

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

Chapter 23: Reaction to the Death of Christ and the Accompanying Phenomenon

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Now when the centurion, and they that were with him, watching Jesus, saw the earthquake, and those things that were done, they feared greatly, saying, “Truly this was the Son of God.” And many women were there beholding afar off, which followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering unto him: Among which was Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joses, and the mother of Zebedee’s children. (Mt. 27:54-56)

And when the centurion, which stood over against him, saw that he so cried out, and gave up the ghost, he said, “Truly this man was the Son of God.” There were also women looking on afar off: among whom was Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the less and of Joses, and Salome; (Who also, when he was in Galilee, followed him, and ministered unto him;) and many other women which came up with him unto Jerusalem. (Mk. 15:39-41)

Now when the centurion saw what was done, he glorified God, saying, “Certainly this was a righteous man.” And all the people that came together to that sight, beholding the things which were done, smote their breasts, and returned. And all his acquaintance, and the women that followed him from Galilee, stood afar off, beholding these things. (Lk. 23:47-49)

Introduction

After the death of Christ and the amazing signs that accompany His death, the synoptic gospels record the reaction of those present at the crucifixion. There is the reaction of the centurion (Mk. 15:39; Lk. 23:47) and his soldiers (Mt. 27:54). There is the response of the Jewish crowd or “all the people that came together to that sight” (Lk. 23:48). Also, there is a record of what the disciples or friends of Jesus (mostly female followers from Galilee) were doing at that time. Therefore, the gospel narratives shift from the death of Jesus, to the response of the Father, to the response of the people. The death of the Savior is of such a cosmic significance that the evangelists make a record of the response from both heaven and earth. In order to carefully examine these responses we will consider each one separately.

The Centurion’s Declaration

As we study the centurion’s response there are three things that merit our attention. First, the centurion’s statement is a response to the events he had just witnessed. By events we mean much more than the mighty miracles which struck great fear into the centurion and his soldiers (Mt. 27:54). Mark notes that the manner in which Jesus died had a profound effect upon him (Mk. 15:39). Luke simply says, “When the centurion saw what was done (23:47). Therefore, we

are justified in viewing the centurion's declaration as flowing from a rather broad pool of information.¹

As a centurion (i.e. an officer over a hundred men) this man was present at the trial of Christ. He had heard the accusations and the words of Jesus. As the Roman officer in charge of carrying out the execution of the Redeemer, he had witnessed all the events of those six cruel hours. He had watched the mocking and had also witnessed the Savior's remarkable demeanor. Our Lord was calm, dignified and resolute as He hung on the gibbet. He had observed the marvelous interaction between the Mediator and the criminal who was converted on the cross. He had heard the promise of paradise to the dying thief. Then, he watched with amazement as the bright noon sun vanished behind a veil of complete darkness. As he saw the manner in which the Nazarene perished, he knew that Jesus had not died the normal death of crucified men. Not only had Christ died when he still possessed great strength, but He did something no man had the ability to do. He dismissed His spirit and sent it into the hands of God. "In Mark's account the reason for the exclamation is unmistakably the manner of Jesus' death..."² Then, as our Lord gave up His spirit, the centurion witnessed a great earthquake that split apart rocky cliffs and opened many tombs. Matthew says that at this point the centurion and his soldiers "became terribly afraid" (*ephobethesan sphodra*). It is as a result of the centurion's reflection "on the earthquake and those things that were done" (Mt. 27:54) that he makes his great declaration.

One could even say that his great fear was rooted not merely in the astonishing signs that he had witnessed; but also, in his realization that he had taken part in a great injustice against a man who was not only innocent, but who was obviously much more than a mere man. He had participated or at least had permitted Christ to be beaten and mocked by his soldiers (Jn. 19:1-3; Mk. 15:15-20; Mt. 27:26-31). He stood by when the Savior's clothes were divided. He had witnessed the pounding of the nails into the Redeemer's hands and feet. Along with his soldiers the centurion had reviled and insulted the Savior as He hung on the cross (Lk. 23:36-37). But now the centurion and his *quaternion* of executioners came to the obvious conclusion that Jesus had power over death, the shining rays of the sun and even the fabric of creation itself. All this astonished them and their consciences were now tormenting them for what they had done.

