



HOLY DEATH

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Mark 15:33-47

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We come now to one of the holiest of texts in Scripture. In these verses from the gospel of Mark we become witnesses to the death of the Son, and the result of that death, our own salvation. But, more importantly, this text bears the Father's testimony to the significance of the death of his beloved Son. Unlike Jesus' baptism and transfiguration, however, this is a testimony without words. The Father has no voice in it. Perhaps it is because there are no words to articulate a father's grief. But, though the Father is drowning in tears and robbed of a voice, he does not fail to act. The moment his Son expends his final breath he moves into swift, decisive action, using all his sovereign power to tell the world what he thinks of his boy.

In that scene around the cross we behold a universe in miniature: a Father, a Son, the crowd of onlookers, soldiers, a centurion, Pilate, two Marys, and one Joseph. This circle of relationships will give shape to our most intimate cries, and set the direction for the history of the coming kingdom. Let us linger long here and gaze deeply, using every vestige of our imagination to enter in. If we grasp what is transpiring, we will have a map that possesses the largest bearings. So, let us stay until the credits are over and the music resonates in our souls. At the center we will find a love that draws us to a place called home.

I. The Son's Cry (Mark 15:33-34)

And when the sixth hour had come, darkness fell over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" which is translated, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Mark 15:33-34, NASB)

As Jesus is crucified, a bleeding, eerie darkness, lasting from noon until three o'clock, descends over that part of the world. Whether this was due to an eclipse or the famed *sirocco* wind that comes from the desert and blackens the sky, Mark doesn't say. He is not as concerned with the source of the darkness as he is its significance. It is a sign from heaven: creation's attempt to groan out its fathomless sorrow at this cruel hour. Perhaps it is a mirror of the Father's abandonment of the Son, a forced turning away of his presence and support at the hour when his precious boy is being made sin. We know how the Son felt at this time, because he tells us, but we do not know how the Father felt; he never tells us. Words cannot express his feelings. David's stammering cries come close (2 Sam 18:33¹), but even those are inadequate. Stricken by sorrow, the Father's voice is seized shut. He cannot speak. But he acts. Mute with grief, he summons the creation to give him a voice. Feeling the frozen darkness hover over the cross, Amos' words come ringing right out of the seventh century B.C.:

**"And it will come about in that day," declares the Lord GOD,
"That I shall make the sun go down at noon,
And make the earth dark in broad daylight.
Then I shall turn your festivals in mourning...
And I will make it like a time of mourning of an only son,
And the end of it will be like a bitter day."**
(Amos 8:9-10)

Jesus endured three hours of dark abandonment in an agony that none of us can comprehend. So sensitive is my soul, I collapse when the warmth of God's grace seems to be blocked for just a few hours (Psa 30:7). But it always returns, as faithful as the sunrise. But for Jesus, those three endless hours compressed a comprehensive and eternal separation that we will never understand. And when he could bear it no more, he seized all of his strength to speak yet once more to his Father, crying, "*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani!*" These words are the Aramaic translation of David's opening cry of desolation in Psalm 22. A mere four words, they capture everything that was happening in Jesus' heaving soul, evoking the memory of the whole psalm. We may never plumb the depths of that cry, but the poet, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, makes a significant reach:

*Deserted! God cold separate from his own essence rather;
And Adam's sins have swept between the righteous Son and
Father.
Yea, once, Immanuel's orphan'd cry his universe hath shaken-
It went up since, echoless, "My God, I am forsaken!"*
(From "Cowper's Grave")

In his darkest hour, Jesus follows the practice of his whole life: he prays to his Father. It is fitting that, as was his custom, he found appropriate words from the psalms. David's verses give shape to his seething emotions, bringing them to the surface with a raw honesty and a defining clarity. Four words of Israel's first poet-king now seized by the lips of Israel's final king. Four words anchor Jesus to his past and forge his future, piercing the black, iron-clad sky and thrusting the abandoned orphan back to the Father's side. May we make them our prayers; then we, too, will have a voice in the darkness. How privileged we are to hear such words uttered in this rare glimpse of intimacy between Father and Son.

Sadly, however, they are lost to those standing around the cross. They are unable to enter in.

