

The Heart of the Gospel: Gethsemane to the Burial of Christ

Chapter 16: Jesus Cares for His Mother

[Brian Schwertley](#)

Now there stood by the cross of Jesus his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Cleophas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus therefore saw his mother, and the disciple standing by, whom he loved, he saith unto his mother, "Woman, behold thy son!" Then saith he to the disciple, "Behold thy mother!" And from that hour that disciple took her unto his own home. (Jn. 19:25-27)

Introduction

The apostle John alone records the touching interaction between Jesus, His mother and John himself that occurred shortly before the earth descended into the three hours of darkness. The statement in the synoptic gospels (Mt. 27:55, 56; Mk. 15:40; Lk. 23:49) about the "women that followed Him from Galilee," including Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and of Joses, and Salome (perhaps the mother of the sons of Zebedee), who "stood afar off seeing these things" refers to a later period much closer to the moment of Christ's death. John's account refers to a time when perhaps the mockery and fierce outbursts of anger had died down a bit and the beloved disciple and the women could move very close to the cross. There is historical evidence that indicates it was not uncommon for Roman soldiers to allow relatives and friends of the person crucified to come near the cross to mourn and sympathize for the victim.¹ John and the women had come near the cross to watch and wait because of their love and devotion toward the Savior. After the darkness, or perhaps after the phenomena accompanying the death of Christ, the women of their own accord or at the instructions of the soldiers move away from the cross to observe at a distance.² The reason that John mentions these women at this point in the narrative rather than later like the synoptics is because John lists them to introduce the Savior's instructions in verses 26 and 27. There are a number of things to consider regarding this incident. First, who are the women mentioned by John? Second, what is our Lord telling John and His mother to do? Third, what are some lessons and applications that can be learned from our text?

The Women Listed by John

Depending on how one reads the list by John there are either three or four women mentioned. Many see the list as (1) Jesus' mother, (2) His mother's sister, (3) Mary of Clopas (i.e. Mary *the wife or daughter of* Clopas), and (4) Mary Magdalene. Others read it as: (1) Jesus'

¹ See E. Stauffer, *Jesus and His Story*, (London: SCM, 1960), 111, 179.

² "After Jesus had spoken to them, after, as it were, he had bidden them farewell, and the strange darkness fell over the land, the soldiers becoming alarmed, cleared the space about the cross, and John with the women and the other friends of Jesus (Luke 23:49) could stand only 'afar off,' watching for the end. This final watching 'afar off' the other evangelists note in their records" (R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John's Gospel*, 1291).

mother, (2) His mother's sister—Mary of Clopas, and (3) Mary Magdalene. Biblical interpreters are almost equally divided on this point.

Scholars who argue for four women see the list as composed of two pairs, the first without names and the second named. They support their interpretation by saying that it is extremely unlikely that two sisters would have the same name. Those who argue for three women counter by saying that it is possible the two Marys had different fathers (in other words, Mary's father died and her mother remained). If this was the case, then the two Marys would be what is called today step-sisters. Others point out that the term sister was commonly used at that time for close relatives (Hengstenberg cites "Tobit viii. 4, 7, vii. 4, compared with ver. 2; Job xlii.11" [presumably the LXX]).³ Still others believe the term "sister" (*adelphē*) really means "sister-in-law." This view is somewhat forced in that a specific Greek word for "sister-in-law" (*galōos*) was available to John. The main argument for three women as opposed to four is based on the use of only two *kai* (and) conjunctions. If four women were in mind, readers in the original language would be expecting another "and" (*kai*) to be added.⁴ Against this argument, J. C. Ryle writes, "The objection that the word 'and' is omitted before 'Mary the wife of Cleophas' is worthless. In almost every catalogue of the Apostles the same omission may be noticed. (See Acts i. 13; Matt. x. 2; Luke vi. 14)."⁵ Fortunately, the number of women is not very important and does not affect any major doctrines.