Second, the centurion "glorified God" (Lk. 23:47) by confessing the truth about Christ. If we combine Luke's account with that of Matthew and Mark we see two elements to the centurion's declaration.

a) He says of Jesus that "certainly He was a righteous man" (Lk. 23:47). The Greek word translated righteous (*dikaios*) can have different yet related senses depending on the context. When a Christian, with a full knowledge of Scripture, says that Christ was righteous he virtually always means that our Lord lived a life of moral perfection in thought, word and deed and, as God, was and is infinitely righteous in His being. The centurion being a pagan, probably from one of the surrounding countries (e.g., Syria, Egypt, Asia Minor, etc), would almost certainly not have had that depth of theology behind his declaration. Therefore, when he says that the Nazarene was righteous (*dikaios*), he is declaring that the Savior is completely innocent before the charges of man and stands in a right relationship to God. All the charges brought against this Man were false; they had absolutely no basis in reality whatsoever. And by these amazing signs we can all readily see that God Himself regards this Man as completely innocent. Thus, the

¹ "O *parestekos ex enantias autou*, 'who stood opposite him,' should be taken to mean that the centurion is standing before Jesus, as opposed to behind him or off to the side" (Craig A. Evans, *Mark 8:27-16:20*, 510). "Being on duty, he had stood facing the crosses, and nothing had escaped him" (Henry Barclay Swete, *Commentary on Mark*, 389).

² William Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, 576.

centurion (perhaps unwittingly) is confessing that Jesus did not die for His own sins, but for the sins of others. “Christ was *righteous*, in that His claim, for which He was executed, was sustained by God, by the supernatural phenomena.... Christ had a testimony of His innocency and righteousness given by all sorts of persons. Pilate and Herod pronounced Him innocent; Pilate’s wife proclaimed Him a righteous person; Judas, the traitor, declared it was innocent blood; the thief on the cross affirmed He had done nothing censurable; and the centurion owned Him to be a righteous man, yea, the Son of God.”³

b) The centurion also said, “Truly this man was the Son of God” (Mk. 15:39; cf. Mt. 27:54). Without question the centurion was heralding the divinity of Jesus by his statement. We know this because, among his pagan contemporaries, “the designation ‘Son of God’ had been arrogated for the Roman ruler, who was worshipped in the state cult.”⁴ The question that is more difficult to answer is related to the worldview behind this declaration. Was the centurion’s statement a confession from a brand new believer in Christ who was saying that in a unique sense Jesus was *the* Son of God? Or, as a Gentile army officer (who had no previous connection with the Savior or His disciples) was he simply acknowledging that the Nazarene “transcends humanity” and must be categorized among the gods? Matthew notes that the soldiers also made this confession. Were these soldiers genuinely converted or did they confess the truth without a Scriptural understanding of exactly who Jesus really was? The gospels give no definitive answer to this question.

Some scholars have seized on the fact that in the Greek language the word “god” and the word “son” are used without the definite article. Therefore, they argue that the centurion and his soldiers are saying, “a son of a god.” The problem with this argument is that as far as Greek grammar is concerned the centurion’s statement can be translated as indefinite or definite (the Son of God). If the soldier spoke in Latin, which is likely, there “was no more definite expression than *Filius Dei*, the language having no such part as the definite article.”⁵ Further, (and this point is decisive) the gospel writers themselves sometimes use the article and sometimes do not when referring to Christ. When the angels of God (Lk. 1:35), Jesus Himself (Mt. 27:43), the apostles (Mt. 14:33) and the unbelieving Jewish mob (Jn. 19:7) refer to the Messiah as God’s Son, they do not use the article. When Peter makes his great confession (Mt. 16:16) and when the high priest asks our Lord, “Tell us if You are the Christ, the Son of God” (Mt. 26:63), both use the article. Obviously, when the angels, the apostles and Christ do not use the article, they do not mean that our Lord is “a son of a god.” Hagner writes, “Although technically the translation ‘a son of God’ is possible since no definite article is present, the technical expression already carries a definiteness by its previous use in the Gospel [of Matthew] (see too the lack of the definite article in 4:3, 6; 27:40, 43). This is the assessment of Jesus at the climax of his earthly work, and it is virtually impossible that Matthew means us to understand the confession to be that he was merely *a* son of God.”⁶

