glory veiled in that suffering! This is what pertains to your peace. Do you see Him by faith? Do you wonder at it? Are you bowing before King Jesus? Amen.