Regardless of whether one's list has three or four women, the only women mentioned whose identification is certain are Mary the mother of Jesus and Mary Magdalene. Our Lord's mother's sister has often been associated by commentators with "Salome" (Mk. 15:40) or "the mother of the sons of Zebedee" (Mt. 27:56). If true, this would make the apostles John and James (the sons of Zebedee) the cousins of Christ. Expositors are attracted to this interpretation because it helps explain why John and James are part of our Lord's inner circle. All of this, however, is not provable and therefore just speculation. If Mary (the *wife* probably) of Clopas is not Mary's sister, then we know nothing about her except that she was a dedicated disciple who was a friend of Jesus' mother or Mary Magdalene. The attempt by commentators to connect Mary the wife of Clopas with the mother of James the less (Mk. 15:40; Mt. 27:56), the wife of Alphaeus (Mt. 10:3), is speculative. It is based on the assumption that with the exception of the mother of Jesus, the same persons appear in John as in Matthew and Mark.

Mary of Magdalene is first mentioned in the gospels in Luke 8:2. She is identified as "Mary called Magdalene out of whom had come seven demons." Luke says that she was one of many who contributed to the Lord's work (8:3). She apparently was named after her home town Magdala (from the Hebrew *migdol* meaning "watch tower"), a small town on the western side of the Sea of Galilee. She is very prominent toward the close of the gospels. She was at the crucifixion (Jn. 19:25; Mk. 15:40; Mt. 27:56; cf. Lk. 23:49). She stayed at the tomb and watched on the Saturday after the death of Jesus (Mk. 15:47; Mt. 27:61; cf. Lk. 23:55). She came early

³ E. W. Hengstenberg, *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*, 2:414. Hengstenberg says "that the Christian Church has from the beginning regarded them as three in number. Where, in the earlier Evangelists, a great number of women had been previously mentioned, and then individuals are specified, three, and never four, are alluded to in connection with the cross. Hence we may naturally expect that here also three, and not four are alluded to. Only on the supposition that Mary wife of Cleophas was the sister of our Lord's mother, can we account for the postponement of Mary Magdalene, who everywhere else takes the first place among the women, as uniformly Simon Peter takes the first among the Apostles" (Ibid., 2:415-416).

⁴ The best grammatical argument for three women is found in R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John's Gospel*, 1291.

⁵ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3:349.

Sunday morning to see the tomb (Mt. 28:1) and anoint our Lord (Mk. 16:1). She was with the women (Joanna and Mary the mother of James and Salome) who first witnessed the empty tomb (Jn. 20:1; Lk. 24:1-8; Mk. 16:1-9; Mt. 28:1-8) and she was the first person to see the resurrected Christ (Mk. 16:9-10). The rather common notion that she was a converted prostitute or a woman of loose moral character before her conversion has absolutely no basis whatsoever in the text of Scripture; Mary of Magdalene figures prominently in the gospels because of her unceasing devotion and love toward the Savior. It was her love and courage (along with these other holy women) that placed her at the site of the crucifixion.

The mother of Christ was Mary, the wife of Joseph. (She was a widow by this time). After the birth narratives, infancy, and the brief incident at the Temple when Jesus was 12, she virtually disappears from the gospel narratives until we arrive at this incident. The fact that she came to the Passover feast in Jerusalem with the other believing women and was at the cross proves that she was a dedicated believer. It also fulfills the prophecy of the aged Simeon spoken at the presentation of the infant Jesus at the temple. He said to Mary, "Behold, this Child is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign which will be spoken against (yes, a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed" (Lk. 2:34-35). Mary loved Jesus both as her son and as the Son of God. She wanted to be near Him during His final hours of suffering.

Interestingly, the women who stood with John near the cross are not wailing and throwing themselves on the ground in grief but are calm, self-controlled and quiet. They apparently have some understanding that the death of Jesus was unique and necessary. As terrible as the agony was, it was the will of God and was needed to save God's people. These women are sad and perhaps are weeping quietly. However, their sorrow was mingled with faith and hope.

