

# LOVE SO AMAZING

SERIES: THE FINAL HOURS



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Matthew 27:27-56  
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*Matthew 27:27-56*

Why was Jesus crucified? He was crucified for human reasons, and he was crucified for divine reasons.

He was considered a threat by Jewish leaders on both sides of the political fence. Jesus troubled nationalists such as the Pharisees because he did not endorse the overthrow of Rome, which occupied their land. Jesus also troubled those who collaborated with Rome, such as the Sadducees, because he stirred up the crowds. The Romans did not permit their subjects to execute anyone, so the Jewish leaders had to convince their rulers that Jesus posed a threat to Roman rule. They effectively painted Pilate, the Roman governor, into a corner, and Pilate ordered the execution of Jesus.

Those were the human reasons. But there were also, more importantly, divine reasons for Jesus' crucifixion, for as Jesus was being crucified on Golgotha, the ancient drama of redemption was reaching its climax.

Yogi Berra, the baseball sage, is supposed to have said, "You can observe a lot just by watching." So, as we consider Matthew's narrative, let's watch carefully for the drama of redemption, and let's listen carefully as well, for words are spoken that are pregnant with meaning.

At the beginning and end, the narrative presents the response to Jesus of the Roman soldiers. In the middle, Matthew focuses on the Jews.

## Romans watch Jesus

**Matthew 27:33-37:**

**And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), 34 they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall, but when he tasted it, he would not drink it. 35 And when they had crucified him, they divided his garments among them by casting lots. 36 Then they sat down and kept watch over him there. 37 And over his head they put the charge against him, which read, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews."**

Matthew, who wrote in Greek, translates the name of the execution site, Golgotha, from Aramaic to Greek for his readers: Place of a Skull. But he leaves it at that, without going into the meaning of the name. Thus he lets us conjure our own horrifying images. Suffice it to say that Place of a Skull doesn't sound like a spot you'd choose for a picnic. God leads Jesus to this place—this God-forsaken place.

An early legend has it that Jesus was crucified where Adam was buried. Some paintings and stained glass windows of the crucifixion scene, therefore, depicted Adam's skull at the foot of the cross. Whether true or not, it is a powerful picture of God's answer to the sin of Adam. The death of God's Son overcomes the death that comes from Adam's sin, the cross of Christ being inserted into the skull of Adam.

The soldiers give Jesus 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, "Reproaches have broken my heart, / so that I am in despair. / I looked for pity, 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 Jesus' garments and cast lots for them. All they hope to take away from Golgotha is a few scraps of clothing. Matthew alerts us to the higher drama with the first of several allusions to Psalm 22 (Matthew 27:39, 43, 46). David, the king from whom the Christ would come, said of his enemies: "they divide my garments among them, / and for my clothing they cast lots" (Psalm 22:18).

Some today, like the Roman soldiers, imagine how they might profit from Jesus. Politicians who want nothing to do with Jesus, for example, shrewdly calculate how they can win the support of his followers. Others scheme to turn the faith of Jesus' followers to their advantage by provoking and leveraging feelings of compassion and guilt. Tragically, all these politicians and schemers are after is a few scraps of clothing, so to speak. If we pay attention to the higher drama, however, we hear this from the apostle Paul: "For as many of

you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Galatians 3:27). If you believe in Christ, you become so identified with him, so close to him, that it can even be said that you wear him. What do you want: to gain from Christ a few scraps of clothing or to be clothed with him?

After the soldiers cast lots for Jesus’ clothing, they sit down and keep watch over him. After the mocking, there’s really nothing left to do but sit and watch.

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.

The charge against Jesus, that he is the king of the Jews, functions both as a joke and a deterrent. Pinning such a charge against Jesus gives the Roman soldiers a chance to laugh at their subjects, but it also tells them, in no uncertain terms, “Don’t mess with us.”

