

CLIMAX OF THE COVENANT

SERIES: THE PASSION ACCORDING TO MATTHEW

By Scott Grant

Entering the story

When I talk about the crucifixion, I don't pretend to know what I'm talking about. That's not to say I don't understand anything. It's simply to say that I don't understand it the way I would like to. In the years I have left, I hope that God will expand my heart so that I will linger longer when I come the way of the cross. I hope to both weep and rejoice with greater intensity. I yearn for the day when I will look into the eyes of my Savior and touch his scars with my fingers. Then, I think, I will understand. Until then, I will do what I can. Yogi Berra is supposed to have said, "You can observe a lot just by watching." So, I will come the way of the cross again and pray that God will give me eyes to see and ears to hear; that in watching I will observe, and that in observing I will understand.

If you care to accompany me, I'm going to use Matthew's account of the crucifixion to join a cohort of soldiers as they watch Jesus. They will watch everything that happens to him, and everything he does. We will sit with them at the foot of the cross and behold what transpires there.

Catching up

To help us understand what we will see and hear, we need to understand that many pages in this story have already been turned at the point we're entering into it. Therefore, we have some catching up to do. Matthew and the other gospel writers, drawing on the Old Testament, show us that in the crucifixion of Jesus, the story of Israel—and even the story of humanity—now reaches its climax. God created humans to worship him and to be his representatives on earth. His purposes, after the first human failure, devolved onto a representative nation, Israel, through whom humanity would be restored. Israel also failed, so the task then would fall to Israel's representative: the Messiah.

Humanity as a whole and Israel in particular became enslaved to the dark powers of the world, Satan and his invaders. Sustaining humanity's hope and then Israel's hope was a series of covenants. The chief of these, the Mosaic Covenant, God made with Israel. It was ratified and maintained by animal sacrifices, which assured the people of Israel that their sins were forgiven.

In the prophets, God promised a new covenant in which Israel's sins, which kept the nation enslaved to the evil powers, would be dealt with once and for all by means of a singular sacrifice. That sacrifice would be offered by the Messiah. In fact, that sacrifice would *be* the Messiah. The human evil of all history would be gathered to one place and to one human. Satan, the author of evil, would meet his demise. The Messiah, the representative of the nation that represents the world, would save Israel and thereby save the world.

The Messiah would go to Jerusalem for God's showdown with Satan. To make things unbearably worse, God would withdraw his presence, and the Messiah would face Satan alone. On the cross, the Messiah

would draw all the wickedness, all the shame and all the pain of the world onto himself. Satan would launch a final assault in order to compel the Messiah to give up and come down. But the Messiah would defeat evil by letting evil do its worst to him. He would not win the war by taking up a sword but by taking up a cross. For God, and for his Messiah, the way of defeat would be the way of victory, and the way of victory would be the way of defeat. When Jesus went to the cross, no one really understood this; therefore, no one really understood him. Many of his followers throughout history and even today haven't understood it—or him—either.

When we come the way of the cross, we come to the climax of the covenant, to the climax of the story of Israel and the story of humanity. This, then, is our story. When a story reaches its climax, we pay attention. When it's our own story, we're riveted. The story of the crucifixion is a drama of intense cosmic and personal significance. Let us, then, turn to it.

At the beginning and end, the narrative presents the Roman soldiers' response to Jesus. In the middle, Matthew focuses on the Jews. Pilate, the Roman governor, has just given in to the Jews' demand that he order the crucifixion of Jesus.

Romans mock Jesus

Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole Roman cohort around Him. They stripped Him and put a scarlet robe on Him. And after twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on His head, and a reed in His right hand; and they knelt down before Him and mocked Him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" They spat on Him, and took the reed and began to beat Him on the head. After they had mocked Him, they took the scarlet robe off Him and put His own garments back on Him, and led Him away to crucify Him. As they were coming out, they found a man of Cyrene named Simon, whom they pressed into service to bear His cross. (Matthew 27:27-32)

The Roman soldiers first strip Jesus of his normal clothing and then dress him up as a king. They give him a robe, a crown and a scepter. But it's a makeshift robe, a crown of thorns and a reed for a scepter. In wearing the crown, Jesus bears the curse of the fall, which meant that the ground would grow thorns and thistles (Genesis 3:18).