II. The Bystanders Mocking (Mark 15:35-39)

And when some of the bystanders heard it, they began saying, "Behold, He is calling for Elijah." And some one ran and filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a reed, and gave Him a drink, saying, "Leave me alone, let us see whether Elijah will come to take Him down." (Mark 15:35-39)

Those standing around mistake Jesus' cry, "Eloi, Eloi," for a cry to Elijah. The prophet was long considered to be the forerunner and helper to the Messiah (Mal 4:5). Hearing the term *Eloi*, one of the bystanders, presumably a soldier, turns Jesus' cry into a cruel joke. He fills a sponge with sour wine diluted with vinegar, a mixture that was drunk by the foot soldiers, in order to sedate Jesus and prolong his life. Gould's paraphrase catches the meaning of this: "Let me give him this, and so prolong his life, and then we shall get an opportunity to see whether Elijah comes to help him or not."² Apparently, some of the bystanders, disgusted by such a display of wanton cruelty, tried to prevent the soldier from doing this, but he responded, "Leave me alone," and persisted in carrying out his taunt: "Let's see whether Elijah comes to take him down." How ironic. At the end of the story there is the same confusion over the appearance of Elijah and his relation to Messiah as there was at the beginning. The striking difference is that now the confusion is turned into a terrible taunt: "Sedate him with vinegar to see if Elijah will help him." In the background we can hear the voice of David, more alive than ever,

**They gave me gall for my food,
and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.** (Psa 69:21)

Strengthened by his prayer, Jesus refuses to play the game, choosing not to prolong his life. He knows that his hour has come; no further work remained to be done.

III. The Centurion's Confession (Mark 15:37-39)

And Jesus uttered a loud cry, and breathed His last. And the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. And when the centurion, who was standing right in front of Him, saw the way He breathed His last, he said, "Truly this man was the Son of God!" (Mark 15:37-39)

Refusing to drink the cheap sedative, Jesus cries out with all his remaining strength. According to John, the cry was the voice of triumph: "It is finished!" (John 19:30). These words startled and shook the earth, broke open tombs (Matt 27:51-53), and rent the veil that separated the holy place from the holy of holies. Jerusalem's temple, which once served as a shadow of the dwelling of God among men, is now transformed and transcended by the body of Christ. Access to the holy throne room, which had been denied to most, and so carefully guarded and relegated to but one, is now thrown open wide as Jesus' blood flows freely from that tree. It is finished. Redemption is complete. The eternal Sabbath for which all creation had waited has now begun. From this point on, time would forever be invaded by eternity.

As Jesus gives up his spirit, the centurion who commanded the death squad is watching intently. Facing Jesus, he is seized with a bolt of fear, and makes the startling confession, "Truly this man was the Son of God!" Mark's gospel has been building to this grand climax. The very words which the Father spoke from heaven at Jesus' baptism, "You are my beloved Son, in you I am well pleased" (1:11), finally are echoed on earth. But strangely, they come not from a Jewish disciple but a Roman soldier, not from a friend but an enemy. He is the first to fit all the pieces together.

Peter, of course, was the first to make the confession that Jesus was Messiah, but had no idea of what that meant. From that point forward (Mark 8:31), Jesus spent the rest of his ministry teaching the disciples "the way" of the Messiah. His would not be a rule of force to destroy Rome, but one of submission to death at the hands of the conquerors. He taught them that the glorious Son of Man of Daniel was to be the Suffering Servant of Isaiah. Yet throughout the story, despite three direct predictions of his sufferings, the disciples were unable to understand. Now, when the climactic moment has arrived, they don't even see it, for they all had fled. Yet the witness comes. How strange and mysterious that the first one in Mark's story to comprehend everything is the brutal commander of the death squad, a man devoid of religious training. But on that day all it takes is one look at the cross and his voice breaks forth with angelic revelation (perhaps symbolized by the renting of the veil), confessing that this man, this suffering servant, through death is King Messiah.

Our story has come full circle. Beginning with the heavens rent, and the Father's confession about the Son as the Spirit enters Jesus at his baptism, it ends now with the temple curtain rent and the centurion's confession as Jesus gives up his spirit. Notice that at both the beginning and the end the mysterious name Elijah resonates in the text.

Moving from the centurion's amazing witness, Mark now directs our gaze to several women around the cross.

IV. The Mothers' Silent Grief (Mark 15:40-42)

And there were also some women looking on from a distance, among whom were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the Less and Joses, and Salome. And when He was in Galilee, they used to follow Him and minister to Him; and there were many other women who had come up with Him to Jerusalem. (Mark 15:40-42)

Unlike the bystanders who mock Jesus up close, these women must gaze from a distance. But the greater contrast to the unnamed bystanders is that these women, who are personally named, arrive on the scene with a caring grief that is characteristic of mothers. We can't fail to catch the theme of motherhood: we hear "Mary" twice and "mother" once. These women had cared for the personal needs and expenses of Jesus out of their own funds (Luke 8:2,3). Behind these three is a small army of women, devoted followers of the Lord. Though they are powerless to do anything they are still there at the cross. Though they are forced to remain at a distance they will not leave the bleeding boy. This is a mother's greatest gift. In our deepest grief what we long for most is a mother's presence. Here, at the hinge of history, these mothers gaze to the bitter end, grieving over a dead Son.

