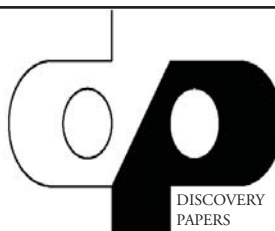


# HONORING THE SON

**SERIES: THE WAY OF THE LORD: FOLLOWING JESUS IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK**



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Mark 15:33-47  
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Hank Greenwald, the former play-by-play broadcaster for the San Francisco Giants, says this: “In baseball you come out every night and you see something you have never seen before.”<sup>1</sup> Even toward the end of his long career, Greenwald could often be heard telling his listeners something like, “You know—how often do I say it?—I’ve never seen that before.” Because of its leisurely pace, baseball, more than most sports, lends itself to such observations. A broadcaster who loves the game can linger over it and see new things.

The story of the death of Jesus is an old story—and a familiar story for most followers of Jesus. We must not therefore conclude, however, that we have seen all there is to see in it. Consider the cry of Jesus from the cross: “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” (Mark 15:34). Who can’t learn something new about that question, the complete meaning of which is ultimately unknowable? Even if we don’t see something new in the story of the death of Jesus, we can still learn new ways of seeing it.

It’s an old story and a familiar story—but a strange story. We need to see new things in it or at least learn new ways of seeing it so that it stays strange, so that it stays fresh, so that we might be renewed by the one it features. If you love Jesus, or if he intrigues you in some way, you may want to linger over the story, sort of like a broadcaster who loves baseball lingers over the game. You might see something you’ve never seen before, something that troubles you or delights you—something that might even change your life.

Mark 15:16-32 featured Part 1 of the crucifixion narrative. Part 2 commences with Mark 15:33.

## Bystanders misunderstand Jesus

Mark 15:33-36:

<sup>33</sup>**When the sixth hour came, darkness fell over the whole land until the ninth hour.**

<sup>34</sup>**At the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a**

**loud voice, “ELOI, ELOI, LAMA SABACH-THANI?” which is translated, “MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?”**<sup>35</sup>**When some of the bystanders heard it, they began saying, “Behold, He is calling for Elijah.”**<sup>36</sup>**Someone ran and filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a reed, and gave Him a drink, saying, “Let us see whether Elijah will come to take Him down.”**<sup>22</sup>

Earlier, the “whole” Sanhedrin and the “whole” Roman cohort gathered against Jesus; now, darkness falls over the “whole” land (Mark 14:55, 15:16). The Jewish leaders and Roman soldiers mocked Jesus, but creation seems to have something to say. Before God created the universe, darkness was over the face of the deep (Genesis 1:2). Before he created Israel as a nation, darkness fell on the land of Egypt (Exodus 10:21-23). In the Hebrew Scriptures, darkness often symbolizes the judgment of God (Deuteronomy 28:9, Jeremiah 15:9, Amos 8:9). Likewise, the darkness in the Gospel of Mark represents the judgment of God. When God turns out the lights on creation, we might picture him weeping behind the scenes for his beloved Son. Perhaps, though, the darkness—and the judgment it represents—is some sort of prelude. If darkness preceded the creation of the universe and the creation of Israel, then the darkness over the land of Israel may signal the dawning of a new creation and the birth of the new people of God.

The darkness over the land mirrors the spiritual condition of those who look upon Jesus as he hangs from the cross. They have eyes, but they don’t see what’s going on. The bystanders have ears, but they misunderstand him, even though he cries out with a loud voice and employs David’s familiar words from Psalm 22:1.

Moses told Israel that God “will not fail you or forsake you” (Deuteronomy 31:6). God himself told Joshua, “Just as I have been with Moses, I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you” (Joshua 1:5). Now, however, the new Moses and the new Joshua, the new Israel, who has been unequivocally strong and courageous, who has never turned from God to the right or to the left, cries out, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?”

When Adam sinned, God cursed the land, and thereafter it produced thorns. When the Roman soldiers enthroned Jesus in a degrading parody, they gave him a crown of thorns. When God formed Israel as his people, he warned them that the covenant curse would come upon them if they worshiped other gods: they would be exiled from the Promised Land. According to the law, “he who is hanged is accursed of God” (Deuteronomy 21:23). As the thorns rim his head and the nails pierce his skin, the Son of God goes into exile. He is—can we say it?—cursed by God. My God!