The soldiers pretend to worship him, falling on their knees and hailing him as king of the Jews. They spit on him and strike him in the head with the reed, demonstrating, in their minds, the foolishness of such a one being considered a powerful king. They certainly don't believe that he is king of the Jews, for the Jewish leadership has rejected him. So they mock him on that count. But they are also mocking the Jews in general, saying, in effect, "This is what happens to your king." In spitting on him and beating him, they are trying to show that he, the supposed king of the Jews, has no power to resist Roman authority.

After mocking him, they strip him of his "royal" attire and clothe him with his regular garments before leading him to be crucified. When the Romans crucify him, they show him to be a man stripped of any royal authority, crushed under the iron fist of Roman rule.

As they lead him away to be crucified, they force a man named Simon from Cyrene to carry the cross of Jesus. Why does Matthew include this part of the story, and why is he so specific in recounting the details of it? The man's name is Simon, which is the same name of the man who confessed Jesus as the Christ and was instructed by Jesus to take up his cross and follow him (Matthew 16:16, 24), but Simon Peter at this point in his life wants nothing to do with crosses, so the Father sends another Simon to carry Jesus' cross.

This Simon is from Cyrene, which is on the North Coast of Africa. Simon is a Jewish name, so he is a Jew living outside the land. But here he is, beside the Messiah, carrying his cross. By including this story, Matthew is indicating that the long-anticipated re-gathering of Israel has begun (Isaiah 43:5-7, 54:1-3).

Romans watch Jesus

And when they came to a place called Golgotha, which means Place of a Skull, they gave Him wine to drink mixed with gall; and after tasting it, He was unwilling to drink. And when they had crucified Him, they divided up His garments among themselves by casting lots. And sitting down, they began to keep watch over Him there. And above His head they put up the charge against Him which read, "THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS." (Matthew 27:33-37)

They crucify Jesus at Golgotha, which means "Place of a Skull." An early legend has it that Adam was buried at the very spot that Jesus was crucified. Some paintings and stained-glass windows of the crucifixion scene therefore depict Adam's skull at the foot of the cross. Whether it's true or not, it is a powerful picture of God's answer to the sin of Adam. The death of Adam's sin is overcome by the death of God's Son, the cross of Christ being inserted into the skull of Adam.

The soldiers give him a wine-gall mixture, a bitter drink evidently intended to torment Jesus. Matthew's description originates in Psalm 69:21. In Psalm 69:20, King David writes, "Reproach has broken my heart, and I am so sick. And I looked for sympathy, but there was none, and for comforters, but I found none." Jesus the King, just like his predecessor, finds no sympathy, only torment.

The soldiers then divide his garments and cast lots for them. This is the first in a series of allusions to Psalm 22 (Matthew 27:39, 43, 46). In Psalm 22, David feels abandoned by humanity and God. In his account, Matthew shows that Jesus feels similarly, thereby fulfilling David's story. The division of his garments and the casting of lots for them may be a subtle reference to the land of Israel, which was divided among the tribes of Israel by lot. The land was Israel's "inheritance." Perhaps Matthew is implying that Israel's true inheritance is found not in the land but in Jesus.

The soldiers are completely ignorant of how Jesus could benefit them, however. All they want from the crucifixion is the garments of Jesus. He would clothe each of them with "garments of salvation" and wrap each of them with "a robe of righteousness" (Isaiah 61:10). He would clothe them with himself (Galatians 3:27). Then the soldiers sit down and keep watch over Jesus. After the mocking, there's really nothing left to do but sit and watch. Let us watch with them.

