

1. Let me start with my lesson title, "The darkest hour". To explain that title I first need to discuss why I write these lessons and who they are designed for: They are for those who already believe Jesus is God and paid the full price for their sins. I write these lessons to help people so they can grow in their faith and trust in Jesus. I explain all of that first, as we are getting into very familiar territory for most Christians: The events around the crucifixion and death of Jesus. As opposed to just explaining what bible verses mean, what I enjoy the most is explaining how they relate to us in our daily life. Yes understanding why Jesus died the way He did is fundamental to the Gospel story, but I assume most of us know that. Of course I'll talk about that in this lesson, but I also want to focus on how we apply this to our lives on a daily basis. With that speech out of my system, here goes:
  - a) Most of us can relate to moments in our lives where we view them as our darkest hour. It is those times where other than our faith in God, we didn't know how we would ever get through such times. Even with our faith, we still worry and make tough decisions. Since you are reading this, I can logically assume we survived such times. What I hope to teach in this lesson is a few tips about dealing with those "dark hour" moments so the next time we do have to face such moments, with God's help, He can see us through such times just as He has seen us through our life to date. With that thought in mind, let me summarize the text of this chapter and see how we can apply it to our own lives.
2. The first part of this chapter focuses on Jesus various trials in front of Roman Courts. Jesus was already found guilty by illegal trials in front of Jewish courts of claiming to be God. The problem with that charge is it isn't enough to get one convicted in the Roman system of justice. To say this another way, the Roman officials that oversee Israel can say, "OK, so this man claims to be God, so what? How does that affect the Roman rule over this territory?" Therefore, the Jewish leaders, who feared Jesus as He put down their crooked religious system of taking financial advantage of people trying to draw closer to God. Jesus taught sin is to be avoided as it's the best way to live. At the same time, He alone would pay the price for all our sins. However, I know I'm preaching to the choir here. Therefore, just understand this was Jesus' darkest hour as demonic forces were doing everything in their power to prevent Jesus from going to the cross.
  - a) Therefore, as we read of Jesus being in front of Roman courts, notice the fake charges, and notice how both Pilate and Herod found Jesus innocent, but were forced to crucify Him in order to keep things peaceful in Jerusalem as it was crowded with tourists for a holiday.
  - b) The point for you and me, is that when things are going horribly wrong, and it seems like the whole world is against us, know that God is still there, guiding our lives for His glory, if we're willing to let Him do so.
3. The second part of the chapter focuses on the events leading up to Jesus actual death. Among the events are the beatings He took and the procession to the cross. It talks of a man guilty of murder who was released instead of Jesus. The text tells of a random person from the crowd who had to carry Jesus cross as it was too heavy for Him in His weaken state. From some cross-references we learn that the man who carried it became a believer as did his sons. That event alone shows how good can come out of the dark hours of our lives. Next we get the story of Jesus warning those in the crowd of how much Israel as a nation is going to suffer for it's destruction. As bad as things looked for Jesus at the moment, the "darkest hour" is coming for all of Israel within 40 years.
  - a) The final encounter we read before Jesus actually died is between another man on another cross and Jesus. The short version is this man believed Jesus was God and Jesus told Him that he would be with Jesus in heaven that day for that belief. The point here is as dark a time as it was for that other man also dying on the cross, he can look forward to an eternal life in heaven despite whatever crimes he committed to be on that cross in the first place.

4. The final part of the chapter focused on those who watched Jesus died. A Roman soldier said Jesus died an innocent man. While I can't prove it, I suspect that Roman soldier later was saved based on what he saw. Other witnesses also left realizing Jesus was framed and over time as the growth of Christianity started, I suspect others who witnessed this got saved once they figured out the implications of what happened. Finally we'll get several stories of people who prepared Jesus body for burial. It shows the honor paid to Jesus as God even before people understood the full picture of what happened. My point here is that this was a dark hour for a lot of people who saw this event but eventually that sadness turned into joy as they'll learn what comes soon.
5. Believe it or not, that leads me into the next lesson I'm going to write on Chapter 24. I can tell you right now that the title to my next lesson is: "Sunday's coming". That's an expression that means that just as Jesus rose from the dead on that Sunday morning, there is always good news coming no matter how dark the present situation is. Even if God does not let us get through our current situation alive, knowing that we lived to do His will, will bring us eternal joy that can't compare to whatever suffering we have to deal with in this life. Now that you know what to expect in the final lesson on Luke, what do you say we get into the details of the "darkest hour" of Chapter 23?
6. Chapter 23, Verse 1: Then the whole assembly rose and led him off to Pilate. <sup>2</sup> And they began to accuse him, saying, "We have found this man subverting our nation. He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar and claims to be Christ, a king."
  - a) It's best to start off recalling where we last left off. Jesus was arrested early in the evening hours of the 24-hour period before He would die on the cross. He was betrayed by Judas who was one of His 12 disciples. He just went through three illegal trials by the leaders of the religious establishment: First was the father of the high priest who was the real power behind the high priest. Then at the home of the high priest himself, and finally a group of judges called the Sanhedrin who was the "Supreme Court" of religious matters in Israel at that time. If you study how people were supposed to be tried in Israel at that time, I'll just say that everything about this trial was illegal and wouldn't stand up in any modern court of law. The short version is they found Jesus guilty of blasphemy as He correctly claimed to be God. They refused to accept witnesses on His behalf or even examine any evidence of what He claimed to prove His case.
