

Thank Jesus for the Cross!

A sermon based on Luke 23:35-43 - ***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."***

³⁶ The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar ³⁷ and said, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself."

³⁸ There was a written notice above him, which read: this is the king of the jews.

³⁹ One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"

⁴⁰ But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? ⁴¹ We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong."

⁴² Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

⁴³ Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

This is the day the Lord has made. We will rejoice and be glad in it! Amen.

It was the week of Thanksgiving. Ms. Murray's second grade class had spent some time learning about the first Thanksgiving, and today was the day...the day right before Thanksgiving break, and they were having their own little Thanksgiving feast. But, before they could eat, they were going to say a prayer. And, the fun little assignment Ms. Murray had given to her class at the beginning of the week was to spend a couple of days thinking about what they were thankful for, because each student would be asked to join in the prayer by thanking God for that something.

Easy enough. One by one, each student followed Ms. Murray's lead, as she thanked God for her "most of the time" well-behaved class. You had kids thankful for Mom & Dad, thankful for a favorite toy, thankful for their Nintendo Switch, thankful for their bike, thankful for their favorite sports team, thankful for their clothes, even one thankful for the delicious-looking food they were about to eat...that was thoughtful!

But then, there was a bit of silence. It was little Danny's turn, and it was becoming apparent he hadn't done his homework. As the uncomfortable silence grew long as he was trying to come up with something that hadn't been mentioned already, you could see several students lifting their heads slightly, subtly opening one eye to see Danny turning bright red in the face. There were even a few muffled snickers as Ms. Murray quickly shushed them and said, "Danny, it's alright. Can you think of something – one thing - you're thankful for?"

He was so frazzled he couldn't. He'd already resorted to looking around the room for something – anything – to mention in his prayer. And then he saw it. And he closed his eyes, bowed his head, and

nervously said, "Thank you, Jesus, for the cross. Amen!" And he lifted his head, opened his eyes to see a warm smile from Ms. Murray. "Yes, that's perfect, Danny! I am, too. Thank you, Jesus, for the cross!"

As you're getting ready for Thanksgiving this week (as I assume you are)...as you're building your "thankful" list (which I hope you do, at the very least in your mind)...as you do that, where is the cross? I want to show you this. It's a prayer journal. The week of Thanksgiving 2015, I set out on a 365 days of Thanksgiving challenge, where I would write one unique thing I was thankful for each day in this journal for an entire year. I didn't quite make it – at about day 200, I think it got put into my nightstand drawer, and I forgot about it. But I paged through it to see when I specifically thanked God for the cross. I didn't make it all the way through, but the closest I found was actually Black Friday, where I thanked God for an even greater "Black Friday," where on Good Friday, Jesus went to the cross so that I could be in the "black" with God. I think that sorta counts, right?

Again, when's the last time you thanked Jesus for the cross?

Well today, to leave no doubts for this coming year, I'm going to make up for that lack. Today, with our Thanksgiving/Christ the King mash-up, we're going to make up for that specific lack of thankfulness by simply saying, "Thank you, Jesus, for the cross!"

Thank you, Jesus, for the cross! Let's go again to that day, the original Black Friday, Good Friday. Do you think that prayer was on the hearts of many people there?

I mean, what you had was like 4 groups of people there on Calvary. You had the Jews, headed by the chief priests and teachers of the law. There were the Roman soldiers who were there simply for the purpose of carrying out the crucifixion. You had some of Jesus' followers (notably his mother Mary and the disciple Jesus loved, John). And lastly, there were the criminals hanging next to Jesus.

Was there any thankfulness there...for Jesus hanging on the cross? Jesus' followers? They weren't. They were devastated.

I guess you could maybe say the Jewish religious leaders were thankful, because that meant they got their way. That meant they were ridding themselves of this nuisance. That meant their arch-enemy was going away for good. So, I assume they were thankful Jesus was going to die.

And you could just see them reveling in his pain and his torment and his misfortune. Listen to their taunts: ***"He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One...If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself."***

Do you get it? Instead of using Jesus' kingly titles to praise him, they used them to make fun of him as he was dying. They said, "He, or literally, "that one" saved others (meaning he had claimed to save others from earthly ills)." Now they were challenging him to come down from the cross. "Let him (the Chosen One) save himself."

Now, don't get me wrong. The Jewish leaders were expecting a King. They wanted a king. But when they looked at Jesus dying on the cross, they didn't see a King. So Jesus couldn't possibly be the Christ, the Chosen One. So again, they were thankful this "Christ," this "liar" was going to die.

Are you? Are you thankful Christ died? You know, in almost any other circumstance, that'd be a swift "no." We're not exactly eager for people to die. We don't tend to revel in or celebrate their deaths (at least not like the Jews here).

But it's different with Jesus. Again, are you thankful Christ died? Of course we are. His death is our salvation. His death is our forgiveness. His death is what paves the way to our eternity. So, yes, I'm thankful for the cross, and I know you are, too.

So, why don't we always live like it? Do you understand that question? Maybe you've heard the phrase, "Thanksgiving is thanks-living." That means if we're really thankful for something, we're not just going to say "thank you" for it at Thanksgiving; we're going to show it in the way we live. So, maybe in your family, kids, if you're thankful for Mom & Dad, you'll listen to them, talk kindly to them, give them lots of hugs. If you're thankful for a spouse or a friend, you'll be there for them, drop what you're doing to help them out or to take their call and just listen; you'll do whatever you can to let them know you care about them. If you're thankful for your job, you're going to show up on time, give 100% of your effort to it.