They place the written charge against Jesus above his head: “This is Jesus the king of the Jews.” Again, it’s a statement and warning to Israel: “This is where any king of yours ends up.” Jesus, of course, is the king of Israel—not to mention all of creation. What does the king of Israel do? As Israel’s representative, he assumes Israel’s role. The Romans execute Jesus as a rebel leader. It is no mere coincidence that Jesus dies for a crime that he is innocent of but that most Jews are guilty of. For the most part, Israel wanted to throw off the fetters of Rome. Jesus dies the death of a rebel on behalf of rebels. He absorbs the wrath of Rome—not to mention the wrath of God—that would otherwise be directed toward Israel.

Sharing the spotlight with Jesus in this section are the Roman soldiers. They start out mocking and end up watching. Their observations are going to lead them to conclude that Jesus, who they mocked as king of the Jews, is something even more than that. We too occasionally arrive at the point in life where there’s really nothing left to do but sit and watch. We do our jobs; we have some fun, sometimes at others’ expense, just like the soldiers. At the end of the day, perhaps we wonder what it all means. Maybe, like the Roman soldiers, our gaze turns to Jesus.

Jews reject Jesus

At that time two robbers were crucified with Him, one on the right and one on the left. And those passing by were hurling abuse at Him, wagging their heads and saying, “You who are going to destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save Yourself! If You are the Son of God, come down from the cross.” In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking Him and saying, “He saved others; He cannot save Himself. He is the King of Israel; let Him now come down from the cross, and we will believe in Him. HE TRUSTS IN GOD; LET GOD RESCUE Him now, IF HE DELIGHTS IN HIM; for He said, ‘I am the Son of God.’” The robbers who had been crucified with Him were also insulting Him with the same words. (Matthew 27:38-44)

Two disciples of Jesus, James and John, wanted to reign with Jesus at his right and at his left, but as Jesus moved closer to the cross, they fled along with the other disciples (Matthew 20:20-23, 26:56). When Jesus looks to his right and left, where his friends should be, who does he see? He sees two angry criminals hurling abuse at him. Evidently, one of the criminals later had a change of heart (Luke 23:39-43).

The narrative shifts from Roman response to Christ to Jewish response to Christ. The passersby, priests, scribes, elders and criminals are all Jewish. They all abuse him. They all have a problem with Jesus. As it turns out, they all have the same problem.

They have a problem with this title “Son of God.” Israelite kings were called “sons of God” (Psalm 2:7, 2 Samuel 7:14). Then it came to be associated with *the* king who was to come, that one king who would come from the tribe of Judah and the line of David who would set things right: the Messiah (Matthew 1:1). He would restore the temple; he would save Israel; the nation would believe in him; he would trust in God; God would deliver him; God would take pleasure in him. But God would not leave him to die, of all places, on a Roman cross. The Son of God, when he came, was supposed to lead Israel to victory over her enemies. The enemy is Rome. Crucifixion was a Roman form of execution. Take issue with Rome’s right to rule and you end up on one of its crosses. The cross was a symbol of Rome’s brutal form

of oppression. But the Messiah, when he came, would rid the land of Rome and its crosses. For Jesus to be called the Son of God and to die on a Roman cross was a misidentification of the grossest proportions.

The passersby, the Jewish leaders and even those dying on crosses next to him are offended that this one would call himself the Son of God. He showed no interest in their causes. He did not at all act like the Son of God. Mostly, he did not endorse a nationalist agenda that involved defeating Rome, the evil empire. The word translated “robbers” in this passage would better be translated “insurrectionists.” Worse still, Jesus identified Israel, not Rome, as the evil empire. The problem, he said, was not so much with Rome as it was with Israel, the representative of humanity, which had forsaken its God and replaced him with a very pagan-like nationalist agenda. Jesus not only failed to meet their messianic expectations, he repudiated them. No wonder they mock him. They mock him as a false Messiah, and a wrong-headed one at that.

The passersby say, “If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.” The chief priests, scribes and elders say, “He is the king of Israel; let him now come down from the cross...” The condemned criminals say the same thing. “If you are the Son of God, then what in God’s name are you doing on that Roman cross? That’s the last place you should be.” They facetiously suggest that if his messianic claim is true, he should come down from the cross. To them, the suggestion is a joke. To Jesus it is as real as the nails in his hands. He could have called on more than 12 legions of angels (Matthew 26:53).

