Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Responses to the Death of Christ
Scripture: Matthew 27:54-56
Code: 2398

I want you to open your Bible again now to the twenty seventh chapter of Matthew. And for our time this morning I want just to refer to three verses, a brief but wonderful and rich passage, one that frankly is overlooked. I don't know in my life that I've ever heard anyone speak or teach or preach on this particular portion. And at first, to read it, it appears to have somewhat limited importance. But the longer you look at it and the more you consider its truths, the more you find the richness and the reward of the thing which initially seems limited. And yet in the hands of the Spirit of God becomes almost unlimited.

I want us to look at verses 54 through 56. Let me read them to you. "Now, when the centurion and they that were with him watching Jesus, or guarding 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 who followed Jesus from Galilee ministering unto Him, among whom were Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joses, and the mother of Zebedee's children."

Now, as I said, at first it doesn't seem like a whole lot. But the longer you look at it, the more it begins to yield its riches.

As we examine these three verses, I want you to see in them and in corollary verses to them, four responses to the death of Christ that are here given to us. They demonstrate for us the kind of responses we can see even today. There is the response, first of all, of saving faith; the response of shallow conviction; the response of sympathetic loyalty and the response of selfish fear. And each of those four responses, two of them responses of unbelievers, two of them responses of believers, are parallel to responses today that men and women have to the cross of Christ. So it is not just an historical narrative. It is an historical narrative with strong and practical application to our own time. And I believe that becomes manifest as we examine the text.

First of all, let's look at the best response that an unbeliever could ever have and that's the response of saving faith. We find that illustrated to us by the centurion and certain of the soldiers mentioned in verse 54. It says, "Now when the centurion and they that were with him guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and those things that were done, they feared greatly saying, Truly this was the Son of God."

Now the centurion is the first focus of our attention. He is not just another Roman soldier. As a centurion, he is a commander over a hundred men, as his name might indicate. We know century to be an indicator of one hundred in number. So he would be a commander over one hundred men. A man of some significance in the ranks of Roman soldiers. But he is not even just another centurion, of which there were many. He is a centurion who has been given a very unique responsibility because it tells us here that he and they that were with him, that would be the Roman soldiers under his command, were guarding Jesus. So this is a very particular Roman centurion and a group of soldiers whose responsibility it was to guard Jesus. We assume that this responsibility began when the trial began before Pilate early that very morning on Friday. So they have been in charge of Jesus for quite a few hours by now.

And the centurion has become very much aware of the issues surrounding Jesus. It may well have been that he not only heard all the cries of the Jews and their accusations, but well may as well have heard the conversation privately between Jesus and Pilate relative to Jesus' kingship. He has been a party to everything that's gone on because it's been his to care for the prisoner.

These, then, are the very men who have nailed Jesus to the cross. They are the very men who have pressed a crown of thorns into His brow, hit Him in the head with reeds, slapped Him, spit on Him, punched Him, mocked Him, thrown a robe over His open wounds that had been opened by the scourging ripped...which ripped and tore His flesh. They are the very men who gambled for His garments in an amazing display of indifference. Frankly, they are ignorant. They are uninformed. They are untaught. They are, at least from a Judaistic viewpoint, irreligious. They are pagans. They are part of the scene not because they have anything against Jesus, they don't even know Jesus. They're part of the scene because theyas Roman soldiershave to do what their commander tells them and Pilate or somebody under him has put them in charge of the prisoner.

To them, Jesus is nothing but some bizarre character who claims to be king, for that is the accusation of the Romans. And any of them looking at Him could tell that He was anything but a king. You have to remember that by the time Jesus arrived at Pilate's doorstep early on Friday morning, He had already been through the whole night of mockery before the Jewish leaders in which He was given a mock trial and after which He was slapped in the face, punched in the face so that His face was disfigured, puffy, blue and black, bruised. He was anything but carrying the visage and demeanor of a king.

He was dressed as a very common man. In fact, Herod had put a robe on Him as king to mock His claim to kingship. Furthermore, Jesus was utterly silent, didn't sound like a king. He didn't pontificate, didn't pull rank, didn't advocate His role as king, didn't call for those to come and rescue Him who might have done that. Where were His followers? He was silent. They may have concluded that He was mentally deranged because He took so much abuse and said absolutely nothing. When He did speak to Pilate, He spoke of a kingdom that was not of this world, which sounds like someone who

has some kind of delusions of grandeur and really doesn't know who he is or where he is.

And so, because of all of this ridiculous claim to being a king, they decided to play a game with Him and they mocked Him as a wouldbe king. These uninformed ignorant pagans had no idea who they were dealing with. Probably because of their specific assignment to Jesus under Pilate, they may have been attached to Pilate which meant that they weren't even from Jerusalem, but rather from Caesarea the seaport city on the coast, some 60 miles away which was the Roman garrison for the Roman occupation of Israel. If that were the case and Jesus' ministry was dominantly in Galilee and around Jerusalem, they may never have seen Jesus and knew very little about Him, if anything.

But, they've been a part of what's been going on. The centurion knows the Jews hate Him. He has heard them scream "Crucify Him, Crucify Him, we will have not this man to reign over us." They have seen Pilate try to do everything he could affirming the innocence of Jesus a half a dozen times to no avail. They know the Jews have accused Jesus of claiming to be the Son of God, claiming to be a king, therefore being a threat to Rome, being a threat to Judaism. But to them it seems ludicrous, ridiculous, stupid that a beaten, battered, pathetic, crucified mocked man hanging on a cross covered by flies and blood could be anything more than just a common criminal, a fake, an impostor, a nobody. And so they just sit there and guard Jesus.