Our Lord's Instructions to John and His Mother

Jesus, even in His agony on the cross, does not forget His responsibility toward His mother. As soon as He sees His mother He says, "'Woman, behold your Son!' Then He said to the disciple, 'Behold your Mother!' And from that hour that disciple took her to his own home" (Jn. 19:26-27). As we look at these instructions we will examine the meaning of our Lord's statement and the Roman Catholic perversion of this passage.

(1) The meaning of Christ's statement is very simple. The Savior is telling His mother that, from now on, the apostle John is responsible to take care of her needs as an older widow. Jesus also tells John that he now bears responsibility to take Mary into his household and care for her as he would his own mother. To paraphrase, "Woman, see your son who now cares for you! Son, see your mother to be cared for by you!"⁶ As the firstborn son of Mary and Joseph, our Lord obeys the fifth commandment by honoring his mother. He magnifies and fulfills the moral law of God even as He hangs on the cross in agony.

The Redeemer's statement raises two questions. First, why does Jesus address His mother as "Woman"? And second, why does Christ commit His mother to John and not to His own brothers according to the flesh? Regarding the first question, it is interesting that Jesus *never* addresses Mary as "Mother," but always as "Woman." This point does not at all mean that the Savior did not love, respect and honor his mother. He certainly did. But, He used the term

⁶ H. Shurmann as quoted in George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 350.

“woman” to indicate to Mary that because He was the Messiah, the Son of God, Mary must always look upon Him first and foremost as Redeemer and Lord. The Mediator’s redemptive-spiritual relationship to Mary is far more important than their relationship according to the flesh. Further, the term “woman” is used because Christ knew that sin and superstition would lead people to place a supernatural honor on Mary as the mother of the Redeemer. Mary was “blessed *among* women” not *over* women. Her blessedness derives from believing in Jesus and obeying His word, not from simply carrying and having a baby. “[T]he Lord, through this name woman, would direct His mother into that love which knows Christ no more after the flesh (2 Cor. v. 16), and would also declare to us that in the midst of His work of atonement He felt Himself equally bound close to all sinners, and that He was not nearer to His mother than He was to thee and me.”⁷

Jesus did not commend His mother to His brothers because at this time they were not yet believers (see Jn. 7:5; Mt. 12:47-50).⁸ The idea that the Savior did not have any brothers through Mary or that all references in Scripture to His brothers means cousins or close relatives is the legacy of Romanist exegesis. It is disproved by Matthew 13:54-56 where the Jews in our Lord’s hometown (Nazareth) compared the miracle-working Jesus to His ordinary brothers and sisters in an attempt to question the validity of His ministry. It would have been absurd for the inhabitants of Nazareth to compare Christ to His cousins. Further, the Word of God, in speaking prophetically of our Lord’s brothers, states explicitly that these brothers were Mary’s children not cousins. “I have become a stranger to my brothers, and an alien to my mother’s children” (Ps. 69:8). These brothers were not equipped spiritually at the time of the crucifixion to be Mary’s companions or guardians. Fortunately, however, God had mercy on these brothers; for after the resurrection of Jesus, only days after the ascension, we find them worshiping with the apostles and Mary (Ac. 1:14).

Interestingly, one can even discern a pattern in the Old Testament of believing parents being cared for by godly children, even when there were unbelieving or unfaithful children who were already (according to the flesh) first in line. “Abraham lived with Isaac and Jacob, not with Ishmael, or with his sons by Keturah. Isaac lived with Jacob, not Esau, and Jacob lived under the care and supervision of Joseph and therefore gave to Joseph a double portion by adopting Joseph’s two sons as heirs on equal terms with all his other sons (Gen. 48:5, 6).”⁹ For Bible-believing Christians, personal godliness and faithfulness to Jehovah are far more important than physical birth.

