

*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."*

When my mother was dying, I prayed that the Messiah would come. Pull down the curtain, Lord, remove all the actors from the stage. Let life as we know it cease, Lord, we've had enough.

For just that moment my voice was in harmony with slaves bound by chains. Because they were black, white folks did not think them human. Property, animals, worthy of as much concern as a cow or a horse, often given even less.

How many times in the night they pleaded, Come, Lord Jesus. Come to bring justice, an end of the suffering and the cruelty, an end to our oppression.

In Israel, for how many centuries they prayed this prayer, and pray it still, "O, that the Messiah would come!" For when he came, the prophet Zechariah promised that a great panic from the Lord would fall on all the peoples that wage war against Jerusalem. Their eyes shall rot in their sockets, and their tongues shall rot in their mouths. The Lord would come and all the Holy ones with him. And the Lord would become king over all the earth.

O that the Messiah would come.

Or as God had promised through Malachi: “‘See the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up,’ says the Lord of hosts, ‘so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act,’ says the Lord of hosts.”

For Israel it was as if the days of my mother's dying had been stretched into centuries. All of history was mocking God and his chosen people. But the people continued to pray and believe and hope. Even as pagans, and idolaters, and those who practiced every kind of evil ruled over them.

Then, along came Jesus. A healer, he gathered the common people, like their shepherd. He said the day was near, God's kingdom was at hand. He came into Jerusalem, as the one promised by Zechariah, the Messiah.

And they hoped he really was.

And so the people stood by and watched.

Would the sky suddenly fill with angels, God's army? Would the wrath of God burn up all the Romans and would Jesus bring the age of peace?

If Jesus was the Messiah, then this was the moment when all would be accomplished - the end.

The people stood by and watched. But the leaders scoffed at him saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!"

They were right about Jesus, even in their mocking, The Messiah of God, God's chosen one.

The soldiers offered him sour wine saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!"

And one of the criminals said to him, "Are you not the Messiah, save yourself and us!"

To each of them it was so obvious that God's Messiah, God's king for Israel, would show power and save himself.

Jesus did not.

He died. He would not, or could not save himself.

Which was it? Would not, or could not?

All who mocked him did so confident that he was a phony - a pretender - certainly not the Messiah. He did not save himself because he could not save himself. This is their verdict.

But we who believe that God raised Jesus from the dead, believe that even in his dying Jesus had all power, yet would not save himself.

"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom," the other criminal begged.

He did not ask for some miracle in the moment. Yet he believed in Jesus.

And Jesus replied, "Truly, I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

On the day my mother was dying, I was weary of faith - weary of waiting - afraid. The mountains ahead looked too tall, too steep, too rugged. My heart ached to spare her the pain of her disease.

For me, it was just a short time. For so many pain and suffering and heartache are a companion day after day.

What we would give for a Messiah who would save himself and us!

But God in his wisdom has given us his Son who did not turn aside from the road he had to walk.

Why Jesus had to suffer, why we have to suffer, why those we love must suffer, is not always so clear to us. We are like the people who stood by the cross, watching. And as we watch we learn from that criminal who said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

Jesus, remember me.

Let this be our prayer.

Jesus, remember me. Jesus, remember those I love. Jesus, remember all who suffer.