If, however, the drama is being played out on a higher level, and if the Kingdom of God is breaking into this world in the person of Jesus, then Jesus, in a sense, is guilty as charged. He is the king of the Jews. And if he’s the Christ, the ultimate King of the Jews, he’s also the king of the Gentiles. He’s king of the world. How is the king bringing in the kingdom? In a way that neither the Jews who handed him over nor the Gentiles who executed him could have imagined: by submitting to a brutal and degrading death.

Beginning in verse 38, the narrative shifts from the Romans to the Jews.

## **Jews reject Jesus**

### **Matthew 27:38-44:**

**Then two robbers were crucified with him, one on the right and one on the left. 39 And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads 40 and saying, “You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.” 41 So also the chief priests, with the scribes and elders, mocked him, saying, 42 “He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. 43 He trusts in God; let God**

**deliver him now, if he desires him. For he said, ‘I am the Son of God.’” 44 And the robbers who were crucified with him also reviled him in the same way also reviled him in the same way.**

The word translated “robbers” in verses 38 and 44 would be better translated “insurrectionists” (*lestēs*). Barabbas, a *lestēs* whom the Jewish crowd in Jerusalem chose over Jesus, was an insurrectionist (Matthew 27:19-26, John 18:40). The charge against Jesus, that he is the king of the Jews, carries with it overtones of rebellion. To be the king of the Jews was a treasonable offense against Caesar, the emperor of Rome. Jesus, crucified between two insurrectionists, is thus depicted as the leader of a violent revolution.

In another sense, Jesus is being crucified because he is *not* a violent nationalist. If he were a violent nationalist, the crowd that cried for the release of Barabbas would not have cried for the crucifixion of Jesus. Although Jesus is innocent of violent nationalism, much of Israel is guilty of it. As the King of the Jews, as the representative of his people, he dies in their place. Jesus dies the death of a rebel on behalf of rebels.

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). As Jesus hangs on the cross, James and John are nowhere in sight. Where we might expect to find two disciples, we instead find two brigands, “one on the right and one on the left.” The disciples envisioned some sort of victory, perhaps hard-fought, but how can being nailed to a Roman cross be anything but defeat? At this point, the disciples want no part of this kingdom. If this is what sharing the reign of the Christ means, then James and John are thankful that Jesus didn’t grant their request.

The passersby, priests, scribes, elders, and brigands are all Jews. 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 the title came to be associated with the king who was to come, who would come from the tribe of Judah and the line of David and 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 desire 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 its enemies, at least according to Jewish nationalists. 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. He did not endorse a nationalist agenda that involved defeating Rome, the evil empire.

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 pagan-like nationalist agenda. Jesus not only failed to meet their messianic expectations, but he also repudiated them. No wonder they mock him. They mock him as a false Messiah and a wrong-headed one at that. Jesus failed to live up to the expectations of his countrymen, and they find in him an outlet for their bitter frustrations.

## **The last temptation of Christ**

The passersby say, "If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross" (Matthew 27:40). The chief priests, scribes, and elders say, "He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the cross . . ." (Matthew 27:42). The condemned insurrectionists say the same thing. "If you are the Son of God, then what in God's name are you doing on that Roman cross?" 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 twelve 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 is 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 these stones to become loaves of bread."

— "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down . . ."

— "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me."

It was the voice of Satan (Matthew 4:1-11). Satan was tempting the Son of God 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.

## **He just hangs there**

Everything about this scene screams for Jesus to come down from the cross. His friends have abandoned him, the Romans are killing him, and his countrymen are mocking him. And God? Jesus listened hard for the voice of God and followed it to this place, this God-forsaken place, this place where even God seems strangely absent. At this moment, a possible conclusion emerges: it must be terribly wrong for Jesus to be hanging on this cross. Perhaps his dream is being drained from him with each drop of blood. Perhaps the best course of action, if there is any hope for the world, is to come down from the cross. Then he could proceed with his mission of gathering the world and building God's new temple.