  - b) That leads me to the "however". When it came to the Roman Government, all they cared about was that people don't cause a riot and that they paid their taxes. If Jesus is charged with "blasphemy" of claiming to be God, the Romans would say so what? The leaders of the Jewish nation knew Jesus was popular and they didn't want to take the blame for Him dying, so they wanted the Romans to kill Him, not them. They didn't want to take blame for Jesus death, so they made up other charges so the Romans would crucify Him.
  - c) That leads us to Verse 1. The text says, "the whole assembly". That would refer to the 70 elders that make up the Sanhedrin as well as the representatives of the High Priest. They charged Jesus with subverting the Jewish nation (a vague charge), opposing payment of taxes to Rome (which Jesus never did) and claiming to be a king, which would be a threat to Rome if people saw Jesus and not the Roman Emperor as the king over their land.
  - d) Suppose you say, I know all of this. It's sad but necessary for Jesus to pay the price for my sins. How does it affect me? As we go through this story, think about "dark times" we've gone through ourselves and let's see what we can learn about life based on the way Jesus did handle what was a horrible situation of the worst miscarriage of justice in history.
7. Verse 3: So Pilate asked Jesus, "Are you the king of the Jews?" "Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied. <sup>4</sup> Then Pilate announced to the chief priests and the crowd, "I find no basis for a charge against this man."
  - a) This is the first of several times where Pilate blatantly says, "Not guilty". Here was Jesus already a little beaten up from the trials He's had so far. Pilate looked at Jesus and said in effect, "This man is no threat to Rome, no matter who He claims to be, not guilty."
  - b) However, as we'll read, He was still a threat to the religious leaders, so they pressed on.

8. Verse 5: But they insisted, "He stirs up the people all over Judea by his teaching. He started in Galilee and has come all the way here." <sup>6</sup> On hearing this, Pilate asked if the man was a Galilean. <sup>7</sup> When he learned that Jesus was under Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him to Herod, who was also in Jerusalem at that time.
- a) The point is Pilate, the Roman governor over this area thought of Jesus as some harmless preacher. Therefore, the Jewish leaders said that Jesus stirs up the Israelites beginning in the (Lake) Galilee region (north of Jerusalem) and is "all the way up here" as Jerusalem is higher in elevation than that lake area.
  - b) At this point Pilate is thinking, OK, how do I get out of this situation? Obviously this man isn't a threat and the Jewish leaders are jealous of what He is teaching. When Pilate hears Jesus is from the Lake Galilee area, he thinks maybe I can pass Him off to Herod who's the leader of that area. Remember that Pilate has already declared Jesus innocent, but Pilate's still dealing with a hostile group of powerful Jewish leaders. Remember that Pilate's main job is to keep the peace. If Pilate fails to keep the peace, his job is in jeopardy.
  - c) Time for a quick "Herod" history lesson. There was a bunch of Herod's in the bible. Each is part of the same family. The Herod that had the babies killed when Jesus is born is now dead. This is one of that Herod's sons who was the leader over the Lake Galilee area. In the book of Acts many years later, Paul was on trial in front of another Herod. Know that the Herod's were not Jewish, but Edomites (a traditional enemy of Israel that lived in the area east of Israel in what is Jordan today). The original Herod was made ruler over this area as he helped the Romans conquer Israel and some of the surrounding territory.
  - d) With all that said the "Herod of the moment" was in Jerusalem for the big holiday. This is the same Herod who had John the Baptist killed probably 1-2 years earlier.
  - e) The point of all of this ancient history for you and me is that this is Jesus darkest hour". It will show us how Jesus handled all of these horrible things that went wrong in His trials and hopefully teach us a few things about how to handle our own dark hours. With that said, let's read on to see how God played out ancient history for our benefit.
9. Verse 8: When Herod saw Jesus, he was greatly pleased, because for a long time he had been wanting to see him. From what he had heard about him, he hoped to see him perform some miracle. <sup>9</sup> He plied him with many questions, but Jesus gave him no answer. <sup>10</sup> The chief priests and the teachers of the law were standing there, vehemently accusing him.
- a) It may help to remember that this is the same Herod who had John the Baptist killed some time back. The quick history lesson is this Herod knew John was a popular preacher and an innocent man. John correctly accused Herod of sin as Herod had his half brother killed so he can marry his brother's wife. A daughter was born out of that sinful relationship. It got stranger as when this daughter grew up, she sexually danced for her father at a party and it turned Herod on. As a reward for that dance, she asked that John be killed at the request of her mother. Herod not wanting to disappoint the party guests, agreed to have him killed despite the fact Herod liked to hear John speak in prison. I have to admit, this would make a great soap opera if it wasn't so disgusting. This story is told in Matthew 14 and Mark Chapter 6.
  - b) The reason I tell that story here is to understand why Jesus was quiet in front of Herod as stated in Verse 9 above. If Herod wasn't convinced John was a prophet, nothing Jesus can say would make a difference. One gets the impression all Herod wanted was to see some demonstration of Jesus power to "put on a show" for Herod.
