

Calvary's Ironic Insults

35 Then they crucified Him, and divided His garments, casting lots, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet: "They divided My garments among them, And for My clothing they cast lots." 36 Sitting down, they kept watch over Him there. 37 And they put up over His head the accusation written against Him: THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS. 38 Then two robbers were crucified with Him, one on the right and another on the left. 39 And those who passed by blasphemed Him, wagging their heads 40 and saying, "You who destroy the temple and build it in three days, save Yourself! If You are the Son of God, come down from the cross." 41 Likewise the chief priests also, mocking with the scribes and elders, said, 42 "He saved others; Himself He cannot save. If He is the King of Israel, let Him now come down from the cross, and we will believe Him. 43 "He trusted in God; let Him deliver Him now if He will have Him; for He said, 'I am the Son of God.'" (Matt. 27:35-43)

Proverbs 16:4 The LORD has made all for Himself, Yes, even the wicked for the day of doom.
how can God make the wicked for Himself? How can God be in control of evil?

That's a big question. In some ways, it's the same as asking, why do terrible things happen in a world owned by a good God? Why is there disease and death, calamity and catastrophe, accidents and disasters? And why do people get to do their evil: murderers, rapists, extortioners, genocidal maniacs, evil rulers and politicians? Why does it go on? It's the age-old problem of evil: why is there sin in the world, why is there suffering, and pain and death? If God is all powerful and all-good, then surely He has both the will and the power to stop it?

There are some wrong ways to answer that question. One wrong way is to limit God. Some claim that God doesn't have the power to interfere with our free will, or that God gave up His right to interfere by creating people with freedom, or when Adam fell.

Another wrong way is to say that evil isn't really evil to God, it's all the same to Him, and He uses all of it.

But none of that is what the Bible teaches. The Bible teaches that all that God is, He is infinitely so. He is infinitely good. He is infinitely powerful. It also teaches that evil is what God hates. When Proverbs says that God has made the wicked for Himself, the very use of the word wicked means that God hates it, abominates it. He cannot hate evil but also be the creator of it.

Instead, the Bible teaches that while God did not create evil, He nevertheless rules over it, defeats it, and even enlists it for His purposes. The Grand Story of history will reveal a God who created men and angels upright, but chose to use all their choices to fulfill His will. I told my children it is rather like having a wild and angry dog that you tie to a pole in your garden. In its rage and anger, it ends up mowing the grass for you around that pole. That's not what it was trying to do – it was raging against you and wanted to attack you. But as you had it under control, and as it fought and struggled against your restraint, it ended up doing what you wanted: mow the grass.

The Bible says in numerous ways that the rebellion and anger of man, the evil of others will be harnessed by God. Even Satan's rebellion has played into God's hands. We see in Psalm 2 that the kings of the earth set themselves, And the rulers take counsel together, Against the LORD and against His Anointed. The result? Verse 4: God laughs. Why would He laugh? Because the more they rage, the more they will play into His hands.

10 Surely the wrath of man shall praise You; With the remainder of wrath You shall gird Yourself. (Ps. 76:10)

Man's angry rebellion will praise God.

Psa 46:6 The nations raged, the kingdoms were moved; He uttered His voice, the earth melted.

In fact, when the apostles preached about the Cross, they brought this truth out. People had meant to do evil, but they were carrying out God's plan.

Act 2:23 "Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death;

26 The kings of the earth took their stand, And the rulers were gathered together Against the LORD and against His Christ.' 27 "For truly against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together 28 "to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done. (Acts 4:26-28)

One of the most powerful signs of how God was in complete control of the events of the cross is to study the insults that were thrown at Jesus. If you are looking for something that seems wild and random, completely hostile to God and rebellious, it would be those rebellious, insolent insults thrown at the Creator by His creation when He was on the cross. Surely, nothing could be less submissive to God than blasphemy: rebellious insults to God.

On one level, that's true. You're never further from God than when you are fighting Him: challenging Him, mocking Him, insulting Him. The people who insulted Jesus when He was on the Cross were definitely not submitting to God. They weren't trying to fulfill His will, and co-operate with God. But what we find instead, is that every insult recorded in Scripture that was hurled at Jesus rebounded back and turned out to be praise and honour for the Son of God.

The insults thrown at Jesus were meant to injure and harm, but they turned out to be words of praise. They were meant to be false accusations, but they became true statements. Every false and evil thing said about Jesus was turned around to become truth about Christ.

This is one of the great lessons of the cross. You might mean it for evil, but God will use it for good. You can rage and rebel against God, but the Lord enthroned in Heaven will laugh. Your rebellion will still end up glorifying Him. 10 Surely the wrath of man shall praise You; With the remainder of wrath You shall gird Yourself. (Ps. 76:10)

Let's consider three insults, three curses, three blasphemies cast on Jesus, which now stand as testimonies to who He was.