Probably the most definitive title for Jesus is that of “Son of God.” It was central to his identity and his vocation. As the Son of God, as God’s anointed king, he was to gather the world, beginning with Jerusalem, and bring it to God (John 11:52, 1 Peter 3:18). These people would comprise the new and living temple of God that he would build. The call to gather the world, return it to God and build this spiritual temple is one he feels in the deepest part of his being. But right now, things don’t seem to be going so well. His identity and vocation are being challenged as he hangs on the cross.

It’s not the first time it has been suggested to Jesus what he should do as the Son of God. In the wilderness, Jesus heard these words: “If you are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread.” “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down.” “All these things I will give you if you fall down and worship me.” It was the voice of Satan (Matthew 4:1-11). Satan was challenging the identity of the Son in order to tempt him to fulfill his vocation in a way that would have conformed to popular expectations and steered him neatly away from the chaos of the cross. Now on the cross, the Son hears the voice again: “If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.” Satan did everything he could to get Jesus to avoid the cross. Now that Jesus is on the cross, Satan hits him with everything he’s got at Jesus’ weakest moment, both physically and emotionally. Everything about this scene screams for Jesus to come down from the cross. His disciples have abandoned him, the Jews are mocking him, the Romans are killing him and God is nowhere in sight.

At this moment, the only possible conclusion is that it must be terribly wrong for him to be hanging on this cross. His dream is being drained from him with each drop of blood. At this point, the only possible course of action, if there is any hope for the world, is to come down from the cross and prove himself as Son of God. Then they would believe that God takes pleasure in him, and he could proceed with his mission of gathering the world and building God’s temple.

Think for a moment about the times when you hear that awful voice within that threatens something you consider central to your identity. You know the voice. It goes something like this, “You’re not much of a man, are you?” “You’re not much of a woman, are you?” When you hear the voice, it demands that you prove it wrong.

Jesus hears the voice. It resounds in his soul, seeking resonance with his identity. “If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.” He is tempted to come down not necessarily because it is the easy way but because by all appearances it is the only way.

New Testament scholar N.T. Wright sees a parallel with the legend of Odysseus: “He is on his way back from the Trojan war, sailing from one danger to another. And one of the dangers he has to pass is the island where the Sirens live, singing their song of intense beauty and exquisite though deadly power. Odysseus is warned that no man who hears it can resist it, and that all who obey the lure end up dead on the shore. So he has his men stop their ears with wax and tie him, with his ears open, to the mast of the ship, with their only orders that if they perceive him trying to tell them to loose him they will tie him tighter. So Odysseus comes within sound of the Sirens’ voices, and the strange longing surges through him so that he is in an agony of desire to obey, to yield; and his deaf sailors, seeing him struggle to be free, simply tie him tighter. He experiences to the full the desperate agony of listening to the song and of being unable, through his own prior decision, to do what it bade him. I see him in my mind’s eye tied there; his arms stretched out to either side, lashed to the crossbeam of the mast, with his overwhelming longing to yield to the lovely voice held firmly in check by his determination to remain obedient, a determination already effected in his orders to his men. Jesus had no men to whom he could give such orders. The orders all came, and continued to come, from within himself.” (1)

What does the Son of God do? Jesus hears the sweet song of the Sirens, but he doesn’t leave the cross. Something within him rises to keep him there. What is it?

The answer is in the words of the passersby, the chief priests, the scribes, the elders and the criminals. They intend to insult Jesus. Unintentionally, they tell us why Jesus remains on the cross: *Their words remind Jesus of his identity and call.* They mock him as one who would destroy the temple and rebuild it. They have no idea that at this very instant, as Jesus hangs on the cross, they are destroying the true temple, the body of Jesus, and that he would build a new temple (John 2:18-21). At the moment of his death, the veil of the temple would be torn in two (Matthew 27:51). The temple was no longer needed, and in due time would be destroyed by Rome. Three days after his death, Jesus would rise to build a new and better temple comprising living stones, the people of God (1 Peter 2:5).