  - c) To explain these verses another way, understand that true miracles by themselves don't produce faith. They only make one want to see another miracle. A problem with miracles is that one simply wants to live for the next miracle. Think of the Israelites who witnessed the parting of the Red Sea and ate bread from heaven daily for 40 years. They still turned from God despite seeing all those great miracles. My point is Jesus didn't do any miracles for Herod as Jesus knew it was pointless as Herod rejected John's preaching to repent.

- d) Anyway, back to the "dark moment", picture Jesus standing in front of the governor of another part of Israel with the Jewish leaders accusing Jesus of being a traitor to Israel. Despite all the false charges and despite the fact that Herod was begging for a miracle, Jesus stood there silent and didn't say anything. The point for you and I is sometimes the best thing we can do to prove our innocence is to say nothing. Think of it this way, I'm sure as a leader, Herod was used to people trying to state their innocence in front of him. Jesus' silence spoke louder than anything He could say in His defense. What we see here is Jesus accepting God the Father's will despite the temptation to speak out here on the miscarriage of justice.
10. Verse 11: Then Herod and his soldiers ridiculed and mocked him. Dressing him in an elegant robe, they sent him back to Pilate. <sup>12</sup> That day Herod and Pilate became friends--before this they had been enemies.
- a) It's one thing for Jesus to keep quiet when Herod was demanding a miracle or for Him to keep quiet when false charges are being leveled against Him. Now Jesus also had to rise above soldiers mocking Him and even putting one of Herod's "fancy king robes" on Him. It would not be a sin for Jesus to speak up, but it wouldn't serve any purpose. The point is both Herod and the Jewish religious leaders already made their minds up about Jesus and saying anything in His defense was pointless at this time.
- b) Stop and consider that when Jesus rose from the dead, He didn't go see Pilate or Herod to say I'm back, boy did you guys blow it! Jesus only appeared to those who believed in Him in the first place. My point is miracles only benefit those who believe in Jesus in the first place, not those who have rejected Jesus beyond a point of any hope.
- c) There are some historical sources that show that Herod and Pilate were rivals for power and did things to irritate each other. However, their unity over bending to the will of the religious leaders to have Jesus killed united them in thought for a period of time.
- d) One of the questions that puzzled me is if Satan didn't want Jesus to die and pay the sins of the world, why did he work "behind the scenes" to have Jesus killed? What I figure is Satan's goal is to stop Jesus from ruling over people and if Satan can get the leadership of Israel all to turn from Him, it would get the masses to not accept Jesus either. The point here is to remind us to "give the devil his due" to understand the power behind the events we read in these chapters. One of the secrets to handle the difficult moments in life is to learn to "rise above it" and see the big picture. That's what Jesus did here by His silence.
- e) In the meantime, Jesus is now being dragged back to Pilate for his third trial in the same day in front of a Roman court. In total, we had six trials all in the same night and early morning hours: Three in front of the Jewish leaders and three in front of Roman leaders.
11. Verse 13: Pilate called together the chief priests, the rulers and the people, <sup>14</sup> and said to them, "You brought me this man as one who was inciting the people to rebellion. I have examined him in your presence and have found no basis for your charges against him. <sup>15</sup> Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us; as you can see, he has done nothing to deserve death. <sup>16</sup> Therefore, I will punish him and then release him. "
- a) Here is Pilate making a statement in front of the Jewish religious leaders that both he and Herod have found Jesus innocent of the charges of causing a rebellion against Rome or the charge of not paying taxes to Rome. What's implied here is that even if Jesus is claiming to be God, Pilate and Herod are thinking, "So what? He's not harming anyone and more importantly, not doing any harm to the Romans ruling over this area, so we find Jesus to be innocent of the charges".
- b) What gets me here is if Jesus is found innocent, why is Jesus ordered to be punished? The best answer I've read is that in Roman law if one is thought to be going down the wrong path in life, (kind of like hanging out with the wrong kind of people), the Romans had the right to punish someone in hopes it would drive that person to do the right thing. Yes it's not fair and Jesus didn't deserve this punishment.

- c) However, as I love to state, this is the "moment of darkness". It's like times can come in our lives when we feel like everything is falling apart and there is nothing we can do to stop any of it from happening. The hope is to realize that despite the darkness, God is still there, still in charge, and still guiding us through such times. Consider when we learn the most in life, from when things are going well or when things are going wrong. Those hard life lessons end up drawing us closer to God, not away from Him. That's why one of my favorite prayers is to ask God to help me to learn what He wants me to learn from what it is I have to face at this moment. Therefore, Jesus put up with whatever was dished out to Him without speaking up as Jesus understood it was God's will to go through all of this, despite the false charges and difficulty of the situation.
    - i) So when we're in our own "dark hour", do we speak up or keep silent? Me, I'd do what was best and constantly pray my way through it. To quote a bible scholar I respect when he was battling depression, one battles it physically, emotionally and spiritually. In other words, he prayed, sought medical help, tried to stay in good physical shape and battled his way through it the best he could. That's what I am saying to each of us as well, when the dark hours come, pray our way through it, as well as do what we can to work our way through such situations realizing God is guiding us through it for His glory.
  - d) In the meantime, we left Jesus probably tied up and beaten up, standing in front of a large crowd of Jewish people. Picture Pilate standing on a stage in front a crowd next to Jesus, saying in effect, what do all of you want me to do with Jesus? The point is the crowd can see how harmless Jesus was after being beaten up by Roman soldiers.