I. The Insulting Title Was True

37 And they put up over His head the accusation written against Him: THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS.

To my knowledge, crucified men did not usually have a title placed over their heads. If they did, it was because the authorities wanted onlookers to be very aware of the person's crime.

We read that the particular title placed above Jesus was penned by Pontius Pilate himself.

19 Now Pilate wrote a title and put *it* on the cross. And the writing was: JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS. 20 Then many of the Jews read this title, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, Greek, *and* Latin. 21 Therefore the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, "Do not write, 'The King of the Jews,' but, 'He said, "I am the King of the Jews.'" 22 Pilate answered, "What I have written, I have written." (Jn. 19:19-22)

Pilate wanted to hurl an insult when he wrote this. He wanted to mock Jesus, who had told Pilate he was a king, and a king of a kingdom not of this world. But he also wanted to mock the Jewish nation, and particularly the rulers and rabbis and priests whom he despised. He meant for the sight

of a broken, bruised and dying man with the title “King of the Jews” to reflect badly on the Jews. What sort of nation has a king in such a condition? And if he is their king, what must their condition be?

This is why the chief priests objected. They said to Pilate, “Don't write, the King of the Jews, as if that is the case. Write 'He claimed to be the king of the Jews'.” They understood that the sign, as it stood, was a reflection not only on Jesus, but on them.

Pilate's answer: “What I have written, I have written.” I'm not changing it. First, because he couldn't be bothered, he wanted to be free of this Nazarene. Second, because he wanted the shame to be shared by the Jews who had forced him to execute Jesus. Third, he probably feared who this might be. After all, his wife had had a dream and sent him a message, saying “Have nothing to do with that just Man, for I have suffered many things today in a dream because of Him (Matt. 27:19)

The fact that the title was not changed meant that what remained above Jesus's head on the cross, in Latin, Greek and Hebrew, were the words, “This is Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews”. And in fact, every word of that title was true. That was exactly who He was. He was Yeshua, Jesus, of the town of Nazareth, and He was also the rightful, true king of Israel. He was heir to David's throne legally through His adopted father Joseph, he was a true descendant of David through His human mother Mary. He was the king who first came as a prophet to warn people about the rules of His kingdom. He was a king who then acted as a priest to enable the righteousness of His kingdom. And He would one day come back as king to impose the reign of His kingdom.

4 For the children of Israel shall abide many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or *sacred* pillar, without ephod or teraphim.5 Afterward the children of Israel shall return and seek the LORD their God and David their king. They shall fear the LORD and His goodness in the latter days. (Hos. 3:4-5)

The last true king of the Jews was Jeconiah before the exile. Israel is still dwelling without king, prince, sacrifice, ephod. Not because there isn't one, but because they have stumbled over their king, their sacrifice, their priest. But the prophecy is that one day Israel will return and seek Yahweh their God and David their king, and fear the Lord in the last days.

But the title that was meant to mock and ridicule stood there as a testimony to God's power over evil. It was in fact exactly who He was. 10 Surely the wrath of man shall praise You; With the remainder of wrath You shall gird Yourself. (Ps. 76:10)

Not only was the insulting title true,

II. The Insulting Taunt Was True

38 Then two robbers were crucified with Him, one on the right and another on the left. 39 And those who passed by blasphemed Him, wagging their heads 40 and saying, "You who destroy the temple and build *it* in three days, save Yourself! If You are the Son of God, come down from the cross." 41 Likewise the chief priests also, mocking with the scribes and elders, said, 42 "He saved others; Himself He cannot save. If He is the King of Israel, let Him now come down from the cross, and we will believe Him

Here is the taunt that was thrown at Jesus by the criminals crucified with Him, by the religious rulers, by the Roman soldiers. It is repeated in every Gospel that records how people mocked Him, in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Every time, you will see in the insult the word “save”.

35 And the people stood looking on. But even the rulers with them sneered, saying, "He saved others; let Him save Himself if He is the Christ, the chosen of God." 36 The soldiers also mocked Him, coming and offering Him sour wine, 37 and saying, "If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself." (Lk. 23:35-37) 39 Then one of the criminals who were hanged blasphemed Him, saying, "If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us." (Lk. 23:39)

Save yourself. Come down from the Cross and save yourself. You who would build the Temple in three days, save yourself. You who said you were the King of the Jews, save yourself.