Following the centurion's confession and the mothers' gaze, Mark says there is still more devotion to follow.

V. A Father's Dying Devotion (Mark 14:42-46)

And when evening had already come, because it was the preparation day, that is, the day before the Sabbath, Joseph of Arimathea came, a prominent member of the Council, who himself was waiting for the kingdom of God; and he gathered up courage and went in before Pilate, and asked for the body of Jesus. And Pi-

late wondered if He was dead by this time, and summoning the centurion, he questioned him as to whether He was already dead. And ascertaining this from the centurion, he granted the body to Joseph. And Joseph bought a linen cloth, took Him down, wrapped Him in the linen cloth, and laid Him in a tomb which had been hewn out in the rock; and he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb. And Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus were looking on to see where He was laid. (Mark 14:42-46)

Deuteronomy 21:22-23 reads:

“And if a man has committed a sin worthy of death, and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his corpse shall not hang all night on the tree, but you shall surely bury him on the same day (for he who is hanged is accursed of God), so that you do not defile your land which the Lord your GOD gives you as an inheritance.” (Deut 21:22-23)

But, Carson explains: “The Roman custom was to let bodies of the crucified criminals hang in full view till they rotted away. If they were buried at all, it was only by express permission of the imperial magistrate. Such permission was usually granted to friends and relatives of the deceased who made application, but never in the case of high treason.”³

Will Jesus be left to rot on a tree? With the approach of evening and the Sabbath, a prominent leader among the Sanhedrin takes the stage. We learn from Luke and Matthew that this wealthy man, Joseph of Arimathea, had become a disciple of Jesus. Not consenting to the action of the council, what followed must have caused him unbearable sorrow, so much so that his heart was moved to risk everything — money, reputation, perhaps even his life — to provide a proper burial for Jesus. He musters up all his courage and goes to face Jesus’ executioner, Pilate, to ask for the body. Pilate, amazed to hear that Jesus was already dead, seeks confirmation from the centurion. For a second time the centurion bears witness to his death, and permission is miraculously granted.

The wealthy Joseph was the owner of a new tomb that he had cut out of the rock. John records that with the help of another Jewish leader, Nicodemus, they took the body of Jesus down from the cross. They washed it, prepared it with about seventy-five pounds of precious spices, and then wrapped it in an expensive linen cloth. What emotions they felt we can only imagine. They then took Jesus’ body and laid it in the tomb, in probably what is now the site of the church of the Holy Sepulchre. Again, Carson fills in the background,

Some centuries earlier the place had been a stone quarry, and the resulting rugged face became a place where tombs were cut from the rock. Joseph had prepared this tomb for his own use, but now he laid Jesus’ body in it. Tombs were of various kinds. Many were sealed with some sort of boulder wedged into place to discourage wild animals and grave robbers. But an expensive tomb consisted of an antechamber hewn out of the rock face, with a low passage leading into the burial chamber that was sealed with a cut, disk-shaped stone that rolled in a slot cut into the rock. The slot was on an incline, making the grave easy to seal but difficult to open.⁴

As the men carry out every holy procedure, behind them are the women. Roman law prohibited mourning for executed criminals; mourners could only watch in silent grief. But watch they did, until the burial was complete. And with it the eternal Sabbath begins.

We are struck by two things: how Mark has carefully crafted everything that went on around the cross, and second, the depths of the Father’s love. The first enlightens the mind, the second moves the heart.

VI. Holy Death

A. A Map of the Coming Kingdom

Observing how Mark shapes the story, it appears that what occurred around the cross was a foretaste, a miniature map of the coming kingdom of God. It, too, began with the creation’s witness (Acts 2:6). The same Spirit that left Jesus and rent the veil of the Temple as it returned to heaven again shakes the Temple on Pentecost, this time filling seventy disciples; and the church becomes the body of Christ possessed and animated by his very Spirit. Without the Spirit we are nothing. And at that hour there was also the same confusion and mocking to the witness of the Spirit as there was at the cross. That will never change. The crowds will always mock, but that will not impede the advance of God’s rule.

In the centurion’s confession we also get a preview that in the coming kingdom gentiles, of all people, will come to faith — and they will do so with seemingly little preparation and training. Even former enemies will comprehend easily and attain what the Jews worked so hard for but rarely achieved. So we discover that wherever the apostle Paul traveled he found a greater response to the gospel among gentiles than Jews. Even at the end of his life the imprisoned apostle had a dramatic influence among Caesar’s elite Praetorian Guard (Phil 4:22). And thus in the mystery of the kingdom, God will give his voice of witness to the Gentiles to make the Jews jealous (Rom 11:11).