12. Verse 18: With one voice they cried out, "Away with this man! Release Barabbas to us!"  
<sup>19</sup>(Barabbas had been thrown into prison for an insurrection in the city, and for murder.)
- a) Before I discuss Barabbas, let's understand why the crowd rejected Jesus. Yes, the Jewish leaders stirred up the crowd to yell for Barabbas. Yes the Romans were "throwing a bone" to the Jewish people by releasing one prisoner on this holiday. To understand this, recall that the Jewish people wanted a leader (Messiah) who would overthrow the Romans. To see Jesus in His beaten up state means He wouldn't lead any rebellion against them. That is why the crowd cheered for Barabbas as the text stated he was guilty of trying to lead a rebellion against Rome and that's what the crowd wanted.
  - b) I admit I can't resist sharing the classic story here of "The Gospel according to Barabbas". No that's not an unpublished gospel account, just an interesting way of presenting this story using Barabbas as the central figure. The name Barabbas means "Son of the Father". Here was the "Son of the Father" guilty of sin as stated in Verse 19. He deserved to die for his sin as he committed murder. He was set free as Jesus paid the price for his sins in his place. Barabbas himself was probably in jail and was not on stage. All he knew was he was going to die on a cross and the next thing he knew he was going to be set free as Jesus is going to die in his place. That story alone is a great example of how Jesus paid the price for our sins and He took the payment upon Himself that we deserved for our sins.
13. Verse 20: Wanting to release Jesus, Pilate appealed to them again. <sup>21</sup> But they kept shouting, "Crucify him! Crucify him!"
- a) Remember that Pilate and Herod had both found Jesus to be innocent of the charges that were brought before them by the religious leaders. The reason the crowd wanted Jesus dead was because He claimed to be the Messiah and that crowd was only interested in a Messiah that would overthrow Rome. It's kind of like saying, "We're not interested in any person who wants to die for our sins, we want to prove our own worth to God based on how we act in life, so kill him as we reject Him as our sin payment."
  - b) I admit I feel sorry for Pilate here. He's like a government bureaucrat who can't "pass the buck" off on someone else and get out of this situation by doing the right thing here. Pilate had to appease the crowd in order to prevent a riot from occurring at that festival.

14. Verse 22: For the third time he spoke to them: "Why? What crime has this man committed? I have found in him no grounds for the death penalty. Therefore I will have him punished and then release him."
  - a) It always amazes me to realize the extent to which Pilate said Jesus was innocent. In you read this story in Matthew's account, he mentioned how Pilate's wife told Pilate that she had a bad dream about Jesus and Pilate should release "that innocent man" (See Matthew 27:19 for that reference.)
  - b) One has to remember that Pilate himself was no angel. Back in Luke Chapter 13, we had a story of Pilate having some Israelites killed as they worshipped in the temple area. I bring it up here just to show that Pilate wasn't always perfect in justice. However, between the big public trials Jesus faced in front of Pilate and Herod as well as what Pilate's wife told him, Pilate wanted to do the right thing here only because his reputation was at stake. If Pilate failed to kill Jesus and a riot begins, Pilate could be brought up on charges as being a bad Roman leader. That's why I see Pilate as a bureaucrat stuck in a bad spot.
  - c) Pilate's hoping he could get out of this by punishing Jesus short of death and hoping that would silence the crowd who wanted Jesus dead.
15. Verse 23: But with loud shouts they insistently demanded that he be crucified, and their shouts prevailed. <sup>24</sup> So Pilate decided to grant their demand. <sup>25</sup> He released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, the one they asked for, and surrendered Jesus to their will.
  - a) Bottom line: Pilate gave up. He agreed to have Jesus crucified even though Pilate knew Jesus was innocent of the charges brought against him. Pilate also agreed to free Barabbas despite the fact that Barabbas was guilty of starting a riot with the intent of getting people to rebel against Rome.
  - b) There is an interesting epilogue to Pilate's life that comes from a nonbiblical source. The story goes that Pilate went insane soon after this and ended up in Sicily. There he hanged himself in his insane state of mind. My point if this is true, is one can't be neutral in their view of Jesus. Doing the wrong thing by doing what a crowd demands is not leadership. In my opinion God punished Pilate both in the later part of his life and eternally for his failure to do what is right. The point as it effects you and me is during the dark times of our lives, make the best decisions possible and not be persuaded by what say, others are telling us to do.
  - c) The main point here for us is no neutrality is allowed with Jesus. There are many who say Jesus was a great teacher or a great prophet. However, they'll deny Jesus is God and deny the only way to salvation is through Jesus. I know I'm preaching to the choir here on that point, so I won't preach on that point any further.
16. Verse 26: As they led him away, they seized Simon from Cyrene, who was on his way in from the country, and put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus.
  - a) At this point in the story, Jesus is now being led away from the crowd bearing the weight of the cross on his shoulders. What Romans did for condemned criminals was make them march through town carrying their cross as to show others what happens when you try to rebel against Rome. Apparently Jesus was so weak from the beatings he's taken he didn't have the strength to carry the cross Himself. Therefore, a Roman soldier picked out of the crowd a man to help Jesus carry the cross.