Here is the substance of the taunt: Jesus is a Saviour who couldn't save Himself. He has come to save, but now in His direst moment of need, He can't save Himself. What kind of a Saviour can't save Himself? Physician, heal thyself, right? If your saving doesn't work on yourself, how good is it?

Now, I think we should firstly note that Jesus had obviously made it known to everyone that He had come to save. Some people deny that Jesus came to die for people's sins. They say that was added to the Christian story much later. They say He was really just a great rabbi, a good teacher, an example of morality, but He had no intention of being a Saviour. We have several statements of Jesus saying He came to save: 10 "for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost." (Lk. 19:10) for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world. (Jn. 12:47) But it is clear that everyone at the cross understands that Jesus came to save, that He saw Himself as a Saviour, His mission was saving others.

Here, the insult that was meant to cut most deeply: if you are truly a professional Saviour, then why not start by saving yourself from this predicament. They meant, you are not really a Saviour.

But, for completely different reasons, and to the glory of God, the insult was exactly true. Jesus saved others, but could not save Himself. He came to save other people from the judgement of sin, from the wrath of God. But there was one person He could not save, and that was Himself.

To be the substitute for our sins, to be the wrath-bearer, there was one person who could not be saved by another, and that was the Son of God. He had to endure the judgement. He had to face the wrath, the agony, the darkness, the exile, the separation from God. There was no saving Him, if we were to be saved. If He saved Himself, then no one else could be saved.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus struggles with this. He prays to the Father, "O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You *will*." (Matt. 26:39)

36 And He said, "Abba, Father, all things *are* possible for You. Take this cup away from Me; nevertheless, not what I will, but what You *will*." (Mk. 14:36)

There Jesus pleads with the Father if there is some way that He can be saved from what He must face on the Cross: the combined and concentrated wrath of God on sin. But Jesus does not demand to be saved. Instead, He surrenders to the fact that He will be the one person whom He cannot save. He cannot save Himself, if He is to save His people.

Once He had resolved to do that through prayer, He is betrayed in the Garden by Judas, and Peter leaps out with a sword, cutting off the ear of Malchus, the high priest's servant. Jesus does His final miracle before the Resurrection and heals the man's ear, and then says to Peter "Put your sword in its place, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. 53 "Or do you think that I cannot now pray to My Father, and He will provide Me with more than twelve legions of angels? 54 "How then could the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must happen thus?" (Matt. 26:52-54)

In other words, if I needed to be saved myself, I have angelic armies at my disposal. But if I save myself, how will the Scripture be fulfilled? How will the prophecies come true? How will atonement be achieved, the new covenant brought in, sin defeated, evil put away, Satan disarmed? If I save myself, how will others be saved?

You see, the insulting taunt was true: He saved others, Himself He cannot save. It was true, just like Pilate's title, not because of how it was originally meant, but because it accurately described who Jesus was and what He was doing. Jesus was the Saviour of the world, giving up on His own fellowship with the Father so as to save others. 10 Surely the wrath of man shall praise You; With the remainder of wrath You shall gird Yourself. (Ps. 76:10)

But there was one more taunt, which the Lord would use to garner praise and glory to Himself.

III. The Insulting Test Came True

43 "He trusted in God; let Him deliver Him now if He will have Him; for He said, 'I am the Son of God.

He claimed to have been in a special relationship with God. He called God His Father. He said He was the Son of God. He said He did only the Father's will, and pleased the Father. Now, if that was the case, and if He trusted in God so perfectly, let God the Father deliver God the Son, if He will have Him! If God the Father really accepts Jesus as His Son, and recognises Him as His beloved one, then let God the Father publicly deliver God the Son from this death.

This taunt was just one step away from the previous one. The previous taunt was: surely a Saviour can save Himself. But now they move the focus from the Son to the Father. If God truly owns Jesus, then let Him save Jesus from this death. Let Him deliver the Son and publicly own Him, receive Him, place His stamp of ownership on the relationship.

What they meant by it was: if Jesus dies on this cross, then God has not delivered Jesus, and that means Jesus is not the Son of God.

Of course, it is always a dangerous thing to read God's will into God's silences. It reminds us of the story of Robert Ingersoll, an American agnostic of the 19th century who said to a gathered crowd. "I will prove to you that God does not exist. I give him 5 minutes to strike me dead." Five silent and nervous minutes passed, and Ingersoll was still standing. The story is told that someone said to a Christian who was present, "Well, Ingersoll certainly proved something tonight!" To which the Christian replied, "Yes – he proved that God doesn't take orders from atheists."

We can interpret silence more than one way. And we can interpret the fact that God didn't rescue Jesus from the cross more than one way.