Think for a moment about the times when you hear that awful voice within that threatens something you consider central to your identity and vocation. 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?" "You're not much of a parent, are you?" "You're not much of a manager, engineer, doctor, bricklayer, are you?" When you hear the voice, it demands that you prove it wrong.

Jesus hears the voice. It taunts him relentlessly: "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 the 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.*

Think about this, though. Wright observes: "Jesus had no men to whom he could give such orders. The orders all came, and continued to come, from within himself." <sup>1</sup>

What does the Son of God do? Jesus hears the sweet song of the Sirens, but he doesn't leave the cross. He just hangs there! 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 brigands. They intend to insult Jesus. Unintentionally, they tell us why Jesus remains on the cross.

The passersby mock Jesus as one who would destroy the temple and rebuild it. They have no idea that Jesus would rise three days later to build a new and better temple comprising living stones (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's people co-opted for their own corrupt purposes. The passersby who are mocking him would not benefit from such a temple. So he stays. He stays for them.

Both the passers-by and the leaders suggest to Jesus that he save himself, but if he saves himself, he wouldn't

be saving them. Jesus practices what he preaches: "For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matthew 16:25). The leaders want him to come down from the cross "now" so that they might believe in him, but if he comes down now, their faith in him will mean nothing. So he stays. He has proved to be such a disappointment that his countrymen abuse him mercilessly at his weakest moment, but he stays. He stays for them.

## We're part of it

If we pay attention to the higher drama, we'll realize that we're part of it. The insecurity, anger, and hostility of the two rebels, the passersby, and the Jewish leaders are also in us. We, too, hurled our abuse at Jesus. The sins of all of us buffeted him. We hurl our abuse at him, but it does not return. Stuart Townend sings:

Behold the man upon a cross, my sin upon his shoulders

Ashamed, I hear my mocking voice call out among the scoffers

It was my sin that held him there until it was accomplished

His dying breath has brought me life; I know that it is finished <sup>2</sup>

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

Michael Card sings: "And why did it have to be a heavy cross he was made to bear? / And why did they nail his feet and hands? / His love would have kept him there." <sup>3</sup>

Some today are similar to those at the scene of the crucifixion. They don't want Jesus to leave the cross and prove himself, of course; they want him to leave the first century, prove himself, and fight their battles for them. Like those at Golgotha, they assume that what they're asking for is impossible and they, therefore, dismiss Jesus.

If we pay attention to the higher drama, however, we know that Jesus will not prove himself in such a manner because that's not what those who demand such proof

really need. What they need—what we all need—is faith to believe that Jesus has already prevailed in the battle we needed him to fight: the battle against Satan, sin, and death, the battle he fought on the cross. We need to believe that Jesus died the death of a rebel on behalf of rebels—us, who rebelled against God.

If Jesus didn't die the way he died, he wouldn't have died for the sins of humanity. The way of humanity is to retaliate, if only in one's heart—to return hatred for hatred, curse for curse, insult for insult. You send your suicide bombers to me; I send my tanks to you. I send my tanks to you; you send your suicide bombers to me. That's how evil stays in circulation.

What does Jesus do? The apostle Peter comments, "When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly" (1 Peter 2:23). Jesus' countrymen hurl their abuse 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. 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.

## Cry of dereliction

### Matthew 27:45-50:

**Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour. 46 And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" 47 And some of the bystanders, hearing it, said, "This man is calling Elijah." 48 And one of them at once ran and took a sponge, filled it with sour wine, and put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink. 49 But the others said, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him." 50 And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit.**

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 Matthew 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 leave you or forsake you" (Deuteronomy 31:6). God himself told Joshua, "I will not leave 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, "a hanged man is cursed by 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 his journey 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, flog him, and crucify him (Matthew 20:18). 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.