  - b) OK, why is this here and why should I care? It's another piece of evidence that nothing is "random" with God. This Simon was from Cyrene, which today is Libya. Apparently he came to Jerusalem as a Jew to celebrate the Passover holiday. Mark's account of this story tells us that Simon was the father of Alexander and Rufus (Mark 15:21). Marks' Gospel is written to a Roman audience and Rufus is mentioned as a Christian in Rome in Romans 16:13. My point is the "random event" of a man in the crowd who helped Jesus, turned out to lead his family to be Christians let alone whoever else he influenced.

- c) With all that said, the reason Luke includes this is to show that despite the darkness that Jesus faced in all of this sorrow, some good is coming out of the story including followers of Jesus from what appears to be a random event.
  - d) Next we get Jesus last recorded words to anyone before the crucifixion:
17. Verse 27: A large number of people followed him, including women who mourned and wailed for him. <sup>28</sup> Jesus turned and said to them, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children. <sup>29</sup> For the time will come when you will say, 'Blessed are the barren women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!' <sup>30</sup> Then 'they will say to the mountains, 'Fall on us!' and to the hills, 'Cover us!' ' <sup>31</sup>For if men do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?"
- a) OK, first question, who are these women following Jesus? Are they the same woman who were part of the crowd that followed Jesus when He was alive? Don't know as the text does not tell us. Some argue they're "professional mourners" who made a living in Israel by crying out for the dead. Others say they were followers of Jesus. What is interesting is if you study all the Gospels and all the New Testament for that matter, you never read of any woman criticizing Jesus in any way, shape or form. My point is whoever these girls are, they cried for Him as He was traveling to His death.
  - b) With that said, notice Jesus doesn't have a pity party for Himself, but instead focuses on the future of these women. The reason women liked Jesus is that He wasn't absorbed in His own problems but despite whatever it was He was going through. He always cared about putting others first. That fact alone is a great lesson in living the Christian life, to put the needs of others as a priority over our own needs.
  - c) This is Jesus in His final role as a prophet. My loose translation of what Jesus is saying is, "Hey, you think I've got it bad, just wait another 40 years until all of Israel is destroyed by the Romans for rebellion. Yes I'm going to die, but soon over a million people are going to die when the Romans destroy this place." To translate this another way, "You think I've got it bad now, you ain't seen nothing yet. It would be better not to have children then to see one's children have to suffer through what's going to take place in the near future.
  - d) OK, so why didn't Jesus say, "Hey hide me and get me out of this mess and God may hold back on the destruction of Israel". Because Jesus understood that the cross was required, as well as the judgment for His corporate rejection by the Israelites. That's why several chapters back Jesus wept over Jerusalem, (Luke 19:41) not because of His own fate, but because He realized that His rejection would mean corporate punishment over Jesus' own nation for their failure to realize who He was and the purpose of His coming.
  - e) That leads me to Verse 30. After Jesus tells the women who are crying because He's going to die "it's going to be worse for you than for me", Jesus then adds to that idea that people would want to be "covered with rocks" than face what I have to do. In other words, Jesus is saying they would rather be dead than face what the Romans will do this country.
    - i) OK, assuming all of that is true, why is Jesus focusing on the horror's of the future rather than his own death? Is He trying to get everyone in a bad mood? No. This is about the realization that no matter how long we get to live, life is short. That's why the best thing we can do with our time is use it for God's glory. The point is not that all of us will die horribly like them. Jesus is saying effectively, "Don't feel sorry for Me, but feel sorry for yourselves if you don't follow believe in Me."
    - ii) Let's assume all of us reading this are already believers in Jesus. This is all ancient history. How does it affect us? The issue is not "do we believe in God?" The issue is always "What are we doing about it?" That's what Jesus is trying to get us and them to focus upon in these verses.
  - f) The final verse here (31) reads like a proverb. The idea is if Jesus is sentenced to die in the prime of life (like green wood), what will happen to the Israelites (or anyone) who would rejected Him after living out long lives? It's a warning about the cost of rejecting Jesus.

18. Verse 32: Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed.<sup>33</sup> When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals--one on his right, the other on his left.<sup>34</sup> Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.
- a) There is a hill just outside the traditional city walls of Jerusalem, where it is believed that Jesus and two other men were crucified. The place is called the "skull" based on the shape of this hill. What many suspect is that the other two men who were crucified were part of the rebellion lead by Barabbas. My point is the third cross that Jesus is on was originally meant for Barabbas. If that is true, it adds to the cute story of "The Gospel according to Barabbas" as the death sentence was meant for him.
  - b) What we do know for sure is that Jesus in His weaken state had to carry or drag His cross through the city from where He was held prisoner to wherever this "skull hill" is located.
  - c) Just as when Jesus was walking toward this fate when He focused on others by giving the proverb in the previous verses about the future fate of the Israelites, here Jesus is still not focusing on Himself but instead focusing on those soldiers who are in charge of the actual act of crucifixion. So, is Jesus trying to get His mind off the pain by focusing on others? I would say yes. If we know we're going to live forever, then life is about using our time in our darkest moments to be of service to others whenever possible. It's about the Christian principal of putting other's needs before our own even again, during the toughest times in our own lives. That's the real lesson here.