While the vast majority of commentators (including John Calvin)⁷ believe that the centurion’s statement does not reflect a genuine conversion of an orthodox Christology, the

³ Alfred Nevin, *Popular Commentary on the Gospel According to Luke*, 672.

⁴ William Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, 576.

⁵ J. A. Alexander, *Mark*, 429.

⁶ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, 852.

⁷ Calvin writes, “It was only a sudden and transitory impulse, as it frequently happens, that men who are thoughtless and devoted to the world are struck with the fear of God, when he makes an alarming display of his power; but as they have no living root, indifference quickly follows, and puts an end to that feeling. The *centurion* had not undergone such a change as to dedicate himself to God for the remainder of his life, but was only for a moment the

possibility of these things should not be ruled out. In fact, there are a number of arguments that favor the centurion's true conversion.

a) The centurion may have been stationed in Jerusalem for some time. He knew that the Jews only believed in one true God. He very likely knew of the Jews' accusation against Jesus. Therefore, he knew that the Sanhedrin was not accusing our Lord of being "a son of a god," but of being "the Son of the one true God." Further, he had heard the related derision of the crowds at Calvary and had witnessed the Savior say, "Father, into thy hands I commend My spirit" (Lk. 23:46). Therefore, it is at least possible that his declaration reflected a biblical-theological outlook and not a heathen world view. Romans knew that the Jews considered them to be pagan idolaters. Therefore, why would he assume that the Jewish Messiah was simply another divine being?

b) The expression "Son of God" (Latin, *Filius Dei*) was at that time reserved for Caesar. "In calling Jesus the 'Son of God,' the centurion has switched his allegiance from Caesar, the official 'Son of God,' to Jesus, the real Son of God.... The centurion now ascribes to Jesus what he had earlier ascribed to Caesar: Caesar is not *divi filius*, 'Son of God' (alluding to the title of the great emperor Augustus), but Jesus is."⁸ The centurion's and his soldiers' acknowledgment of Christ as the Son of God was in essence an act of treason against the Roman state embodied in the "divine" emperor. Therefore, it is not likely that these men were simply referring to the Savior as the offspring of a deity in the pagan sense.

c) The conversion of centurions to Christ is not without precedent in the New Testament. There is the centurion who asked the Savior to heal his servant at a distance (Lk. 7:7; Mt. 8:8); of whom our Lord said, "I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel!" (Lk. 7:9). There also was Cornelius, "a devout man who feared God" (Ac. 10:2), who believed in Jesus and received the Holy Spirit (Ac. 10:44). If the synoptic gospels are making an implicit statement of the Gentiles' willingness to believe in the Messiah in contrast to the Jewish rejection of Christ, then a real conversion on the part of the centurion is more fitting.

d) It is very likely that the early readers of the gospels would have understood the centurion's declaration as a confession of faith on the lips of a Gentile. "The fact that the truth of Jesus' person was publicly declared, whether intentionally or unintentionally, by a Roman was undoubtedly important to the Christians at Rome."⁹ There is no doubt that to the Christian readers of the gospels, the centurion's declaration of truth would form a sort of climax to the great scene of the crucifixion. If the declaration is meant to be taken in the unique sense, which it no doubt was, then it seems more appropriate that this great confession was not simply an excited statement rooted in pagan mythology. As Lenski notes, "Did the evangelists know the emptiness of this officer's confession and nevertheless record it when it really meant nothing for

herald of the divinity of Christ" (*Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark and Luke*, 3:327). This is essentially the view of John Gill, James Morison, Marvin R. Vincent, Alfred Plummer, Craig A. Evans, R. T. France, Alfred Nevin, Leon Morris, R. Alan Cole, Ezra P. Gould, Samuel J. Andrews and others. According to ancient tradition, the centurion's name was Longinus and as a result of his experience became a dedicated Christian and a martyr (Chrys. *hom. in Mt.* ad 1).