## **Bystanders misunderstand Jesus**

The bystanders, though, think Jesus is calling for the prophet Elijah. Jesus cries out in Aramaic. The word for “my God,” *Eli*, 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:

Surely he has borne our griefs  
and carried our sorrows;  
yet we esteemed him stricken,  
smitten by God, and afflicted.  
But he was pierced for our transgressions;  
he was crushed for our iniquities;  
upon him was the chastisement that brought us  
peace,  
and with his wounds 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 (Psalm 69:20-21) are relevant:

Reproaches have broken my heart,  
so that I am in despair.  
I looked for pity, but there was none,  
and for comforters, but I found none.  
They gave me poison for food,  
and for my thirst they gave me sour wine to drink.

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. 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.

## **Do you hear the cry?**

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 Matthew 27:46 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? When my oldest daughter was seven years old, I asked her 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, though he could have called on more than twelve legions of angels. The Father, paralyzed by his love for us, addresses our deepest need by refraining from rescuing his Son from the cross, 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 off 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 Jews miss it. Meanwhile, the Roman soldiers keep watch.

## Romans recognize Jesus

### Matthew 27:51-54:

**And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split. 52 The tombs also were opened. And many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, 53 and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many. 54 When the centurion and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe and said, "Truly this was the Son of God!"**

Jesus both predicted and dramatized the destruction of the temple (Matthew 21:12-13, 24:1-2). When he acknowledged that he was the Son of God, the high priest tore his clothes to indicate that he had heard blasphemy (Matthew 26:65). 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 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. It is unclear whether this was a temporary resuscitation, along the lines of the raising of Lazarus, or a permanent resurrection, in which the people were given new bodies along the lines of Christ's. This strange event was designed as a testimony to unbelieving Israel. It was designed 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.

The Roman centurion, the captain of the death squad, and the soldiers who are also keeping watch "saw the earthquake and what took place." They say, "Truly this was the Son of God!" Finally, someone sees what's going on. Those who should have seen, the Jews, didn't see. Those no one would expect to see, pagan soldiers, see. It was the soldiers' job to watch men die. They had probably watched countless men die, but they had never seen a man die like this.

How exactly the soldiers mean it—in a Jewish sense or a pagan sense—is unclear. The Roman emperors, like the Jewish kings, were called sons of God. The soldiers evidently recognize Jesus as a ruler of some sort. 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 Elijah." The soldiers say otherwise, concluding, "Truly, this was the Son of God."

## The specter of Elijah

At the beginning and middle of the Gospel of Matthew, when the specter of Elijah was evoked by John the Baptist and when Elijah himself appeared beside Jesus, God spoke. "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased," God said when John, the new Elijah, baptized Jesus (Matthew 3:17). "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased," God said when Jesus was transfigured, with Elijah looking on (Matthew 17:5).

Now, at the end of the Gospel of Matthew, 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 Jewish leaders, passersby, or insurrectionists but to a group of Roman soldiers, the enemies 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 soldiers, "That's my Son!"

When the Roman soldiers recognize Jesus as the Son of God, he is in actuality what Israel was supposed 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).

### Who dies like this?

You don't need to have any special background to believe in 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 Roman soldiers had a pagan background, but they 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.

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 shakes the land? 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.

## Women behold Jesus

### Matthew 27:55-56:

**There were also many women there, looking on from a distance, who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to him, 56 among whom were Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.**

The Roman soldiers aren't the only ones who see. Many 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. Matthew identifies two of the women as mothers. 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. We might at this point imagine the Father sending a collection of mothers to comfort his Son. In the next scene, the Father 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: for Easter Sunday (two weeks from today!).

Today, it is enough for us for us to survey the wondrous cross and marvel.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> N.T. Wright, *The Crown and the Fire* (Grand Rapids, MI: 1995), 38-39.
- <sup>2</sup> Stuart Townend, "How Deep the Father's Love for us" (Kingsway's Thankyou Music, 1995).
- <sup>3</sup> Michael Card, "Why" (Navarre Corp., 1997).