The New Testament epistles also teach that believing children and grandchildren should honor their progenitors. Paul writes, “If any widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show piety at home and to repay their parents; for this is good and acceptable before God” (1 Tim. 5:4). The fifth commandment is not just speaking about attitudes or words spoken to parents; it also applies to concrete acts of piety. A believer’s first religious duty toward his parents when they are old and feeble is to lovingly care for their physical and spiritual needs. Fairbairn comments,

⁷ Berrer as quoted in J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3:352.

⁸ “As the firstborn of Mary, He had both the authority and responsibility, which would have devolved on her second son James. This automatic devolution was apparently undesirable, so our Lord used the authority He possessed as a dying criminal to commit her to the care of one whom He could trust—the Beloved Disciple” (F. W. Buckler, “Eli, Eli, Lama Sabachtani?” in *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures*, Vol. LV, no. 4 [October, 1938], 387).

⁹ Rousas J. Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law* (Phillipsburg, NJ: The Craig Press, 1973).

The expression, to *show piety (eusebien)* to such, points back to the fifth commandment, in which the honouring of parents is placed in immediate connection with the reverence and homage due to God, and the things which most nearly concern His glory: *that* in youthful bosoms is the germ of fealty to God, and so its becoming exercise is reckoned a department of piety. To do this *first*, therefore, *toward their own house*, as having a prior claim even in comparison of what is due to the church or house of God, and to do it in the way of substantial ministrations of relief, which in such a case are but returns for similar ministrations formerly received (Matt. xv. 4-6), *is acceptable before God*; He regards it in a manner as done to Himself, and sees in it the earnest of future worth. The homes in which such reverential feelings are cherished, and such acts of lovingkindness are reciprocated, are the best nurseries of the church—churches themselves, indeed, in embryo, because the homes of Christian tenderness, holy affection, self-denying love, and fruitfulness in well-doing.¹⁰

The fact that our Lord turned the care of His believing mother over to a dedicated Christian instead of unbelieving relatives teaches us something important about the church and the family. It teaches that one's faith in Christ takes precedence over family or blood relations. All professing Christians must take great care *not* to place covenant children or aged believing parents in the hands of unbelieving caretakers. To do so, is to deliberately place that person in spiritual danger by forcing them to be unequally yoked together with unbelievers (2 Cor. 6:14-18). This principle applies as much to the heathen state ("public") school as it does to the unchristian and uncaring pagan nursing facility. We must follow the Savior's example by making the spiritual care of loved ones a top priority. Christians must reject the paternalism of the welfare state and make the necessary sacrifices to biblically care for those that God has made their responsibility. When professing Christians hand their children or believing parents over to the heathen to save money or for the sake of convenience, they are committing a serious sin worthy of censure by the church of Christ. As Paul says, "But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" (1 Tim. 5:8). The apostle "asserts in the most emphatic manner the obligations springing out of family relationships, as grounded in the constitution of nature, and, so far from being annulled or relaxed by the gospel, [are] only rendered the more sacred and imperatively binding."¹¹

(2) Given the current resurgence and popularity of the Roman Catholic Church in America we would do well to briefly consider the Romanist perversion of John 19:26-27. The Papal church for many centuries has used this passage to argue that John as the representative of all Christians was placed by Jesus directly under the spiritual care of Mary. In other words, Mary is the mother of all believers.¹² She is the new Eve who gives birth to and watches over the church as co-mediatrix with Christ. The Romanist popularizer Bishop Fulton J. Sheen writes, "When our Lord spoke of John, he did not refer to him as John for then he would have been only the son of Zebedee. Rather in him all humanity was commended to Mary, who became the mother of men, not by metaphor, or figure of speech, but by pangs of birth."¹³ In a similar vein

¹⁰ Patrick Fairbairn, *Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles: 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, [1874] 1956), 195.

¹¹ Patrick Fairbairn, *Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, 197.