To make matters worse, Jesus doesn't know why his God has forsaken him. Earlier, he seemed to know that the way of the Lord would take him to this place. He told his disciples that the Jewish leaders would condemn him and hand him over to the Gentiles, who would mock him, spit on him, scourge him, and kill him (Mark 10:32-34). Now that he has arrived at his destination, he doesn't know why it has to be this way.

Jesus' cry from the cross is a cry for the ages—a cry for all ages. In every age, the cry goes up, “Why do the innocent suffer?” In every age, the cry goes up, “Where is God?” In every age, the cry goes up, “Why doesn't God do something?” Indeed, the Son of God takes our place, giving voice to the deepest cry of the human heart.

The bystanders, though, think Jesus is calling for the prophet Elijah. Jesus cries out in Aramaic, the Hebrew dialect of the day. The Aramaic word for “my God,” Eloi, sounds like “Elijah.” Many Jews believe that Elijah will return to deliver God's people or at least prepare the way for deliverance (Malachi 3:1, 4:5-6). The bystanders, hearing a word that sounds like “Elijah,” think Jesus is calling out for his own deliverance. He is not. For Jesus, John the Baptist fulfilled the expectations concerning the return of Elijah (Mark 9:13, Matthew 17:12). Elijah, in the person of John, had come, preparing the way for deliverance—for what is happening now, as Jesus cries out from the cross. Elijah (John the Baptist) had come to prepare Israel for this moment, and when the moment comes, Israel is still waiting for the moment.

The bystanders fulfill the words of Isaiah, who wrote of Israel's reaction to the Servant of the Lord: “Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, / Smitten of God, and afflicted.” They could not see or hear, “But He was pierced through for our transgressions, / He was crushed for our iniquities; / The chastening of our well-being fell upon Him, / And by his scourging we are healed” (Isaiah 53:4-5).

One of the bystanders, continuing to mock Jesus, offers him sour wine, probably wine vinegar mixed with water, a beverage enjoyed by laborers and soldiers. The drink would extend Jesus' life—and his torture—and supposedly give Elijah more time to come. Again, the words of David are relevant: “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. / They also gave me gall for my food / And for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink” (Psalm 69:20-21).

## Hearing Jesus

Just as Elijah appeared on the scene in the first century in the form of John the Baptist, he appears on the scene today in all sorts of forms—probably not in person, definitely in the people and events that God uses to prepare the way for us to follow his Son. God sends us Elijah-like figures and arranges for Elijah-like moments, but they blow right past us, because we have more important things to do than to pay attention to what God is doing. Therefore, when Jesus cries out in our day, we misunderstand him, just like the bystanders.

Is it possible, though, that you've been prepared to hear the cry of Jesus in Mark 15:35 with new ears? He cries out to the Father, but he cries out for you. Listen: “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” Don't those words resonate with something in your heart, something deep, something you can hardly identify? Aren't they like a line from a song, a movie, a novel, or a poem that makes you say, “Oh, that's me; that's what I feel”? Perhaps the cry of Jesus, as you hear it with fresh ears, liberates you to cry out to your God with a new voice. Jesus, when he cries out, gives voice to the deepest cry of your heart.

Although we hear from the Son in the crucifixion narrative, the Father is silent. His silence, though, speaks volumes. How can the Father listen to his Son's cry and not answer him? Recently, when I asked my seven-year-old daughter why she was crying in reaction to something I had done, she told me, “Because it makes me think you don't love me.” I said, “Christina, look into my eyes.” After she looked into my eyes, I said, “Do you think that's true?” She said no. She was reassured and went on her way. As a father, I wanted to reassure my daughter of my love for her. However, when the Son cries out to the Father, asking why he has forsaken him, the Father offers no such reassurance.

Why does the Father hold himself back? How can the Father hold himself back? This is, after all, his Son, his beloved Son. The Father has to hold himself back, he has to be silent, in order to address our deepest need. The Son addressed our deepest need by staying on the cross, held in place by his love for us, though he could have called on more than twelve legions of angels. The Father addresses our deepest need by refraining from rescuing his Son from the cross, paralyzed by his love for us, though he could have moved heaven and earth. Instead of forsaking us, God forsakes his Son. Instead of delivering his Son, God delivers us. Instead of answering his Son's cry, he addresses our need for victory over Satan, sin, and death. Somehow, though he desperately wants to jump out of his throne for the sake of his Son, he holds himself back for the sake of us. It had to be this way, it had to be this agonizing, for both the Son and the Father, because God loves us far more than we know and sin is far more destructive than we think.

