

FOUR RESPONSES TO JESUS' DEATH

Matthew 27:54-66

In Matthew 27:50, we read that **Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up His spirit**. Matthew and the other Gospel writers could have ended the narrative quickly at that point. Jesus died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and He was buried, and He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures (First Corinthians 15:3-4). John moves quickly to Jesus' burial, followed by His resurrection.

But Matthew, Mark, and Luke turn our attention to some of the observers of these events. First, the Roman centurion who oversaw Jesus' crucifixion. Then, the women who were present. Then, Joseph of Arimathea, who saw to Jesus' burial. And then Matthew alone gives us a peek into the thinking of the Jews.

We serve a risen Savior – He's in the world today – amen? Amen! And yet, even while dead, Jesus of Nazareth, Yahweh's Messiah, possessed enormous influence.

Let's begin with the centurion.

THE CENTURION

Matthew 27:54

54 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 God's Son!"
(Matthew 27:54, 2022 LSB)

The Roman world, like virtually every other ancient culture, was deeply religious. The apostle Paul found the city of Athens so filled with statues of gods that one was labeled "The Unknown God" (Acts 17:23). Judaism and Christianity stood out because of their monotheism. But the Roman world recognized hundreds of gods.

In fact, Rome was so religious that even the emperors, from Augustus on, were considered divine. Emperor Gaius Julius Caesar Augustus Germanicus – also known as Caligula – declared his horse to be a god. Generally, people could worship any god they wished, provided they gave the emperor his due by burning a pinch of incense in his name once a year. The Roman Empire was superstitious from top to bottom.

The centurion who oversaw Jesus' crucifixion was part of that superstitious, polytheistic culture. There's no telling who his family gods might have been. But his world was filled with good luck charms, magic amulets, and little statues of gods all over the place. Those gods were great and small, important and

insignificant, terrifying and amusing, good and evil, and everything in between. They really only had one thing in common: none of those gods were crucified.

But then the sky went dark for three hours, and Jesus died, and the earth shook, and the tombs opened up. He and those with him were terrified and blurted out: **Truly, this was God's Son!** The centurion's superstitions could not account for what he saw and experienced that day. None of the other "sons of the gods" were anything like Jesus. They were fantasy, and most Romans knew it. But Jesus was flesh and blood. He truly suffered and died. And His death was accompanied by genuine signs and wonders. I don't think the centurion's confession amounted to saving faith. But while we are not told, I do believe that he most likely truly believed in Jesus the moment he heard about the resurrection. Jesus was unlike any other man. He was certainly unlike any made-up deity. I think it's more likely than not that this centurion was one of the first Gentile converts after the resurrection.

So, we can see that Jesus Christ is a threat to superstitions of every sort. Jesus stands apart. He won't be confined. He won't follow my opinions or expectations, or yours, or anyone else's for that matter. He doesn't follow the crowd. He doesn't pander to the masses for approval. He doesn't care about our opinions. Praise God, Jesus is gentle and kind; those who trust Him have nothing to fear from Him. But while He is gentle and kind, He is also outside our control. It's not that we must take Jesus as He is, but that we can only hope that He will take us as we are, by His grace and mercy.

THE WOMEN

Matthew 27:55-56

55 And many women were there looking on from a distance, who had followed Jesus from Galilee while ministering to Him.

56 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, 2022 LSB)

Matthew then turns to a large group of women standing a distance away, observing Jesus' death and the signs that followed. He names a few.

Mary Magdalene was there. Jesus had cast seven demons out of her (Luke 8:2).

Mary, the mother of James and Joseph, was there. It's thought that she was the mother of James, the son of Alphaeus, one of Jesus' disciples.

The mother of James and John, "the sons of Zebedee," was there. Mark 15:40 implies that her name was Salome.

Matthew says nothing else about the women at this point. He is beginning to set the stage for Jesus' resurrection. They witnessed His death, as we see here. They also witnessed His burial (Matthew 27:61). And they were the first witnesses of His resurrection (Matthew 28:1).

They had accompanied Jesus from Galilee, ministering to His needs. They were no doubt consumed with grief but refused to let Him die completely alone. They would not have been identified as Jesus' disciples and were less likely to be harassed by the Jewish leaders. Nevertheless, we would do well to recognize their courage and love. Jesus was not a distant, mysterious figure to them but their Lord and a dear friend.