¹² Bruce Vawter writing for the Roman Catholic *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* writes, "What follows [Jn. 19:26-27] is perfectly understandable in itself, an act of filial piety characteristic of Jesus. It is also, however, a 'sign' of the spiritual motherhood of Mary, the new Eve, the mother of faithful (Editor, Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmeyer, Roland E. Murphy [Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1968] 2:462).

¹³ Fulton J. Sheen, *Life of Christ* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1958), 398.

the Roman Catholic scholar Raymond E. Brown remarks, “If Mary was refused a role during the ministry of Jesus as it began at Cana, she finally received her role in the hour of Jesus’ passion, death, and resurrection.... In becoming the mother of the Beloved Disciple (the Christian) Mary is symbolically evocative of Lady Zion who, after the birth pangs, brings forth anew people in joy (John 16:21; Isa. 49:22; 54:1; 66:7-11).”¹⁴

Does this passage support the gross Mariolatry of the Papal church as many Romanist scholars claim? No, not at all! Such an idea is unbiblical and absurd for the following reasons. First, the text makes it very clear that Mary is placed under John’s care and authority, not the other way around. There is not a trace or even a hint of the doctrine that Mary is a mother and patroness to all the saints. As a middle-aged widow, she is the one who needs economic, physical and spiritual care, not the young, vibrant apostle who was part owner of a prosperous fishing business. Roman Catholic expositors are guilty of eisegetically reading their own perverted human traditions about Mary into the text.

Second, Romanist scholars who see in John the representative of all disciples because he is called “the disciple whom He loved” instead of John fail to take into consideration that out of modesty and a desire for objectivity in the narrative, John never calls himself John in his gospel (see Jn. 13:23; 19:26ff.; 20:2-10; 21:7-23; 21:24). Therefore, John is not making some veiled theological point by the expression “the disciple whom Jesus loved.” He is simply being modest.

Third, a careful examination of the New Testament demonstrates that Mary did not have any special role or authority in the church of Christ. In Acts 1:14 Mary is observed at prayer with other believers and is never mentioned again except for the expression “born of a woman” in Galatians 4:4. The only mother of the church mentioned in Scripture is the “Jerusalem above” (Gal. 4:26) where Christ rules, sends out the Spirit of His grace and intercedes for His people. There is nothing in Scripture about a “queen of heaven” or “mediatrix.” If Mary were ruling alongside the exalted Mediator, then her unique role would be emphasized or at least mentioned in God’s Word. But it is not because it is an invention of sinful man. Furthermore, the New Testament explicitly forbids women to teach or exercise authority over men in the church (1 Cor. 14:34-35; 1 Tim. 2:11-12).

The text before us is strong proof “that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was never meant to be honored as divine, or to be prayed to, worshipped, and trusted in, as the friend of sinners. Common sense points out that she who needed the care and protection of another, was never likely to help men and women to heaven, or to be in any sense a mediator between God and man! It is not too much to say, however painful the assertion, that of all inventions of the Church of Rome, there never was one more utterly devoid of foundation, both in Scripture and reason, than the doctrine of Mary-worship.”¹⁵

Copyright 2007 © Brian M. Schwertley

[HOME PAGE](#)

¹⁴ Raymond E. Brown, as quoted in George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 349.

¹⁵ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3:330. R. C. H. Lenski comments, “Alas, what has Roman Catholicism made of this scene! Some of it is like blasphemy of Christ in the very hour of his atoning death. Catholic books are full of this derogation of Christ and the exaltation of Mary. We are told that with her passion Mary comes to the aid of her son on the cross. Alone he could not have accomplished the task; he could never have borne the sins of the world and made atonement for them by himself. ‘The Mother of God’ had to cooperate with the Son of God. This summarizes the Catholic teaching. It invents two mediators where God only had one. It robs Christ in order to deify and to glorify Mary. In doing this blasphemous thing it destroys the real atonement and invents another which does not atone. Simply to state these facts is to abhor them. There is one Mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus, I Tim. 2:5, 6” (*The Interpretation of St. John’s Gospel*, 1297).