The bystanders don't understand what they hear. A Roman soldier, however, understands something he sees.

## Centurion sees Jesus

Mark 15:37-39:

**<sup>37</sup>And Jesus uttered a loud cry, and breathed His last. <sup>38</sup>And the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. <sup>39</sup>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!"**

If a man on a cross managed to muster the strength to utter anything at all with his dying breath, the best he could hope to generate would be a whisper. Jesus, though, lets loose with a loud cry. On two other occasions in the Gospel of Mark, loud cries have been supernatural in origin (Mark 1:26, 5:7). In this case, a supernatural result proceeds from the death of Jesus: the veil of the temple is torn in two.

At the beginning of the Gospel of Mark, Jesus, after being baptized by John, came up out of the water, whereupon the heavens were torn (*schizō*) and the Spirit came down (Mark 1:11). Now, at end of the gospel, after Jesus dies, the veil of the temple is torn (*schizō*). The Spirit

doesn't come down, but the veil is torn literally in a "downward" manner. If Jesus had come "down" from the cross, as he was tempted to do, the veil of the temple would not have been torn in any manner. Jesus both predicted and dramatized the destruction of the temple (Mark 11:15-18, 13:1-2). When he acknowledged that he was the Son of God, the high priest tore his clothes to indicate that he had heard blasphemy (Mark 14:63). Now, God doesn't tear his clothes (he has none to tear, of course); instead, he tears the veil of the temple—which clothes his presence, so to speak—to validate his Son. From God's perspective, the high priest, not Jesus, was guilty of blasphemy. The rending of the veil indicates that the temple would be destroyed, just as Jesus said. It was, in fact, destroyed by the Romans, in 70 A.D. Jesus would build a new temple comprising his followers.

The centurion, the leader of the soldiers charged with executing Jesus, "saw" the way Jesus died. Finally, someone sees what's going on. Those who should have seen, the Jews, didn't see. The one no one would expect to see, a Gentile—and the captain of the death squad, no less—sees. Jewish leaders said they would "see and believe" if Jesus came down from the cross. The centurion sees and believes because Jesus stayed on the cross. It was the centurion's job to watch men die. He has probably watched countless men die, but has never seen a man die like this. He observes something supernatural in the way that Jesus breathed his last and concludes that Jesus was the Son of God.<sup>3</sup> At one point, Peter expressed similar belief but later backtracked, saying that he didn't know "this man" (Mark 14:71). The centurion, on the other hand, says that "this man" was the Son of God.

At the beginning and middle of the Gospel of Mark, when the specter of Elijah was evoked by John the Baptist and when Elijah himself appeared beside Jesus, God spoke. "You are My beloved Son," God told Jesus when the heavens were torn and the Spirit descended (Mark 1:11). "This is My beloved Son," God said when Jesus was transfigured (Mark 9:7). Now, at the end of the Gospel of Mark, the specter of Elijah is raised once again, as the bystanders misunderstand the cry of Jesus. We might now expect to hear the voice of God again. For a few unbearable hours, God has forsaken his Son for the sake of the world. Grief-stricken beyond words, weeping behind the scenes, God does not speak. Still, he makes his voice heard. It is left not to the high priest, the leader of the Jews, but to a Roman leader, an enemy of the Jews, to give voice to God's love for his Son. God, though he cannot appear in this scene, is saying through the centurion, "That's my Son!"



When Simon of Cyrene joined the story to carry Jesus' cross, Mark indicated that God was gathering the dispersed of Israel. When a Roman joins the story, Mark is indicating that God is gathering the dispersed of the world. The new temple that Jesus is building would comprise both Jews and Gentiles.

## Seeing Jesus

Perhaps, if we can hear Jesus' cry from the cross with new ears, we can also, like the centurion, see the way he died with new eyes. You don't need to have any special background to embrace Jesus. Israel had the special background—including the Scriptures, Elijah, and John the Baptist—and didn't see what Jesus was doing on the cross. The centurion had a pagan background, but he saw something special in Jesus. You don't need to know one word of the Scriptures to recognize that something special happened when Jesus died.