If he comes down, what kind of temple is he left with? That shell of a building in Jerusalem that God long ago abandoned because the people had abandoned him. The people hurling abuse at him at this very moment would not benefit from such a temple. So he stays. He stays for them.

They tell him to save himself and come down from the cross. If he comes down, they tell him, they will believe in him as the Son of God, presumably following him as he saves them from Rome. But if he saves himself and comes down from the cross, he wouldn’t be saving them. They needed salvation not from Rome but from sin. If he comes down and they believe, their faith won’t mean anything. They want him to come down to save himself, but he stays to save them.

They suggest that God would deliver him “now” if God takes pleasure in him. God doesn’t deliver Jesus now because he is delivering *them* now. He is delivering them by extending forgiveness to them in the broken body of his Son. God takes pleasure in them, so he doesn’t deliver Jesus. Neither does Jesus cry out for deliverance. It must be that Jesus, too, takes pleasure in the passersby, the chief priests, the scribes, the elders and the criminals. Again, he stays for them. He has proved to be a laughable disappointment to these people to the point that they abuse him mercilessly at his weakest moment, but he stays because his heart breaks for them, even these who are mocking him.

What keeps Jesus on the cross? It isn’t the nails. It’s love. It’s love for you. Rising from within Jesus is love for you so intense in its beauty that it overpowers the song that begs him to leave the cross. He wanted to gather you to God and enfold you into his temple. Jesus finds the temptation resistible, because he finds you irresistible. He stays on the cross because he takes pleasure in you.

Jesus stays on the cross by holding onto love. That’s how he defeats Satan. The way of humanity is to retaliate, if only in one’s heart—to return hatred for hatred, curse for curse, insult for insult. But what does Jesus do? The apostle Peter comments, “And while being reviled, he did not revile in return; while suffering he uttered no threats, but kept entrusting himself to him who judges righteously” (1 Peter 1:23). They hurl their sin at him, but it does not return. The world hurls its sin at him, but it does not return. We hurl our sin at him, but it does not return. Instead, as he hangs on this cross, he absorbs our sin into the purity of his being, and it dissolves. We hurl our sin at him, and love returns. And Satan goes down.

In its day, the cross symbolized defeat and oppression for God’s people. God has changed all that. Since then, God’s people have landscaped the entire earth with crosses to symbolize his victory over evil and his love for the world.

Jews misunderstand Jesus

Now from the sixth hour darkness fell upon all the land until the ninth hour. About the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, “ELI, ELI, LAMA SABACHTHANI?” that is, “MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?” And some of those who were standing there, when they heard it, began saying, “This man is calling for Elijah.” Immediately one of them ran, and taking a sponge, he filled it with sour wine and put it on a reed, and gave Him a drink. But the rest of them said, “Let us see whether Elijah will come to save Him.” And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and yielded up His spirit. (Matthew 27:45-50)

The Jews are in the dark. Not only are they in the dark, but so is the land—the land of Israel, one of Israel’s sacred symbols. From the sixth hour until the ninth hour, noon to 3 p.m., darkness falls on the land. The darkness is symbolic of God’s judgment on Israel for rejecting its Messiah (Exodus 10:21-22). A passage in Amos also suggests that it symbolizes mourning: “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 into mourning and all your songs into lamentation; and I will bring sackcloth on everyone’s loins and baldness on every head. And I will make it like a time of mourning for an only son, and the end of it will be like a bitter day” (Amos 8:9-10). The Father, having moved Simon of Cyrene onto the stage, now changes the backdrop. In despair, he darkens creation to mourn for his only Son.

Jesus then cries out, uttering the words of Psalm 22:1: “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” Matthew records Jesus as speaking the words in Hebrew and Aramaic. Jesus probably spoke in Aramaic and Hebrew most of the time, but the gospel writers translate his words into Greek. In leaving these words in their original language, Matthew shows how it came about that they were misunderstood by the bystanders.