  - d) With that said, it's not just a matter of thinking about others. Remember that Jesus is also our "high priest". That means He prays for us individually and wants us to get our focus on others and not ourselves. That's why Jesus prayed for God to forgive those who are in the act of actually crucifying Jesus and dividing up His clothes.
  - e) Know that Roman soldiers would be paid by taking what a condemned man had on him for the actual work of doing the crucifixion. The soldiers there didn't get the significance of what they were doing, and Jesus asked God to forgive them. This reminds me that the only unforgivable sin is a lifetime denial of Jesus as God, not any single act we do against Jesus in our lifetime. I'm also reminded of the classic line here of, "Jesus was crucified on a cross of wood, but made the hill on which it stood". I'm not exactly sure how that fits in with this part about the soldiers taking Jesus clothes, but I wanted to put it into the lesson.
  - f) What is important is that Jesus died exactly as Isaiah predicted about 700-800 years earlier when He wrote about the Messiah being "numbered with the transgressor" (Isaiah 53:12). The point being that Jesus quoted that passage in Chapter 22:37, referring to the fact that He was going to die with other criminals just as it was predicted hundreds of years before it actually happened.
19. Verse 35: The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One."
- a) One has to remember that Jesus was popular before the crowd turned on Him. Now we have people watching this event saying things like, "If He's really the Messiah why won't He just come down from there?"
  - b) Keep in mind that Satan didn't want Jesus to pay the price for our sins. I sort of see a lot of this as "a plan gone horribly wrong from his perspective" as Satan's goal is was either to stop the cross from happening or else to get no one to care about Jesus dying. With the crowd casting insults at Jesus, it's like Satan is tempting Jesus to show off His power here by coming down which would be possible if Jesus choose to do so. Again, realize that we never once read of Jesus using miracles for His own personal benefit in the bible.
  - c) OK John, you're not God and neither am I. We know Jesus had to die for our sins. What do we do when it everything is going badly as it is here? That's when we remember that God is aware of all that we do and wants to guide us for His glory. As horrible as life can be at times, we remember that God has a reason to allow us to go through what we do.



20. Verse 36: The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar <sup>37</sup> and said, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself."
- a) A reason this verse is here is to remind us that it wasn't just Jesus' enemies who picked on Him at the cross, but also those who were just "in the neighborhood" either doing their job or just seeing this event. If you do a study of Psalm 22, or read what I wrote about it. I talk about both Jesus' enemies and outsiders being predicted to do this over 1,000 years before it actually happened. My point is as difficult this moment is, none of it is a surprise to God nor should it be to us if we know our bible.
  - b) Let me explain the "wine vinegar". This was a drink local soldiers carried with them to help lower the pain so prisoners would hold still so they could be nailed down. Jesus refused it because He was willing to take the "full force" of the wrath put on Him.
  - c) One also has to see this verse as another temptation for Jesus to "take a short cut" to show off His power as God and not go the way of the cross. During the rough moments of our lives, we also get tempted to take a short cut and not do what is necessary to be done. It is during such times that we like Jesus must rely upon God the Father's strength to help get us through our own "dark hours".
21. Verse 38: There was a written notice above him, which read: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.
- a) If one reads all four gospel accounts, they vary a little as to what was written on the cross above Jesus. When the Romans crucified someone, they would usually put a sign above the person being crucified so people would know what is the crime they committed.
  - b) Since Jesus wasn't guilty of any crime, Pontius Pilate wanted to "rub it in a little" to the Jewish leaders who forced Jesus to die. Most likely, the complete inscription was "This is Jesus of Nazareth, the king of the Jews" if translated in English. The religious leaders did want the title to read something like, "Jesus claimed to be King of the Jews" and Pilate did say back to those leaders, in effect "I've written what I've written". Pilate knew Jesus was innocent of those charges and again, this is his way of getting revenge of being forced to have Jesus' crucified.
  - c) So why do the different Gospel accounts vary a little? If one has ever interviewed a bunch of people all describing the same event, one will find accounts will vary a little. If all four Gospel writers said the exact same words, critics would say, "They are all collaborating to make up these lies." With little variances in the different Gospel accounts it makes all the witnesses more credible in terms of acceptable evidence as to what really happened.
  - d) Meanwhile, back to the insults being thrown at Jesus:
22. Verse 39: One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!"
- a) I suspect but can't prove that the two other criminals who died here were those who were working with Barabbas to cause an "uproar" while all the Jewish people were in Jerusalem for the big holiday. It makes me wonder if the third cross was meant for Barabbas. What we do know is the Romans were planning on killing three people that day for bad crimes as three crosses were prepared and Jesus was the substitute for the "ringleader" Barabbas.
  - b) I also suspect that besides Jesus, these other men were also beaten up before being hung on the cross as that is what Jesus suffered. One of those two men, in his pain, needed to take it out on someone and took out his pain on Jesus. He's saying, "If you're the Messiah and you've helped people with their sickness and injuries, why don't you help yourself and me while you're in the neighborhood? We know why Jesus didn't help Himself, but why didn't Jesus help this man who was calling out to Jesus as the Messiah? Part of the answer is that this other man deserved his punishment for committing murder. This man didn't ask for help so he could change his life, he just wanted his horrible suffering to end so he could go back to old lifestyle and literally get away with murder.
  - c) We're about to read of the other man on the third cross being saved. Before I got there, I wanted to show why Jesus didn't help this one, because he wasn't willing to repent here.