⁸ Craig A. Evans, *Mark 8:27-16:20*, 510.

⁹ William Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, 576. R. T. France concurs, "It is Mark's readers for whom it matters, and for them, after so many and varied declarations already in the gospel that Jesus is the Son of God in the unique sense (1:1; 1:11; 3:11; 5:7; 9:7; 12:6; 13:32; 14:61-62), there can be no question. Whether or not they realized that the centurion was unlikely to have grasped the theological significance of the words he uttered, for them this is the final declaration, at the moment of his apparent failure, that Jesus is the true Son of God, fulfilling on the cross his Father's will" (*The Gospel of Mark*, 660).

true believers? Did they not know that their record would be understood as referring to the deity of Jesus whereas the centurion had [only]...a pagan notion? Surely, the evangelists would have not tricked their readers.”¹⁰ “The centurion agrees with the malefactor in regard to whom and what Jesus was. Why reduce these confessions to the lowest possible level? If they amounted to next to nothing, why were the inspired writers allowed to set them down for all time? The Christian view [at least the ancient view] is to let these confessions stand in their full weight.”¹¹ Further, could Luke say the centurion “glorified God” (23:47) by making a statement that was objectively true, but subjectively in error? At any rate, these are questions that have been neglected by many scholars.

If the Holy Spirit wrought a genuine conversion in the centurion and his soldiers, then this confession is quite remarkable. This would mean that the very men who were in charge of executing Jesus, who earlier had tortured, mocked, spit upon, and nailed to the cross the suffering Servant, were saved by the very Person they had mistreated and murdered. The grace of God and love of Christ are unfathomable. There is no sin or injustice too great for the cleansing blood of the Savior. “Christ’s love is such that when sinners are doing him all the dishonor they can, he will reveal himself to them and overcome them with free love: for here is a centurion and other soldiers with him turned subjects to him, and confessors of his name: even when he is hanging dead on the cross, life springs forth of him to open the eyes of these soldiers to see his Godhead, and gives them courage to confess it in his deepest humiliation.”¹²

Third, the declaration of the centurion serves two purposes in the gospel narratives. a) It serves as a public indication of the truth regarding Jesus by a credible eyewitness of the day’s events.¹³ The centurion was not a Jew with a hard-hearted bias against Christ. Neither was he a disciple who already believed in and loved the Savior. He was a pagan who had to be there because it was his job. He stood there right in front of the three crosses and witnessed the whole day’s events. What was his conclusion? The Nazarene was truly righteous or innocent and, without question, He was the Son of God. The Jewish leaders were wrong; the mocking crowd was in error. Even the centurion himself and his soldiers who were caught up in the spirit of verbal venom, hatred and derision were mistaken. Jesus is righteous; He is God’s Son. He was crucified unjustly. He is worthy of our utmost allegiance.

b) The response of the centurion gives us a prelude to the success of the gospel among the Gentiles. “What the Jewish leaders have denied and declared to be blasphemy and even the disciples have not yet grasped, this ordinary soldier perceives in the unlikely context of Jesus’ [apparent] final defeat and death. He speaks necessarily in the past tense, since Jesus has now died: his manner of death has proved the truth about what he has been in life.”¹⁴ The centurion publicly confessed what the chief priests, scribes, elders and mob denied. The parable of the wedding feast was about to become a permanent reality for the visible church. Because the Jews had emphatically and brutally rejected their Messiah, God would invite all into His kingdom, even Gentile heathens. And ever since the death of Christ, “it has often happened that the most abandoned and profane have acknowledged Jesus as the Son of God while their religious rulers have denied his divinity.”¹⁵ “Profane soldiers are more easily gained to Christ than misbelieving

¹⁰ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Mark’s Gospel*, 717.

¹¹ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Luke’s Gospel*, 1156.