Why did God forsake Jesus? He forsook Jesus for the sake of Israel and humanity. The sins of humanity were heaped onto Jesus, and for this reason God forsook him on the cross. Jesus is being forsaken by God for their sake, but again, the Jews can't see it. More to the point, they can't hear it. They hear Jesus speaking, but they misunderstand him. They hear the words “Eli, Eli,” which means “My God, My God,” and think he's calling for Elijah.

It's not simply that they misunderstand what Jesus is saying. Behind their misunderstanding is a worldview that is predisposed toward misunderstanding. The Jewish belief was—and still is—that the prophet Elijah would come back to deliver God's people or at least prepare the way for deliverance (Malachi 3:1, 4:5-6). At the Passover meal, a door was left open for Elijah to enter, and a cup of wine was left for him to drink. The hope was that Elijah would return to save them.

The bystanders think Jesus is calling for Elijah. They think that Jesus is crying out for deliverance. He is not. He told his disciples that Elijah had already come in the person of John the Baptist (Matthew 17:12). The forerunner had already come, preparing the way for the Messiah, preparing the way for deliverance. Jesus' cry of God-forsakenness, then, is indicative that the deliverance that Elijah came to prepare the people for is happening now. Instead of forsaking the bystanders, God forsakes Jesus.

Hearing what he thinks to be a cry for Elijah, one of the bystanders offers Jesus “sour wine,” probably wine vinegar diluted with water—a drink enjoyed by laborers and soldiers. The act is probably not one of kindness but one of mockery. The drink would extend the life of Jesus—and his torture—and supposedly give Elijah more time to come. The word translated “but” in verse 49 would be better translated “and” in this case. The rest of the bystanders did not object to the offer of a drink; they endorsed it so that the fun could last a little longer.

Jesus cries out again with a loud voice, but there can be no mistaking the meaning this time. When he cries out, he yields his spirit. He yields his spirit, so that God can send his Spirit to renew Israel and all humanity.

As we hear the cry of Jesus, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” what does it mean to us? What are the expectations of our day that predispose us to miss the moment? What expectations do we have that may predispose us to misunderstand the cry of Jesus, to under-appreciate it or to ignore it altogether?

Perhaps God has been preparing you all along to hear the cry. Perhaps there have been Elijah-like people or Elijah-like moments in your life, sent and designed by God to turn your heart toward him and prepare the way in your heart for the Messiah. Perhaps like the Jews of Jesus' day, those who didn't recognize Elijah in the person of John, you didn't recognize these “Elijahs” when they came to you. But perhaps now, as you hear the cry again, those people and those moments are coming back to you. And you're

ready to hear the cry in a new way. Matthew says the bystanders heard the cry, but they didn't really hear it. Do you hear it?

Do you hear the anguish and confusion? Do you hear the love—love for an absent Father, love for a world gone wrong? Do you appreciate what it means? It means that instead of forsaking you, God forsook his Son. It means you've been delivered from the evil one. It means your sins are forgiven. It means that you're loved more than you could possibly know. It means that the best thing that could ever happen to you has already happened.

Like the Jews at the scene of the crucifixion, we can miss what it's all about. Perhaps our preconceptions blind us to the reality of Jesus—the reality of his love for us. Perhaps we have constructed blinders for ourselves that prevent us from seeing that Jesus loves us—or seeing that anyone loves us. The drama of the crucifixion shows us that God loves us, that Jesus loves us—that there never has been and never will be another love like this.

The Jews miss it. Meanwhile, the Roman soldiers keep watch.