I think we could all agree the best way to say "thank you" is to show it. So, why don't we always do that for Jesus?

For example, here, I'm reminded how, because of the cross, I'm forgiven for the way I talk to my wife sometimes – just plain rude, or for when I sometimes get overly frustrated with my daughter and act out in that frustration...and then, my way of saying "thank you, Jesus" is by continuing to say those rude things or continually getting angry and yelling at my child. That's not thankfulness.

One of the best ways you get to say "thank you to Jesus for dying for me" is by making that great gospel message a priority in your life – through worship, and Bible class, and personal devotions...all ways we get to glorify Christ our King. So, where do those fit in your life? At the top – here's what's most important to me? Or, is it more like, when time's available, or when I remember or feel like it (which isn't all that often). And, as for following that Word and obeying the King? At least for me, there're a lot of time where I'd rather be king of my life and do what I want, not what God's Word says. Again, that's not thankfulness.

As you know, the examples of our unfaithfulness and ungratefulness to God are abundant. They're different for every one of us in our lives. But what's the same for all of us is we aren't always showing thankfulness for Jesus and his cross. We just aren't. And for that thanklessness, we deserve the fullness of God's wrath and eternal condemnation from Christ the King.

So, that's us. Now, going back to that Good Friday scene, again, was there any thankfulness for Jesus and the cross that day...like any real thankfulness?

There was...from the least likely source.

You know, also getting in on the mocking Jesus was one of the two criminals who was hanging on another cross next to him. But the other? There was this incredible change that took place. For that thief, what likely started out that day as a fear of God (and the punishment that lay in store for him because of his wickedness) turned to a genuine fear of God (as the true, loving, compassionate God). He

looked beside him, and that man hanging next to him...the Holy Spirit moved his heart to believe that this Jesus could forgive even him.

You could tell by his words that he was thankful for Jesus. Why? Why was he thankful? Jesus' cross meant God would remember him. Jesus' cross meant that God was forgiving him. Jesus' cross meant eternal paradise for him.

Same as for you and me. Fellow Light of the World family members, I know you join me today in saying, "Thank Jesus for the cross!" I'm thankful for Christ my King, whose battle involved that cross and taking all my sins and suffering hell for me there so that now, eternal Paradise is mine!

You see, the one who hung on the cross was indeed the "Christ of God, the Chosen One...the King of the Jews." But, unlike the taunts, Jesus didn't want to save himself. He didn't have to. That wasn't his charge. He was hanging to save others. He was dying to save us.

He was exactly the one who was doing exactly what the prophet Isaiah had written when God told him, ***"Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight...he will bring justice to the nations...In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; he will not falter or be discouraged"*** (Isaiah 42:1-4).

If only his enemies had understood what we know now. They had rightly sang at Palm Sunday, "Hosanna! Save us, Son of [King] David." Good Friday, they rightly called him the Christ, the Chosen One, the King of the Jews. They said all the right things, but they didn't believe Jesus was that person, their King. It was a joke. They didn't believe Jesus could truly and eternally save. But that one thief did. And Paradise was his. And we do, too. And Paradise is ours.

Thank Jesus for the cross. Because of it, we are saved. We are forgiven. We are heirs of heaven.

The cross is what makes us Christians. Christ's cross and what it stands for, his entire work of salvation – his perfect life, his innocent death, his glorious resurrection – is what makes us Christians.

But, today, we also thank Jesus for another cross that makes us Christians, the cross each of us carry.

You know, I wonder if the thief wasn't that very thing as his life was ending. I'll bet he praised and thanked God for the cross he had carried and was hanging on. Do you understand why? Without his cross, where would that thief be? Not talking to Jesus. Not having the Holy Spirit changing his heart. So, probably not in paradise today, either. He needed his cross to point him to Jesus, his King.

In the same way, we're not in paradise yet, but along the way, Jesus promises each of us a cross. Do you know what it is? It's whatever suffering or hardship or adversity you experience in this life that tries to rip you away from Jesus. And our crosses can be cumbersome and frustrating, and you would think they make us want to turn away from Jesus.

But do you know their true purpose? Our crosses always point us to and keep us focused on the cross of Christ. Seeing Jesus on the cross, suffering unimaginable pain and torment – the depths of which our own crosses could never compare in a million years – but all that in order to gain paradise for us, it leaves us feeling nothing but thankful...thankful for Jesus' cross that forgives us...thankful for our crosses that, like with the thief, focus us on Christ our King.

You look at that cross, and what do you feel? What are you thankful for? We thank Jesus for the cross. That's what'll be on my heart and mind this Thanksgiving. That's what'll be the starting entry for my

new 365 days of Thanksgiving challenge. Any of you want to join in with me and Becky and hopefully Mara? I'm serious; let's talk later!

But even if that's not for you, will you join me today...and this week...and every day of our lives, saying, rejoicing, "Thank you, Jesus, for the cross!"? Try it with me: "Thank you, Jesus, for the cross!" "Thank you, Christ my King for the victory you won for me on the cross! Thank you, Jesus, for the cross you allow me to carry each day because it shows me I belong to you; it points me to you always! Thank you, Jesus for the cross!" What a perfect ending! Amen.

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