¹² David Dickson, *Matthew*, 402.

¹³ “Polybius (vi. 24) tells us what solid and strong characters were looked for in those who were promoted to be centurions” (Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew*, 404).

¹⁴ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 659.

¹⁵ Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 408.

rabbis,”¹⁶ for the latter have had the truth and rejected it, while the former have lived in ignorance of revealed religion. In our day, when the Western nations who once were saturated with biblical truth have turned away from it, the task of gospel preaching is humanly speaking much more difficult.

The People’s Reaction

And all the people that came together to that sight, beholding the things which were done, smote their breasts, and returned. (Lk. 23:48)

Of all the gospels only Luke records the response of the multitude that surrounded Calvary. This was the large crowd that had come to watch the crucifixion of Jesus.¹⁷ This was the mob that assembled around the cranium-shaped rock to express their furious hatred and rage against the dying Savior—the One they had rejected for a despicable brigand and murderer. There are a number of things to note regarding this incident.

First, note their remarkable change of attitude and behavior. This crowd (or at least the majority of it) had come to Golgotha to take great pleasure in the suffering, humiliation and death of Jesus. These were the Jews of Jerusalem who followed the lead of their religious and political leaders and rejected Christ as a pretender, a false prophet, a blasphemer and a sorcerer. They were not shocked by the scene of crucifixion, but rather relished it. They looked upon the bleeding Savior with smiles on their faces, with mocking eyes and scornful lips. They spent their time laughing and heaping insults upon the Mediator, exulting over the pain and agony of the defenseless Man who hung before them. As far as they were concerned, the Nazarene was now defeated, finished and would soon be forgotten.

But a number of things occurred that day that had a profound impact on their demeanor. The spectacle of the bright noonday sun being veiled in pitch blackness caused their hearts to tremble and at least temporarily caused their mockeries to cease. The death of Christ with the violent earthquake, the splitting of the cliffs and the opening of the tombs caused an even more profound soul shock. They were struck with terror and dread. They began to regret their cruel mockeries. Their attitude was very different than it had been hours earlier when they had abused the Savior as wild beasts circle a wounded lamb. “Observe the power which God hath over human minds! See how he can tame the wildest, and make the most malicious and proud to cower down at his feet when he doth but manifest himself in the wonders of nature!”¹⁸

The crowd now exhibited deep sorrow for what had occurred. Luke says they were “beating their breasts” (v. 48). The expression “beating their breasts” in Jewish culture at that time denotes profound sorrow and self-reproach. It is the same terminology used of the publican who “smote his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me a sinner’” (Lk. 18:13). While there are no indications that this crowd now believed that Jesus was the Messiah or the Son of God; nevertheless, the signs that accompanied the crucifixion and death of the Savior produced profound regret in this multitude for their participation in the crucifixion and their derision of the

¹⁶ David Dickson, *Matthew*, 401.

¹⁷ Regarding Luke 23:48 Lenski writes, “The plural ‘multitudes’ is correct, for the city was filled, not with thousands, but with tens of thousands. Thus great crowds ‘came along together for the spectacle,’ *theoria* is found only here in the New Testament but is otherwise used to designate a theatrical show. Yet when these crowds saw the show, viewed the spectacle of what occurred, even they were struck in their hearts.... They came to witness a show, they left with feelings of woe” (*The Interpretation of St. Luke’s Gospel*, 1156-1157).

¹⁸ Charles H. Spurgeon, “Mourning at the Sight of the Crucified,” 15:146.

Nazarene in His agonies. Perhaps they thought they had put to death a prophet. They very likely believed that they were now under God's holy displeasure and that some horrible judgment awaited them.