Romans recognize Jesus

And behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth shook and the rocks were split. The tombs were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; and coming out of the tombs after His resurrection they entered the holy city and appeared to many. Now the centurion, and those who were with him keeping guard over Jesus, when they saw the earthquake and the things that were happening, became very frightened and said, “Truly this was the Son of God!” (Matthew 27:51-54)

Matthew uses the word “behold” in describing the events that ensue after the death of Jesus. The Jews at the scene of the crucifixion failed to behold the reality of Jesus, but Matthew encourages his readers to take it in. At the death of Jesus, the veil of the temple, which separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place, was torn. Jesus was mocked as one who would destroy the temple and rebuild it. The tearing of the curtain indicates that he is doing just that.

The temple had been corrupted, and Jesus, its fulfillment, has come (Matthew 21:12-17). The meeting place of God would now be Jesus, not a building, making the temple redundant. It would be destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD. Jesus is now the temple, as is his body those who believe in him. There is now universal access to God through Christ (Hebrews 4:16; 6:19-20; 9:3, 11-28; 10:19-22).

The land is shaken by the death of Christ. Earthquakes in the scriptures convey the presence of God. In this scene, the Father doesn't appear—he can't appear—but he makes his presence known. He groans with grief too deep for words.

The death of Christ also precipitates the opening of tombs. Many bodies of “the saints, who had fallen asleep,” God's people, who had died, were raised, evidently after the resurrection of Christ. They entered the holy city, Jerusalem. This was evidently not a temporary resuscitation but a permanent resurrection, in which the people were given new bodies along the lines of Christ's. After they entered Jerusalem,

presumably they went to be with the Father, just like Jesus. This strange event was designed as a testimony to unbelieving Israel to show that the long-awaited restoration of Israel, which was comparable to a resurrection, was happening even now (Ezekiel 37:12-14, Isaiah 26:19, Daniel 12:2). What they were longing for was happening, but it's left to Roman soldiers to make the appropriate observation.

And now, the scene shifts back to the Roman soldiers. When Matthew turned his narrative away from them, they were keeping watch over Jesus. When he turns back to them, they are doing the same thing. The centurion, the leader of the soldiers, joins the story at this point. Keeping watch, the soldiers observed. Matthew says they "saw the earthquake and the things that were happening."

What other "things" did they see besides the earthquake? They had a chance to observe the crucifixion from start to finish. They saw everything. They saw Jesus when they stripped him, gave him the cloak, placed the crown of thorns on his head, gave him the reed, mocked him as king, spit on him and beat him with the reed. They saw the criminals, the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders abuse him while he was on the cross. They saw darkness fall on the land. They heard Jesus cry out twice, first when he felt abandoned by God and second when he yielded his spirit. And they felt the earthquake. They saw Jesus absorb all this abuse, but they never saw him strike back. Seeing and hearing all this, they become very frightened, fearing some kind of heavenly wrath. The Roman soldiers were experts at watching men die. Yet they have never seen anyone die like this before.

What they see leads them to a different conclusion: "Truly this was the Son of God." First they mocked him, thinking it not even possible that he was king of the Jews. Now they call him the Son of God. How exactly the soldiers mean it—in a Jewish sense or a pagan sense—is unclear. At the very least, they recognize Jesus as a powerful ruler—perhaps more powerful than their own king, Caesar. Matthew, however, would have us believe that they spoke more than they knew. He uses their words as an endorsement for his meaning. Jesus is the Son of God, the King of Israel and of the whole world. The charge against Jesus said, "This is Jesus the king of the Jews." The Jews said, "This man is calling for Elijah." The soldiers say otherwise, concluding, "Truly, this was the Son of God."

When Simon of Cyrene joins the story, Matthew's message is that God is gathering the dispersed children of Israel. When the Romans—the Romans!—acknowledge Jesus, Matthew's message is that God is gathering the entire world. When the Romans see something of God in Jesus, he is in actuality what Israel was designed to be: the light of the world and a city set on a hill (Matthew 5:14). Jesus, hanging from a cross atop the hill of Golgotha, is that city and light all by himself, reflecting the glory of God for all to see. God chose Israel to save the world, and now the true Israel, Jesus the Messiah, is doing precisely that (Genesis 12:1-3, Exodus 19:6, Isaiah 49:3).