23. Verse 40: But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? <sup>41</sup> We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong."
- a) One has to understand that to hang on a cross is a very painful exercise. One has to push up with one's feet just to take a breath. Yet here, we read of the second criminal on the cross yelling at criminal #1 saying in effect, we deserve to be here! Why don't you go ask God to forgive us of our sins instead of trying to figure out a way to end our punishment? The difference between these two criminals here is one cared about his relationship with God while the other didn't.
  - b) Luke is the only writer who records this exchange. Remember that Luke didn't come on the scene until many years later. He got his information from interviewing witnesses to the events of this story. I suspect that Luke heard this story from Mary, who he talked to or maybe John, who hadn't written his gospel at this point in history yet. The reason Luke did include this little story is coming up, which is to show how someone could be saved in an "Old Testament" sense of trusting God for forgiveness of one's sins even if one does not know the complete Gospel story. With that said, let's read on:
24. Verse 42: Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." <sup>43</sup> Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."
- a) The point here is "Criminal #1" just wanted Jesus to get them off the cross. Criminal #2 was interested in his relationship with God and knew that Jesus was the Messiah. That's why "Criminal #2" was saved here and not "Criminal #1".
  - b) Verse 43 has a whole bunch of things to consider: First, Jesus is saying that he will be in heaven despite committing probably murder and whatever other sins he committed over his lifetime, simply because he trusted in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins. With that said, there are a bunch of wonderful little things to point about Verse 43:
    - i) The first is that this criminal wasn't baptized. Jesus said he was saved. My point is simply that I consider baptism to be a public witness of one's salvation, and not a necessary step in order to be saved.
    - ii) The next thing to notice is Jesus said, "today" you will be with Me in heaven. That makes the argument that there is no "soul sleep" and when we die we immediately go to either heaven or hell. Notice the man didn't have to go to purgatory for any undefined period of time. Jesus just forgave him and that was that.
    - iii) This verse also contradicts the false view that Jesus had to spend three days in hell before He could be in heaven. Jesus is telling this man "today" they will both be in heaven, end of issue.
    - iv) It's also interesting to consider that despite all the pain Jesus suffered, despite all of the taunting Jesus endured here, He still took the time to focus on others up to the moment He actually died for our sins.
  - c) Finally, how do we know all of this is true? How do we know Jesus didn't make this up in order to comfort a dying man? The issue comes down to "verifiable evidence". I like to encourage people who have such doubts to study all the Gospels from the standpoint of verifiable evidence. In the 1800's there was a famous bible skeptic who specifically set out to prove that Luke's writings were false. He ended up becoming one of the most famous Christians of that era and published books proving what Luke wrote is true simply based on what is considered "court admissible evidence". (His name was Dr. Simon Greenleaf, a Harvard law professor for those who want to read further studies on that issue. Even for nonbiblical issues, he is considered one of America's greatest experts on the issue of what is and is not court admissible evidence.)
    - i) Let me make this much simpler: If we can accept the fact the Old Testament was written hundreds of years before the New, we can read of hundreds of predictions about Jesus that literally came true. If we can trust that, we can trust Luke here.

25. Verse 44: It was now about the sixth hour, and darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour, <sup>45</sup> for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. <sup>46</sup> Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." When he had said this, he breathed his last.
- a) Here we read of Jesus actual death. To say Verse 44 in "plain English", Jesus died about 12 noon, and the land around Jesus was very dark until about 3pm. It's probably important to remember that the Passover Holiday is always held on a full moon. I state that because it is impossible to have a solar eclipse on the night of a full moon.
  - b) If you ever wonder how Christians calculate when to celebrate Easter, it is always held on the first Sunday after the first full moon of spring (after spring equinox). That's because Jesus was crucified on "Passover" which is usually the first full moon of spring. Yes it's a little complicated, but once you know that, you won't forget it.
    - i) I mention that here so you understand what is the Christian purpose of Passover: It is a Jewish holiday to remember the exact day where God said He would kill all the first born's of every family including the Jewish people unless they smeared lamb's blood on their door. The Christian purpose of understanding Passover is to remind us that God's wrath against sin is ended with His own blood paying the complete price of our sins. That's why Jesus had to die on this particular day.
    - ii) If all of that is true, why don't Christians celebrate Passover as a holiday? In effect we do which is "Good Friday". I also don't have problems with Jewish people also celebrating Passover as it recalls how God separated them as a nation in order to serve Him. As I love to state every now and then, if you ever get a chance to join a Jewish Passover celebration (called a "Seder" join in to see the rituals, and one can see how Jesus is the literal fulfillment of those rituals).
  - c) Enough of all of that, back to the text. So why was the land dark for three hours? It's best to think of hell as eternal separation from God and living in eternal darkness. No one can explain how that darkness occurred, but I suspect it was so dark, one couldn't see say, our hand in front of our face. Jewish people would associate that darkness with the plague on Egypt where it was total darkness before the great plague of all the deaths. Ok, so why 3 hours? I think it was there long enough for the Israelites to realize this is something "God is doing" and it's got something to do with the fact Jesus is being crucified.