Second, note that their sorrow did not result in a confession of Christ or a plea for pardon. These people were convicted by what they saw and expressed remorse; but, they exhibited no signs of saving faith or genuine repentance. We know that their sorrow did not result in immediate, large scale conversions to Jesus because about forty days later, as related in the book of Acts, the church in Jerusalem consisted of only one hundred and twenty persons (Ac. 1:15), many from the region of Galilee. The crowd experienced great emotion. They beat their breasts and shed some tears; but, they did not look to the Redeemer as the propitiation of their sins. They pitied Him as a prophet or a common martyr. They smote their breasts and then returned to their homes. "They did not show any further token of respect to Christ, nor enquire more concerning him, but went home; and we have reason to fear that in a little time they quite [soon] forgot it."¹⁹

The crowd may have been willing to acknowledge a few specific sins regarding their treatment of the Nazarene. But, there was no real sorrow for a life of sin and guilt against God. Perhaps they were thinking, "Yes, we made a mistake. We followed the lead of our Rabbis, scholars and leaders. But, in sum and substance we are good, religious people. Let us return to our homes and to life as it was before." The feeling of great sorrow that they experienced for oppressing the innocent soon passed away as they returned to the business of everyday life. Therefore, from a spiritual standpoint, their deep experience of emotions was absolutely worthless.

The people's consciences were deeply affected by what they saw. God has given man a conscience, so that when a grievous wrong has been committed he will repent and make amends of the situation. But tragically, after the fall, because of man's sin, moral pollution and spiritual blindness, men have become experts at avoiding responsibility and soothing guilty consciences with all sorts of twisted reasoning and pitiful excuses. Therefore, one day the multitudes could tremble with guilt and fear and only a few days later their troubled consciences are quieted by perverse inward arguments and worldly cares. As useful as a pricked conscience is when evil has been committed, it cannot lead a dead soul into life, convert a man, or lead him to Christ. It is only when darkened and dead hearts are raised to life by the Holy Spirit in regeneration that the guilty conscience is drawn away from excuses and slavery to sin toward Jesus Christ. Only the cleansing blood of our Savior can truly alleviate a guilty conscience.

Third, we must learn from the response of this large Jewish crowd that emotion alone, even if it is the appropriate emotion, is not a trustworthy guide in discerning saving faith and evangelical repentance. Many people have sat under solid gospel preaching and have been deeply affected by it. They have shed tears and wept for the bloodied, beaten, tortured, spittle-covered, disfigured Messiah. But when they return home, they go on with their lives as though nothing has happened at all. Their emotion was temporary and fleeting. Likewise, regarding the crowd at Calvary, Calvin writes,

But as they went no farther, their lamentation was of no avail; unless, perhaps, in some persons it was the commencement or preparation of true repentance. And since nothing more is described to us than the lamentation which God drew from them to the glory of his son, let us learn by this example, that it is of little importance, or of no importance at all, if a man is struck

¹⁹ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:830.

with terror, when he sees before his eyes the power of God, until, after the astonishment has been abated, the fear of God remains calmly in his heart.²⁰

The crowd's strong emotions should have led them to acknowledge their sin, confess their sin to God and plead with God to forgive their iniquities on account of the sacrificial death of Christ. But tragically, the people who surrounded the cross on that day either did not have a biblical understanding of who Jesus really was; were unwilling to accept the claim that this man was the Son of God; or, they had an intellectual understanding of the truth but were unwilling to commit themselves to the truth. Without a biblical understanding of Jesus and His work or a faith commitment to Him as the Christ, the Son of the living God, the only thing that people can do is have an emotional experience and then go home. It is for this reason that we must behold the cross of Christ through the lens of Scripture and with the eyes of faith. Yes, look upon the bleeding Savior, shed tears and beat your breast; but, do so with a full biblical knowledge of why the Redeemer had to suffer and die. Then, use those emotions to deepen your love and commitment to the Mediator. Our emotions must be grounded upon biblical truth, guided by a scripturally informed intellect and then acted upon by a sanctified, submissive will. It is not enough to be emotional about or even sorry for one's sinful behavior. Everyone must believe and repent. The crowd should have confessed their sin, trusted in Christ and become followers of Him.