Hollywood, even if it doesn't acknowledge the historicity of the crucifixion narrative, recognizes its transcendence. With a great deal of regularity, I find myself watching a movie and saying to myself or to others I'm watching with something like, "You know—how often do I say it?—there's the Messianic story again." I said it recently when I watched *Gran Torino*, a 2008 movie starring Clint Eastwood. Messianic figures keep showing up in our stories. When Hollywood tries to tell the story of Jesus, it usually bombs. When it works the Messianic story into *Gran Torino*, *The Lord of the Rings*, or *The Matrix*, for example, it often does so with sublime subtlety.

Who dies like this? Who absorbs this kind of emotional and physical abuse and gives back nothing but love? Who, when he could have called on more than twelve legions of angels, stays on a cross—for God's sake!—held in place only by obedience to God and love for us? Who dies as the midday sky turns black? Whose death tears a curtain in two and signals the destruction of the most important structure in the world? Truly, this man was the Son of God. Truly, he is the Son of God. Truly, he is our Lord and Savior.

The Jewish bystanders couldn't hear Jesus. The Roman centurion, however, saw Jesus. Finally, a Jewish leader, who has heard and seen something in Jesus, honors him.

## Joseph honors Jesus

Mark 15:40-47:

**<sup>40</sup>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. <sup>41</sup>When He was in Galilee, they used to follow Him and minister to Him; and there were many other women who came up with Him to Jerusalem. <sup>42</sup>When evening had already come, because it was the preparation day, that is, the day before the Sabbath, <sup>43</sup>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. <sup>44</sup>Pilate wondered if He was dead by this time, and summoning the centurion, he questioned him as to whether He was already dead. <sup>45</sup>And ascertaining this from the centurion, he granted the body to Joseph. <sup>46</sup>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. <sup>47</sup>Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses were looking on to see where He was laid.**

The centurion isn't the only one who sees. Several women from Galilee are looking on, probably from a place as close as they were allowed to get. The men from Galilee have fled, but the women stay by Jesus. Mark identifies one of the women as a mother. Two of the three he identifies have the name Mary, the name of Jesus' mother. In the moment of his deepest sorrow, any man would long for the presence of his mother. If God sent Simon of Cyrene to carry the cross and if he inspired the centurion to speak, we might imagine him sending a collection of mothers to comfort his Son.

The Romans usually let the bodies of those they crucified rot on crosses. After decomposition had run its course, a corpse was usually tossed into a common grave. On occasion, the Romans allowed relatives to bury the dead. Joseph of Arimathea, acting like a family member, steps forward to ask Pilate, the Roman governor, for the body of Jesus. Joseph acts quickly, because the Sabbath is approaching and burials on the Sabbath were contrary to Jewish law. Whereas the high priest tore his clothes

when Jesus said he was bringing in the kingdom of God, Joseph, a prominent member of the Sanhedrin, longs for the coming of the kingdom of God. Joseph risks his life to associate himself with one convicted of a treasonable offense.

Men often hung on crosses for days before they died, and Pilate is surprised that Jesus died so soon. Mark leaves us with the impression that Jesus, with a cry of strength, not a whisper of weakness, chose the time of his death. He could have held on longer, but he chose to breathe his last. That Pilate granted Joseph the body of Jesus is surprising. Then again, if the divine director is moving players in and out, perhaps it's not so surprising that he arranges to honor his Son.

Whereas the Roman soldiers dressed Jesus in purple to mock him, Joseph buys an expensive linen cloth and wraps him in it to honor him. Joseph places the body in the kind of tomb usually reserved for men of wealth: one hewn out of rock. Jesus, though rejected by the Jews and crucified on a charge of treason by the Romans, nevertheless receives an honorable burial. We might remember that the only other time Mark used the word "linen" was when he reported, cryptically, the escape of an anonymous follower of Jesus (Mark 14:51). Might another escape of sorts be in the offing?

When John the Baptist was executed, his disciples "came and took away his body and laid it in a tomb" (Mark 6:29). Likewise, Mark reports that Joseph "came" to Pilate and "laid" the body of Jesus "in a tomb." The disciples of Jesus, having fled in fear, are not there to care for the body of Jesus. Joseph, though, "came" in courage. If God sent a collection of mothers to be with his Son as he died, is it too much to imagine that God also sent a man who bears the name of Jesus' father to lay him to rest?