If you read Matthew's gospel all the way through you find that when Elijah appears at two key points, a heavenly voice sounds forth. When John the Baptist, appearing in the spirit and power of Elijah, baptized Jesus, a voice came out of the heavens: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased" (Matthew 3:17). When Elijah appeared, along with Moses, as Jesus was transfigured before three of his disciples, a voice came out of a cloud: "This is my Son, with whom I am well-pleased; hear him!" (Matthew 17:5). When the bystanders misunderstand Jesus and watch for Elijah at the climax of the story, we expect the heavenly voice of affirmation again. But the Father, weeping behind the scenes, grief-stricken beyond words, does not speak. It is left not to the Jews but to the enemies, Roman soldiers,

to give voice to the Father's love for his Son: "Truly, this was the Son of God." The Father, though he cannot appear in this scene himself, is saying through the soldiers, as Jesus does his will, "That's my Son!"

The Jews, who had all the advantages to enable them to recognize Jesus as the Son of God, fail to do so. The Romans, who had none of the advantages, acknowledge him as such. They are the ones who weren't supposed to get it. They were on the outside. They were the enemies of Israel. But they did have at least two advantages that helped them see the truth. First, they didn't look at Jesus with the Jewish preconception of what the Son of God was supposed to do. Second, they had eyes and nothing to do with them but watch what was happening for a few hours. A fresh pair of eyes and the inclination to watch go a long way toward the apprehension of truth. Therefore, the story encourages us to sit before the cross with fresh eyes and watch. If we do, we'll come to the conclusion, this side of the resurrection, not only that this was the Son of God but that this *is* the Son of God. If the Roman soldiers—the ultimate outsiders—can get it, we can too.

In the oratorio "St. Matthew Passion," which puts the words of Matthew's passion narrative to music, Bach has written into the bass line of the soldiers' observation the musical letters that represent his own name. That, essentially, is what we should do with this passage: Find ourselves among the soldiers. We can see our sin piled onto Jesus. We can see it crush him. We can see him give back nothing but love. We can hear him cry, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me," and know that the cry was for us. We can accept what Jesus accomplishes for us as he hangs on the cross. We can bring our sin, our sadness and our fears to that hill and hold them up to the light of the love we see there. And we can say, "Truly, this is the Son of God."

Women behold Jesus

Many women were there looking on from a distance, who had followed Jesus from Galilee while ministering to Him. Among them was Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee. (Matthew 27:55-56)

The Roman soldiers weren't the only ones who were watching. Many women who had followed Jesus were, literally, "beholding" him, probably from a place that was as close as they were allowed to get. They are doing exactly what Matthew encourages his readers to do (Matthew 27:51). Here is faithful Israel. The Israel that was supposed to follow Jesus didn't follow Jesus. That Israel sent Jesus to the cross and abused him as he hung there.

The two women who are identified by name are called Mary. Jesus' mother was named Mary. Two of the women are specifically called mothers. The Father, who somehow holds himself back, sends three mothers to behold his Son, backed up by a whole cohort of mothers. In a son's deepest moment of pain, he wants the comfort of a mother. In the next scene, he will send a Joseph, a name that Jesus' father bore, to bury his Son (Matthew 27:57-60).

At least two of these women beheld more than the crucifixion. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph visited the tomb of Jesus on Sunday morning and found it empty (Matthew 28:1-10).

Matthew, by including the women in his description of the crucifixion scene, thereby sets the stage for the resurrection of Jesus, which will vindicate him as the Son of God. But that is a story for another day.

The way into our hearts

So, we come to the end of our story. We have come the way of the cross, and perhaps it has made its way into our hearts. Before the end of this day, having come the way of the cross, what will we do? We will remind ourselves of what we have observed here today. And we will worship our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

NOTES

(1) N.T. Wright, *The Crown and the Fire*, © 1992 by N.T. Wright. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Mich. Pp. 38-39.

Catalog No. 4814
Matthew 27:27-56
Fourth Message
Scott Grant
March 28, 2004

[Back to Index page](#)

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