From the centurion we turn to the sea of faithful women staring in silent grief. Unlike the disciples, they were not driven off in fear. They will be first to bear the news of the resurrection to a group of doubting males. Perhaps this is an indicator of the enhanced role which women would play in the age of the Spirit. They seem to burst on the scene with fearless faith and prepared hands, giving birth to large things. It is no coincidence that nearly every significant ministry here at our church was started by a woman. One of the latest, envisioned by Karin Stahl, has given birth to a whole city of faith in Guatemala.

And then we behold Joseph, the final figure around the tree. With this leading Jew we have come full circle. Perhaps he is a sign that God will not give up on his people. Thus the gospel story has as its defining shape the Jew first, then the Gentile, and finally, the Jew.⁵ And in the end, when they “look upon him whom they have pierced,” they will be moved as Joseph of Arimathea was and serve the Lord at great personal cost. I see indicators of that already in the Jewish believers I know. Like Joseph, many of them are wealthy, yet they give abundantly out those riches to serve the Son whom they love. The rejection of their families is often costly, making their devotion as dear as when Joseph washed Jesus’ bloody back and laid him in his own tomb.

Here then at the cross we find our map for the coming kingdom of God. But even more importantly, our text reveals much about the devotion of the Father to the Son, and by implication, the kind of devotion we owe to the Son.

B. The Devotion of the Father to the Son

As we saw in our last study, Mark makes use of very few words to describe the actual crucifixion. But, when we come to the impact of Jesus' death, his words explode with emotion. What was it like for the Father to abandon his boy and walk away while Jesus was being tortured at the hands of the Romans? We will never know. He veiled his weeping in the dark. Perhaps it would have been too much for our humanity to bear. It might even have inhibited our freedom to respond to his love. What we do know is that at the moment when Jesus cried, "*It is finished,*" God moved swiftly to action and speedily answered his beloved boy's cry. Abandon he must, but not for long. He will not wait for the resurrection to vindicate his Son. The moment he exhales his last breath, creation explodes and quakes, and the curtain of the old temple is torn asunder in a sign that the new one is at hand. In the place of a Father's forced abandonment and the nameless, mocking crowd we hear the names Mary and Joseph coming on the horizon like a lost mother and father. And it is not just one Mary but two, with a small army of mothers in their wake. And it is not just any Joseph but the most prominent Joseph in the land. In the holy presence of a surrogate father and a sea of mothers, Jesus receives a burial fit for a king, Messiah King. The Father who cannot leave his throne sends an army of mothers and a most distinguished father to care for his orphaned son.

What makes the devotion so beautiful is that it none of it is planned. It is all spontaneous, coming right from the heart.

How different this was from Herod the Great, who slaughtered the infant children in a sea of blood in Bethlehem. Herod longed for a grand display of devotion upon his death, so he prearranged everything. He built a mountain about three miles from Jesus' birthplace. There weren't any natural hills large enough, so he made his own. On top of this huge volcano-like structure he built one of

his seven palaces. He named it *Herodiun*, after himself. That was where that he would be buried. Then he prearranged his own funeral, with color guard and military escort. To ensure people would be weeping rather than applauding at his funeral, he ordered all the leading Jewish elders arrested and placed in the Jericho Hippodrome. At the moment of his death they were to be executed. Sadly for him, but fortunately for them, his orders were not carried out.⁶

Unlike Herod, Jesus had no ability to arrange for his funeral, yet observe its display of costly and courageous, extravagant devotion. In its uninhibited display the Father is demonstrating the kind of love he wants to give us. When we are mired in the deepest grief, God sends a sea of mothers and fathers to be his tender hands and weeping eyes. And when we look into those eyes we are touching the very tears of God, and they in turn are staring into the eyes of the Son. Is it no wonder that when we gaze into the heart of the cross we find an unquenchable love that draws us to a place called home. Perhaps this is why Paul said to the Corinthians, "*For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified*" (1 Cor 2:2). Amen.

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1. "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!" (2 Sam 18:33)
2. Quoted by Walter W. Wessel, "Mark," *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 783.
3. The words of the Father in Mark 1:11 are a combination of three texts, Psa 2:7, Gen 22:2, and Isa 42:1. By placing these three texts together, the Father at the very outset is saying, "This one is the King, but the way he will become King is through death."
4. D. A. Carson, "Matthew," *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 584.
5. Carson.
6. This paragraph on Herod was taken from Eugene Peterson's lectures on *Leadership*, given at Regent College, May 2000. Also supplemented by the Anchor Bible Dictionary.