Women who earlier looked on from afar now look on as Jesus is placed in the tomb. What are these women doing in Mark's narrative? As of yet, unlike Simon of Cyrene, the centurion, and Joseph of Arimathea, they make no contribution. Do they have a part yet to play? Mark's narrative crackles with anticipation as Jesus rests for the Sabbath in the darkness of the tomb.

## Honoring Jesus

If we hear Jesus' cry from the cross with new ears and see the way he died with new eyes, what do we do now? After having identified with the bystanders and the centurion, we now see ourselves in Joseph of Arimathea. What did Joseph do? He honored Jesus.

Like Joseph, act like a family member of Jesus. If you believe in Jesus, he is not only your Lord, he is also your brother (Hebrews 2:11). Of course, plan and pray and prepare, but sometimes, you have to act quickly, at a moment's notice, in the manner of Joseph. Remember, God arranges for us to honor his Son. Opportunities will present themselves spontaneously, and if you think too long and too hard, the opportunity will pass. If you initially respond to an opportunity to honor Jesus with fear, then that may be an indication that it's time to gather up courage and act in faith. Joseph risked his life to publicly associate with Jesus. Is it too much to ask that we also risk something—rejection, our reputations, or our resources, for example—to publicly associate with Jesus?

If you risk something to honor Jesus, then watch for God to validate your decision. Pilate, quite surprisingly, granted Joseph's courageous request. God will even work through people who are otherwise opposed to him in order to arrange for his Son to be honored. He moves players into place, or he moves them out of the way.

Some of us in our church have begun to be more intentional about inviting seekers and skeptics to our community groups. Being invitational involves risk, albeit not the kind of risk that Joseph of Arimathea took. You risk rejection. You risk looking a little awkward. You might risk your reputation. We might want to ask, though, especially in light of the crucifixion narrative, is Jesus worth it? The apostles, who were arrested and flogged for their faith, rejoiced because "they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name" (Acts 5:41). To honor Jesus, you may want to consider joining one of our community groups or starting one with others and becoming more intentional and prayerful about inviting seekers and skeptics to join you.

## Our deepest need

Most of us, quite naturally, think of our own needs.

We don't occupy ourselves with risking something to honor Jesus. We feel deep needs in ourselves, and if those needs get met, then we'll think about honoring Jesus. What if our deepest need, though, had to do with connecting with Jesus and honoring him? What if connecting with Jesus invariably leads to honoring him, even risking something to honor him? Perhaps, then, when you honor Jesus, you're actually meeting your deepest need.

Consider the crucifixion narrative. Does it—that is, does God—meet some needs in you: the need to be loved, the need to be forgiven, the need to be reconciled to God? Having lingered over the story, do you see either something new in it or a new way of seeing it? Can you listen to the cry of the Son, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” and hear that, though he cried out to God, he cried out for you? Can you hear the silence of the Father—a silence that shouts his love for you from the mountaintops? Can you, like the centurion, see not simply that Jesus died but also the way he died—the way he died for you? If so, then you may want to pray and watch for opportunities to honor Jesus.

The story is told of a festive gathering hosted by Frederick the Great, the Prussian king. He was making crude jokes about Jesus when one of his officers, General Von Zealand, rose and addressed the king: “Sire, you know I have not feared death. I have fought and won thirty-eight battles for you. I am an old man; I shall soon have to go into the presence of one greater than you, the mighty God who saved me from my sin, the Lord Jesus Christ whom you are blaspheming. I salute you, sire, as an old man who loves his Savior, on the edge of eternity.” The king apologized, and the party ended.<sup>4</sup>

Trust God and honor the Son.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Ari Wasserman, “Greenwald Living His Boyhood Dream” (MLB.com, June 13, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Literary structure:

A Darkness fell over the land (witness of creation) (33)

B Jesus cried out with a loud voice and some bystanders misunderstood him (34-36)

B' Jesus uttered a loud cry, and the veil of the temple was torn in two (37-38)

A' The centurion said, “Truly this man was the Son of God!” (witness of humanity) (39)

C Some women were looking on from a distance (40-41)

D Joseph asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. (42-43)

X Pilate granted the body to Joseph (44-45)

D' Joseph laid Jesus in a tomb (46)

C' Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus were looking on (47)

<sup>3</sup> Mark doesn't say what meaning the centurion attaches to the title “Son of God.” If the centurion means it in a pagan sense rather than a Jewish sense, Mark would have us believe that he speaks more than he knows.

<sup>4</sup> *Today in the Word* (Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, August 1989), 7.