

Sunday of the Passion (Shorter Version)

GETTING WHAT YOU DON'T DESERVE

Luke 23:1–49

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Analysis by Lori A. Cornell

Then the assembly rose as a body and brought Jesus before Pilate. 2They began to accuse him, saying, "We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king." 3Then Pilate asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" He answered, "You say so." 4Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, "I find no basis for an accusation against this man." 5But they were insistent and said, "He stirs up the people by teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee where he began even to this place."

6When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean. 7And when he learned that he was under Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him off to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time. 8When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had been wanting to see him for a long time, because he had heard about him and was hoping to see him perform some sign. 9He questioned him at some length, but Jesus gave him no answer. 10The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him. 11Even Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him; then he put an elegant robe on him, and sent him back to Pilate. 12That same day Herod and Pilate became friends with each other; before this they had been enemies.

13 Pilate then called together the chief priests, the leaders, and the people, 14 and said to them, "You brought me this man as one who was perverting the people; and here I have examined him in your presence and have not found this man guilty of any of your charges against him. 15 Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us. Indeed, he has done nothing to deserve death. 16 I will therefore have him flogged and release him."

18 Then they all shouted out together, "Away with this fellow! Release Barabbas for us!" 19 (This was a man who had been put in prison for an insurrection that had taken place in the city, and for murder.) 20 Pilate, wanting to release Jesus, addressed them again; 21 but they kept shouting, "Crucify, crucify him!" 22 A third time he said to them, "Why, what evil has he done? I have found in him no ground for the sentence of death; I will therefore have him flogged and then release him." 23 But they kept urgently demanding with loud shouts that he should be crucified; and their voices prevailed. 24 So Pilate gave his verdict that their demand should be granted. 25 He released the man they asked for, the one who had been put in prison for insurrection and murder, and he handed Jesus over as they wished.

26 As they led him away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus. 27 A great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him. 28 But Jesus turned to them and said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. 29 For the days are surely coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed.' 30 Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us'; and to the hills, 'Cover us.' 31 For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?"

32Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. 33When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. [[34Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.]] And they cast lots to divide his clothing. 35And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" 36The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, 37and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" 38There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."

39One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" 40But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? 41And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." 42Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." 43He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

44It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, 45while the sun's light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. 46Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." Having said this, he breathed his last. 47When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, "Certainly this man was innocent." 48And when all the crowds who had gathered there for this spectacle saw what had taken place, they returned home, beating their breasts. 49But all his acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.

DIAGNOSIS: Resolute (the Assembly)

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Hopeless*

As this Passion scene ensues, Jesus knows he doesn't have a fighting chance. Anything he says will be used against him by the Jewish authorities: "If I tell you, you will not believe," he says to the leaders (22:67). Jesus has little choice: The whole assembly is ganging up on him—determined to prove him guilty. He can, metaphorically speaking, try to swim up this river of opposition, or simply allow himself to be swept downstream by the current. (He does the latter, but not without directing his course along the way.)

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Getting What He Didn't Deserve*

The driving passion of the Council is their desire to prove Jesus guilty of whatever crime will result in his death. They accuse him of misleading a whole nation and stirring up the people (vv. 2 & 5, that's insurrection), and he protests the Roman tax (v. 2, that's treason). But, despite appearances to the contrary, the religious leaders aren't alone in their misdeeds. Pilate, who finds no cause to convict Jesus, simply passes Jesus off to the appropriate regional authority: Herod. And Herod, although he has a wicked good time mocking Jesus and trying to get him to perform signs (v. 8), concludes that Jesus has done nothing to deserve death (v. 15). Pilate's public conclusion (made on behalf of himself and Herod), is that he cannot find this man "guilty of any of your charges against him" (v. 14). Even the flogging that Pilate consigns Jesus to is merely a warning not to mess with Rome (v. 16).

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *A Mockery of Justice*

So why does the trial continue? Why, when Rome was ready to

release Jesus, did the mockery continue? The apparent answer is that the crowd is bloodthirsty; it's a good day for someone to die, and they'd like it to be Jesus. But the deeper answer may be revealed in the derision thrown at Jesus by one of the criminals who hangs next to Jesus from his own cross: "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" His mockery is readily exposed by the criminal on Jesus' other side, who says: "Do you not fear God?" (v. 40). No one, into whose hands Jesus has been placed, fears God. Like Adam and Eve in the garden, the people believe that they—not God—are in charge of rendering judgment—even over the Son of God. What they fail to realize (other than the second criminal) is that they are under a "sentence of condemnation" (v. 40). God will be the judge of Jesus' innocence or guilt. And it is into God's hands that Jesus alone commends his spirit (v. 46).

PROGNOSIS: Resolute (God)

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *"Justice" is Mocked*

Luke's Passion narrative ends with Jesus breathing his last breath and commending himself into his Father's hands. Jesus dies. It is a somber ending to what seems a hopeful, purpose-filled life. But examine the evidence of the narrative more closely and you will see that what appears to be an ending is really a new beginning. For instance, Luke tells us that the temple curtain is torn in two (v. 45) at the same time that Jesus' life ends. But that temple curtain was the only thing that stood between God's holiness and the people. Is it possible that when Jesus hands over his spirit to the Father, that the presence of God is being unleashed on the world? And what are we to make of the centurion's declaration? Is it merely a sad afterthought to a gross miscarriage of justice? Or, is it possible that Luke is hinting to us that God's justice will be done, and the so-called "justice" of the people is what's really

being mocked (by God)? And then there are Jesus' own words: In the midst of his crucifixion (a painful circumstance that would turn any of us in on ourselves), Jesus asserts his authority to give the second criminal what he begs for: Paradise. And, note, this is not some future hope for the criminal, but Jesus makes it effective "today" (v. 43).

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Getting What We Don't Deserve*

If Jesus' Passion according to Saint Luke is an account of Jesus getting what he doesn't deserve, it is also an account of humanity—us!—getting what we don't deserve. Because we witness this narrative from the other side of Jesus' grave, we know that the authority Jesus asserted on behalf of the criminal is the same authority he asserts over us (v. 43, "today you will be with me in Paradise"). His death is the beginning of new life for us also. That new life is Paradise—the promise of life with God face to face. But it is more than that too, because the life that comes out of Jesus' death also empowers us to admit our fault: Our past failure to fear God (v. 40), our history of mocking true justice, our need to repent—to beat our breasts when justice is miscarried (v. 48), and our need to stand uncomfortably and vulnerably in the presence of death (v. 49).

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Hopeful*

Ironically, in Jesus' Passion God is recreating humanity. Through Christ's Passion, God crucifies everything in us that would mock and spit at not only Jesus/God but humanity. In the Passion, God declares the wisdom (and so-called "justice") of the world foolish, and asserts a new wisdom: That even in death, when it appears that no hope remains, God is at work exercising his power and authority for our benefit. God is at work unleashing Christ's Spirit on our world so that we can keep watch with those who are dying, show love to the loveless, and die with the hope of new life.