Fourth, it is indeed probable that the witnessing of the events on Golgotha and the attending strong emotions of sorrow and regret on the part of the people were used by God on the day of Pentecost to convict at least some of these witnesses of their need for Christ. In his Pentecost sermon Peter twice reminds the assembled crowd that they were directly responsible for the crucifixion and death of Jesus (Ac. 2:23, 36). Peter was aggravating the emotional wound they experienced that day. He was bringing to remembrance their knowledge of their own guilt in helping convict and murder a righteous, innocent Man. He purposefully was troubling their souls with their own sinfulness to make them miserable once again. Peter was applying their guilt and wickedness to their consciences so effectively that Luke says "they were cut to the heart" (Ac. 2:37). This time, however, they did not just return home, but "said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Men and brethren, what must we do?'" (Ac. 2:37). "This explains, at least to some extent, why on the Day of Pentecost there were no less than three thousand conversions. It may also go far to explain the temporary hesitancy on the part of the Jewish authorities [at this early stage of the church] to persecute the followers of Jesus."²¹ On the day of Pentecost many of those who had beat their breasts at the crucifixion were converted because the Holy Spirit took their sorrow, which before was worldly and indifferent, and made it into a godly sorrow that leads a person to repentance (see 2 Cor. 7:9-11).

The Reaction of Jesus' Friends

But all His acquaintances, and the women who followed Him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things. (Lk. 23:49; cf. Mt. 27:55-56; Mk. 40-41)

²⁰ John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark and Luke*, 3:328.

²¹ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Luke*, 1037. "The pilgrims scattered, but the people of Jerusalem, who were the very ones who had sanctioned the death of Jesus, remained, and many heard Peter's sermon" (R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Luke's Gospel*, 1157).

After describing the reaction of the centurion and his soldiers, as well as the multitudes, the synoptic gospels focus their attention on the Savior's friends or disciples who were at the crucifixion. There are a number of noteworthy things regarding these passages.

First, all three evangelists focus their attention on the fact that this group was composed primarily of women. Mark says there "were women" (15:40), identifies a few of the prominent members of the group, and then says there were "many other women which came up" (15:41). Matthew says "many women" (27:55) and identifies the same three notable women, substituting "the mother of the sons of Zebedee" for Mark's "Salome." Luke says "all His acquaintances, and the women" (23:47). Matthew and Mark do not mention any men at all while Luke's term "acquaintances" does indicate some men were present. (We know from John 19:26 that the apostle John was among this group.) Why the focus on these women? Why were none of the men identified while certain of the women were?

One reason that the synoptics (especially Matthew and Mark who only mention women) focus on these women is to contrast their faithfulness with the failure of the apostles (with the exception of John) to stand by Christ in His time of suffering and serve as crucial eyewitnesses to the work of redemption. The disciples' weak faith and courage failed them and thus they deserted Jesus, while these women boldly stuck to the Savior no matter what the danger. "Note, even those of the weaker sex are often, by the grace of God, made strong in faith, that Christ's strength may be made perfect in weakness."²² "It is one more instance of candour on the part of the Evangelists that they record how women, who might be expected to have less courage, watched till the very end, after all the disciples had left Him and fled (xxvi.56; Mk. xiv.50)."²³ Calvin writes, "[T]he Evangelists bestow the chief praise on the women, for they deserved the preference above the men. In my opinion, the implied contrast suggests a severe reproof of the apostles. I speak of the great body of them; for since only one remained, the three Evangelists, as I mentioned a little ago, take no notice of him. It was in the highest degree disgraceful to chosen witnesses to withdraw from that spectacle on which depended the salvation of the world."²⁴

Another reason is that the mentioning of the women serves as a link to the burial and resurrection which is soon to follow. Some of these dedicated women will be eyewitnesses to every important redemptive event. Luke says, "The women from Galilee... beheld the tomb and how the body was laid" (23:55). Matthew and Mark identify Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James as eyewitnesses of the burial (Mt. 27:61; Mk. 15:47). These women were among those to witness the crucifixion (Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and James and Salome [the mother of the sons of Zebedee]; Mt. 27:56; Mk. 15:40). Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome were the first disciples to see the empty tomb (Mk. 16:1; Mt. 28:1). These women saw Jesus die. They witnessed the burial and saw the open sepulcher.²⁵ They told the apostles what they had seen and the evangelists who wrote the gospels no doubt interviewed these women because they had witnessed these redemptive events. The gospel writers give these women a special note of recognition because their faithfulness to Christ enabled them to be eyewitnesses of the suffering, crucifixion and death of the Savior.