JOSEPH OF ARIMATHEA

Matthew 27:57-60

57 Now when it was evening,
there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph,
who himself had also become a disciple of Jesus.
58 This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus.
Then Pilate ordered it to be given to him.
59 And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth,
60 and laid it in his own new tomb,
which he had hewn out in the rock;
and he rolled a large stone against the entrance of the tomb and went away.
(Matthew 27:57–60, 2022 LSB)

I have a confession to make. Long ago, I had heard that Jewish women alone were responsible for preparing the dead for burial. This is not historically accurate; Jewish men not only participated in burials but often took a leading role. It's a good reminder to me to check out the assumed "truths" that I heard from various popular teachers when I was a young Christian. The fact that someone writes books or is on the radio means absolutely nothing.

What is true is that by tradition, *priests* were only permitted contact with immediate relatives who had died: a father, mother, brother, unmarried sister, wife, son, or daughter. Religious tradition – *not Scripture* – prohibited contact with any others who had died.

Now, Joseph of Arimathea is mentioned in all four Gospels regarding Jesus' burial. Between them, we know that he was a rich man, a prominent member of the ruling council, a good and righteous man who was eagerly waiting for the Kingdom of God, and a disciple of Jesus who, fearful of the Jews, kept his faith secret while Jesus was alive.

The thing is, why go public after Jesus died? Guilt, perhaps? Shame? It was the ruling council that condemned Jesus to death; I'm sure that Joseph did not vote to kill Him but evidently didn't oppose their demands for Jesus' blood. That's too bad. But, from a human point of view, it made no sense to make a public statement after Jesus had died.

But that's exactly what Joseph did. He went to Pilate that afternoon and asked permission to bury Jesus' body. Mark 15:44 says that Pilate was surprised that Jesus was already dead. He called for the centurion, the same one who had just confessed that Jesus was the Son of God. The centurion confirmed Jesus' death, and Pilate gave Joseph permission. Joseph returned to Golgatha with Nicodemus, a Pharisee who had come to Jesus by night (John 3), and together they removed Jesus' body from the cross, took it to a new, unused tomb owned by Joseph, and carefully prepared Jesus' body for burial. John says that Nicodemus provided 75 pounds of spices and ointments for the process. They did a good job. When they finished, they rolled a heavy stone across the entrance to the tomb.

Matthew 27:61 says,

**61 And Mary Magdalene was there, and the other Mary, sitting opposite the grave.
(Matthew 27:61, 2022 LSB)**

These very same women would come to the tomb early on Sunday morning to prepare Jesus' body for burial. Why go through that if Joseph and Nicodemus had already done it? Remember, these women didn't live in the same social circles as Joseph and Nicodemus. They had no idea what they had done to Jesus' body. Can we blame them for wanting to make sure that it was properly done?

Back to Joseph. The Sanhedrin had legally condemned Jesus to death. The Pharisees hated Jesus beyond all reason. Joseph had no obligation whatsoever to care for Jesus' remains. During His life, he had kept his respect, faith, and love for Jesus a secret. Now that Jesus was dead, there was no point in going public. But contrary to all reason, Joseph's regard, faith, and love for Jesus grew enormously, and he was willing to risk public humiliation, banishment from the council, and even perhaps persecution to identify with a dead man. It makes no sense from a pragmatic point of view, but it makes perfect sense for someone moved by the Holy Spirit.

Finally, Matthew turns our attention back to the Jewish leaders.

THE JEWS

Matthew 27:62-66

**62 Now on the next day, the day after the Preparation,
the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered together with Pilate,
63 and said, "Sir, we remember that when He was still alive that deceiver said,**

‘After three days I am to rise again.’

64 “Therefore, order for the grave to be made secure until the third day, lest His disciples come and steal Him away and say to the people,

‘He has risen from the dead,’ and the last deception will be worse than the first.”

65 Pilate said to them, “You have a guard; go, make it as secure as you know how.”

66 And they went and made the grave secure, and along with the guard they set a seal on the stone.

(Matthew 27:62–66, 2022 LSB)

These men had accomplished their goal. They had wanted Jesus dead for a long time. They had to bribe witnesses to make up convincing lies. Then, they had to virtually threaten Pilate to get him to give in to their bloodlust. When Pilate wavered, they said, **If you release this man, you are no friend of Caesar; everyone who makes himself to be a king opposes Caesar** (John 19:12). They stood there as Jesus died, mocking Him in His agony, daring Him to come down from the cross.

Now, Jesus was dead, but that wasn’t enough. They remembered that Jesus had spoken about His resurrection; in fact, they remembered before Jesus’ own disciples did. So they went to Pilate, perhaps that evening – remember, a Jewish day begins at sundown – and demanded a squad of soldiers be set at the tomb to keep the disciples from stealing Jesus’ body and pretending that He had risen.