  - d) There is one more thing from Verse 45 we need to discuss. In the Jewish Temple, there's a famous curtain that separated the most holy place from the rest of the interior of that area. If memory is correct, that curtain was said to be four inches thick (by Josephus). Matthew records that the curtain was torn from top to bottom (Matthew 27:51). That indicates God Himself did the "ripping". The point is the "most holy place" which could only be entered one time per year by the top priest after lot of rituals could now be entered by anyone. By the curtain being torn apart, it signals that God accepted Jesus payment for our sins.
  - e) OK, how did Luke and Matthew know all of this? From interviewing witnesses. In the book of Acts, it mentions Pharisee's who became Christians. (See Acts 15:5). My view is that the tearing of the curtain is what caused some of them to accept the Gospel as well as the darkness that occurred.
  - f) Finally we get Jesus final words which is when He tells God the Father that He is giving His spirit back to Him. During that period of darkness, was the first and only time that Jesus had to be separated from God the Father. It's the concept that God is "too holy" to even look upon sin in the sense that Jesus had to literally become sin for us. Think of it as our reminder that every time we sin, we're adding to the pain Jesus had to go through so that we can spend eternity with God the Father.
  - g) This verse also shows that we have each have a spirit that lives forever, and not a body and a thought process that dies when we die. Just as Jesus' spirit returned in unity with God the Father at His death, so our spirit will be united with Jesus after we Christians die.

- h) All of this gets back to the big theological question of "Why did God bother?" What's in it for Him that He went through all of this trouble? The answer is based on the concept that if we love to do something, we just do it, not for the money, but just because we love to do it. God's so full of love, He wants someone to share that love with. For whatever reason, He choose people to share that love with. Because He's perfect, we have to be perfectly forgiven of all sins to be with Him forever. That's why God Himself had to pay the full price of our sins and we can't do anything to add to it.
  - i) OK, I know I'm preaching to the choir here, but I had to get that in. What we can learn is that in our own darkest hour, God still has a plan and is using that time in some way for His glory and that's what we have to remember during such times. Meanwhile, I've still got 10 more verses to get through:
26. Verse 47: The centurion, seeing what had happened, praised God and said, "Surely this was a righteous man." <sup>48</sup> When all the people who had gathered to witness this sight saw what took place, they beat their breasts and went away. <sup>49</sup> But all those who knew him, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.
- a) What we get here is the reactions to these events. To "beat one's breast" is a Jewish way of showing remorse for something. Here we have people realizing it was a mistake for Jesus to be crucified even though they didn't get the big picture just yet. While this crowd did realize that Jesus was put to death for false charges, they didn't get the big picture yet. We will get to the good news of "Sunday's coming" in the next lesson. Even the woman who followed Jesus as mentioned in Verse 49 saw this, but again didn't see the big picture yet.
27. Verse 50: Now there was a man named Joseph, a member of the Council, a good and upright man, <sup>51</sup> who had not consented to their decision and action. He came from the Judean town of Arimathea and he was waiting for the kingdom of God. <sup>52</sup> Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus' body. <sup>53</sup> Then he took it down, wrapped it in linen cloth and placed it in a tomb cut in the rock, one in which no one had yet been laid. <sup>54</sup> It was Preparation Day, and the Sabbath was about to begin.
- a) Remember the Sanhedrin who found Jesus guilty? Apparently there was one member of that group that didn't vote with the majority. Most likely, the bodies of criminals who die on a cross were then thrown into a pit or common grave. Yet we have a Sanhedrin official named Joseph asked Pilate for Jesus body so that Joseph could bury Jesus in his family's grave. As the old joke goes, "What's the big deal, it's only for the weekend?"
  - b) I could explain how Isaiah 53:9 literally predicted Jesus would be buried in a rich man's grave, so I just did. Many suspect that by Joseph doing this act, it cost him his seat on the Sanhedrin. The point is Joseph didn't have the power or the guts to stop this crime from happening, but he did what he could to make a difference for Jesus after He had died. I suspect this man is saved based on his actions here. Anyway, the next day was either a "standard" Sabbath or a separate holiday, so no work was allowed for Jews. Bottom line is all of this was done before that Sabbath occurred.
28. Verse 55: The women who had come with Jesus from Galilee followed Joseph and saw the tomb and how his body was laid in it. <sup>56</sup> Then they went home and prepared spices and perfumes. But they rested on the Sabbath in obedience to the commandment.
- a) Apparently the women who were watching Jesus die on the cross saw enough of this to know where Jesus was buried. On their own (probably without Joseph's knowledge) the girls went home to prepare spices for burial, which was a standard custom back then.
  - b) These women were still "good Jewish women" and rested on the Sabbath as required. I'd argue that these women and Joseph didn't know each other and they just wanted to go to the grave on their own figuring no one would stop them. Despite the horror of what did occur, these women within a few days will end up rejoicing, as the title of my next lesson says, "Sunday's coming." That's a great line to remember when despair is there, to recall that in effect "Sunday's coming" and God is working life out for His glory. Let's pray:

29. Father, give us the strength and courage during our own moments of despair to recall that You are there and You desire to guide our lives for Your glory. Help us to learn what You want us to learn from such tough moments as we often learn best from the trials we go through in life. Then lead us to make a difference in the lives of others around us as we use our lives for Your glory by putting the needs of others as priority over our own needs. We thank You for that guidance, in Jesus name we pray, Amen.