Second, (as noted) all the synoptics emphasize that these women were observers or witnesses to these events. Matthew and Mark say the women were beholding from afar (Mt.

²² Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:433.

²³ Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew*, 405.

²⁴ John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark and Luke*, 3:329.

²⁵ Luke 24:9-10 indicates that these women were not the only female witnesses to the empty tomb. Verse 10 says literally "and the other women with them."

27:55; Mk. 15:40). The verb “were beholding” (*etheoroun*) is in the imperfect tense and “implies steady and *careful contemplation*. They took careful note.”²⁶ Luke says that they “stood afar off seeing these things” (23:49). The centurion declares the truth regarding Christ and the crowds wail and beat their breasts. But these women are noted for their observing. Nothing is said about what they felt, thought or spoke. The evangelists simply want us to know them as witnesses. With the Savior in the clutches of His enemies, surrounded by Roman soldiers and dying on the cross, there is nothing that these women could do at that time but watch. However, given the historical nature of the gospel; their role as witnesses to the crucifixion and the events that follow; their presence as observers is very important.

It is significant that the evangelists draw the curtain on the final scene of the crucifixion and death of Jesus with our Lord’s most faithful disciples standing at a distance, beholding these momentous events. This group from Galilee believed in the Savior and loved Him dearly; but, they did not yet comprehend everything before them. They certainly were not expecting the Mediator to rise from the dead early Sunday morning. But, their faith and love for Jesus kept these pious women at Calvary. Although their understanding at this time was incomplete, they never stopped looking to the Savior. This is a scene of faith, courage, love and anticipation. These women were probably not sure what to do or think, so they did the only safe, logical thing to do. They looked to Christ. What a blessed example they are for all believers!

The synoptic gospels note that they were beholding from afar. This observation does not mean that the whole group always watched from that vantage point; for earlier at least some of these women and John were very close to the cross, close enough for Jesus to speak to His mother and John (Jn. 19:25-27). They likely stood afar off at this time because of necessity. The soldiers kept a space free around the crosses and this space may have been increased due to the terrifying signs. Further, there were large crowds to contend with. The watching from afar should be seen not as a sign of fear, but as an unavoidable circumstance.

Third, the evangelists emphasize the women’s love and dedication to Christ by noting that these women had followed Him from Galilee and had ministered to Him (Mt. 27:55; Mk. 15:41; Lk. 23:49). These women served as a support group for the Redeemer during His Galilean ministry. They “had not only provided material help, but also *ekolouthoun auto* [followed Him]; this is the language of discipleship, and suggests that they, like the Twelve, were regular members of the group.”²⁷ “They seem to have been possessed of material ‘means,’ and they ‘ministered unto Him of their substance’ (Luke viii.3). Doubtless they would ply, at every halting place, and all along the route, their busy ministering fingers to provide for the seemly accommodation of our Lord; and such refreshment as He required.”²⁸ (The evangelists’ comments give us a rare glimpse into how Jesus’ ministry was supported. It is interesting that many of the very same women who enabled Christ’s ministry to function effectively were given the privilege of observing the climax of the Savior’s redemptive work—the very reason He came into the world). The gospel writers want us to know that it was love and fidelity that kept these women following and serving the Redeemer to the cross, the burial and the empty tomb. When these women could no longer minister to Jesus with their hands they continued to love Him with their teary eyes. Oh, that all of us would have such love and dedication to our Savior! Is your life a life of ministering to the Mediator or a life of selfishness and worldliness? “Let us with an eye

²⁶ Marvin R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament*, 1:233.

²⁷ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 663.

²⁸ James Morison, *A Practical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew*, 604.

of faith behold Christ and him crucified, and be affected with that great love wherewith he loved us.”²⁹

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[HOME PAGE](#)

²⁹ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:434.