In any case, the chief priests and the Pharisees, guardians of the Jewish traditions and way of life, grossly violated their own traditions. They entered the home of a Gentile – an unclean place – on the Sabbath. They might have violated the travel distance imposed by their traditions, which only allowed Jews to go a short distance away from their homes. They were so concerned with protecting their religion that they were willing to violate one of its most sacred tenets.

We see that they remembered what Jesus had taught before His own disciples did. He had claimed that He would rise after three days. His disciples didn’t remember this until after His resurrection (John 2:22). But His enemies called it to mind immediately. They were afraid that Jesus’ disciples would steal His body and claim He had risen from the dead.

That’s still one of the lies told to try to deny the resurrection, by the way. Those eleven men, terrified beyond all measure, driven into hiding, demoralized, dejected, went to the tomb secretly, stole Jesus’ body from under the noses of professional soldiers, stashed it somewhere in violation of their own religion and consciences, and then remained committed to what they knew to be a lie for decades, suffering persecution in every place, until one by one they were tortured and executed for daring to preach that Jesus was alive and well, without once letting the cat out of the bag.

Pilate gave them a *kustodion*, between four and sixteen armed men. They went and made the grave secure with a seal and left the soldiers there to stand guard until the third day had passed. Breaking that seal, by the way, would have been a direct violation of Roman law and exposed the perpetrator to extreme

penalties, perhaps even crucifixion.

It's ironic when you think about it. The paranoia of the chief priests and the Pharisees provided us as Christians with very strong evidence that Jesus was actually raised from the dead! They guaranteed that His disciples would not be able to get to Jesus' body.

BRINGING IT HOME

Every person who encounters Jesus Christ, even today, comes to a conclusion about Him.

Some, like the centurion, have an opinion based only on partial information. "I love Jesus," some say, "He never judged anyone." They've obviously never read the Gospels. "Jesus never criticized anyone," someone else will say. Again, they've clearly never read His words. He called the scribes and Pharisees hypocrites, blind guides, fools, serpents, and broods of vipers (Matthew 23).

The centurion's confession was true, but it was not enough to save. Romans 10:9 says that salvation requires confessing that Jesus is Lord and that God has raised Him from the dead. That confession has to be true; a lying, hypocritical confession will only condemn those who make it.

Some, like Joseph, have a quiet, almost secret faith in Jesus that only reveals itself in crisis. That sort of faith is genuine saving faith. That's why it speaks out when it makes no sense and it seems that all is lost. Those who are like Joseph are afraid of what other people will think if they speak up. It might cost them friendships or opportunities at work. Ultimately, keeping our faith in Jesus a secret will make us ashamed. I can't prove it, but I think Jesus' death made Joseph ashamed of his own silence. He determined to be silent no longer and probably wished he had voiced his faith earlier, regardless of the cost.

Some are like the chief priests and Pharisees, who will go to any length to stifle faith in Jesus Christ. They are consumed with hatred for Jesus, His teachings, His Gospel, and His followers. At the most extreme, they will kill Christians. But there are countless more who are satisfied to mock and insult the Lord Jesus and His followers. They are the ones that the "Josephs" of the world are trying to impress, but their so-called "friendship" isn't worth the effort. Jesus says, **Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if a blind man guides a blind man, both will fall into a pit** (Matthew 15:14).

But shouldn't we try to help them see? Of course, we should. How do we do that? We present the Gospel to them. If they repent and believe, we praise God and give Him all the glory. But if they continue to reject the Gospel, mock Jesus and His Word, and abuse us, we are to leave them as they are, dead in their sins, without Christ and without hope in the world (Ephesians 2:12).

Finally, some are like the women, who knew Jesus and believed in Him, and faithfully wait for Him even when circumstances are the darkest. Some believers stand out, like the Marys. But most are nameless,

just faithful people who trust in Him in their most confusing times. They lean on Him when all hope seems lost. They look to Him when the world sees no one there. Some unbelievers call God our “invisible friend in the sky.” Well, yes, God is Spirit, so we cannot see Him. And He is in heaven, which is typically thought of as “up there” somewhere. Peter, who had his own struggles with faith and faithfulness, counsels us to **sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, with gentleness and fear** (First Peter 3:15). A *defense*, not an *offense*. We aren't commanded to conquer their unbelief, just explain why *we* believe. We have nothing to prove to the world. We owe them a reason for *our* faith, but not answers to every possible objection they might have.