The more important question is this: did God deliver Jesus from death? If Jesus died like any crucified man, and was buried like any man who had died, and His remains were in a certain tomb known to all, and there they stayed, and became a place of pilgrimage and veneration for people later on, then God did not deliver Him from death. And in that case, He was not the Son.

But the plain fact of history is that the tomb was empty on Sunday, and the enemies of Jesus could not produce the body. The plain fact of history is that a group of frightened disciples began proclaiming that they had seen Him, and would not stop proclaiming that. The plain fact of history is that this assembly began meeting on the first day of the week, and celebrating a meal called the Lord's Supper to show that they believed He was alive and would return.

And this is what they said in their sermons:

Act 2:32 "This Jesus God has raised up, of which we are all witnesses.

Act 3:15 "and killed the Prince of life, whom God raised from the dead, of which we are witnesses.

Act 4:10-12 "let it be known to you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by Him this man stands here before you whole.

Act 5:30-32 "The God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom you murdered by hanging on a tree.

Acts 10:39-40 39 "And we are witnesses of all things which He did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem, whom they killed by hanging on a tree. 40 "Him God raised up on the third day, and showed Him openly,

Acts 13:29-30 29 "Now when they had fulfilled all that was written concerning Him, they took *Him* down from the tree and laid *Him* in a tomb. 30 "But God raised Him from the dead.

If God raised Jesus from the dead, then God delivered His Son from death. He did not deliver Him from the death of the Cross, because that would have prevented our atonement. But He delivered Jesus from death itself, by raising Him from the dead.

Why? Peter tells us why in His sermon:

Act 2:24 "whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by it.

It was not possible for death to hold Jesus. Death had an unlawful claim on Jesus, because Jesus had not sinned. The wages of sin is death. If any man wants eternal life, let Him keep the commandments. Jesus was the only One without sin, and who perfectly kept the commandments. When He died, it was not the death that comes to all. He surrendered up His life as a Death for others. But since that was not a death He deserved, He received His life back. God the Father raised Him up.

In so doing, what was God saying about the Son? 3 concerning His Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh,

4 *and declared to be* the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead. (Rom. 1:3-4)

Paul says that the resurrection declared Jesus to be the Son. In his sermon in Acts 13, Paul quotes Psalm 2 and tells us it was fulfilled at the resurrection. 33 "God has fulfilled this for us their children, in that He has raised up Jesus. As it is also written in the second Psalm: 'You are My Son, Today I have begotten You.' 34 "And that He raised Him from the dead, no more to return to corruption, (Acts 13:33-34)

You are My Son.

What was the test of the enemies of Jesus? If God will have Jesus, if He will receive Him as His Son, then let Him deliver Him from death! Since Jesus trusted so much in God, let God vindicate that trust by delivering Him from death.

But that test was exactly right. It was completely true. God delivered His Son from death. The Father vindicated the faith of the Son. Their insulting test was exactly what took place. 10 Surely the wrath of man shall praise You; With the remainder of wrath You shall gird Yourself. (Ps. 76:10)

Now consider how these angry dogs were mowing God's grass. Pilate wrote, "This is Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews." But that's exactly who was on the Cross: Yeshua ben David, the true Messiah of Israel.

The Romans, Jewish leaders, thieves on the Cross said, "He saved others, but He cannot save Himself". But that was exactly correct. In order to save us, He could not, and would not save Himself.

They said, "If God is really His Father, then let God deliver Him from death". But that is just what God did.

Now when you encounter a God, who can turn blasphemy into unintended praise, intended insults into ironic truth, false accusations into correct statements, you know you are dealing with overwhelming sovereignty and power. Men and women are free and can make their choices, but God will use them all for His own glory. He will use the hardness of Pharaoh's heart, and the softness of the heart that is perfect towards Him. He will use trust and faith in him, and He will use unbelief and rejection of Him. He will use love and worship of Him, and He will use hatred and false worship of Him.

The real question is, do you want to wrestle with this God? You have no chance of winning. You can either bow the knee and get on His side, and then watch how He will work all things together for your good, or you can remain in opposition to Him and thrash and rage.

You can reject Jesus as Your Saviour, and you will become a vessel of dishonour. You will display the power and wisdom of God, as a vessel of wrath. You will become a Pharaoh, a Judas, a Pilate in God's story, doing your own thing, and doing God's will, but condemned in the end.

You can receive Jesus Christ as Your Saviour, and watch how your Father will use pain, sin, disease, calamity, catastrophe, and even the sin of others against you. He will use it, according to Romans 8:28 for the good of those that love God, who are the called according to His purpose.

Why not be that second criminal on the cross, who changed his mind, and said to Jesus, "Lord, remember me, when you come into your kingdom." He bowed the knee of his heart, while his feet were nailed to a cross.