However, something begins to happen that changes what they think. In verse 54 it says, "When the centurion and they that were with him watching Jesus, or guarding Jesus, saw the earthquake and those things that were done." Now we'll stop there at that point.

I mean, when it went instantly dark like midnight at noon and the sun failed, and when the earthquake came and the earthquake shook the earth and split the ground and the rocks split open and the graves split open and the veil in the temple was ripped from top to bottom, they knew something was happening that was out of the ordinary. And so, Matthew says when they saw the earthquake...and literally, present participle...those things that are occurring. When they were right in the vortex of this phenomena that was going on all around them, it says then in verse 54, "They feared greatly." And the word there is phobeo or phobeo from which we get the word "phobia" which has to do with a terror. They entered into a sheer terror, a state of panic which causes the heart to beat rapidly and sweat to pour out and a terrible anxiety to come over the individual who is in the midst of that kind of terror. They were very, very afraid.

The word is the same word used in Matthew 14:27 for the fear experienced by the disciples in the boat on the Sea of Galilee during the storm when they saw Jesus walking on the water. It is the same word used to speak of the sheer terror the disciples felt on the Mount of Transfiguration in Matthew 17 verses 6 and 7, where Jesus pulls back His human flesh and the glory of God is made visible to them and they fall on their faces on the ground and are in a state of absolute panic. It is a strong word.

And the context here and the circumstance here implies that this is not simply a human fear. It is not just being afraid of an earthquake or being afraid of a darkness. It is the idea that inherent within their fear is a spiritual awe, a reverential...a reverential terror. There's something more than just the physical, something more than just the human fear. And all of a sudden, they come to the conclusion that this is not just another criminal, not just a rebel, a deluded deranged man, a fake and an impostor. The phenomena is overwhelming to them.

The centurion has heard Jesus speak whenas infrequently as He spokeHe spoke. He has heard His words on the cross, profound words which have penetrated his heart. He has seen all of this amazing miraculous phenomena taking place. And he knows that something has gone very wrong and the whole of the universe is convulsing in response to what is going on.

The fear indicates the sense of sin. It is that reverential fear that comes to one who knows that he may be under the judgment of God. And though they were pagans, that no doubt penetrated their hearts. It was more than a human fear.

And so, the awareness of their sin in doing what they did to this man, the sense of guiltwhat have we done, what's going on, something is very wrongleads them to one other step. And fearing greatly, they said, and the centurionthe other gospel records tell usarticulated this, but it wasn't just him, it was other of the soldiers as well, he said, "Truly, this was God's Son."

First, the fear indicates the sin. Then the confessionmay I be so bold as to suggestindicates the salvation. The fear indicates the sin, the confession indicates the salvation. If their fear was only a human fear, they would have cried for help or they would have run. But it wasn't only a human fear. It was awe in the sense that men reserve awe for God, for deity. In fact, in Mark 15:39, Mark who gives us his view of the same scene, says that it was immediately after the centurion heard Jesus say "It is finished. Father, into Thy hands I commend My spirit," it was immediately after that that he said, "Truly, this was God's Son." So it wasn't only the phenomena, but it was those final words of Jesus that just drove the truth into his heart. And he uses the word "truly" to make it very, very clear that he has no equivocation in his mind. He isn't saying, "Maybe it's the Son of God...possibly it's the Son of God." He is saying without equivocation and without contradiction, "This was God's Son." No doubt in his mind.

And I believe, I really do believe in my heart, that he is affirming the divine Sonship of Jesus. Jesus had just said, "Father, into Thy hands I commend My spirit," and he says momentarily after that, "Truly, this was God's Son." Jesus in His final words is claiming to be God's Son and he affirms that it is so.

How does he know that? The phenomena going on around him, the demeanor of Jesus, the graciousness of His spirit on the cross, the silence when rebuked, the sense of being on a divine mission which He has finished. But more than that. Do you know why he knew this was God's Son? The only way anybody can ever know that, by the Holy Spirit. In Matthew chapter 16, Peter said, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." And Jesus said to him, "Flesh and blood has not revealed that unto you but My Father in heaven has." Peter knew Jesus to be the Son of the living God because the Holy Spirit told him that. That is a sovereignly revealed truth. In 1 Corinthians 12 it says, "No man can say, Jesus is Lord, but by...whom?...the Holy Spirit," 1 Corinthians 12:1. That isn't something you conclude in your own mind as a human being. I believe what you have here is a product of the work of the Spirit of God just like you have it in Matthew 16. I believe the Spirit of God had taken this openhearted centurion and a few of the other soldiers who were there in that scene and began through the work of Christ on the cross and through His attitude and His words and the phenomena all around to bring them to an affirmation of faith that only comes from the mind of God to the mind of man.

Further, Luke 23:47 said that the centurion also said, "Certainly this was a righteous man." It's as if he builds to a crescendo. Certainly this was a righteous man. Why does he say certainly? Because again he's affirming the truthfulness of it, it's without contradiction. And hadn't Pilate said, "This is a righteous man" in Matthew 27:24? And hadn't Pilate's wife said it in verse 19, "Don't have anything to do with this righteous man?" And here comes the centurion whose heard all that and says, "Certainly this is a righteous man." And then goes one step further, "Yes, truly, this was God's Son."

And Luke 23:47 says he also glorified God. There's no question about what God he's referring to. Scripture would not leave that open to guessing. He glorified the one true God, affirmed the absolute righteousness of Jesus Christ and then declared Him to be God's Son. Now that kind of faith is saving faith. If the thief on the cross by simply saying, "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom," can receive a guarantee of eternal salvation, certainly this man could with this kind of faith. So I don't have any question in my mind but that he was redeemed. He was saved at the foot of the cross.

Now some have wanted to argue this, based upon linguistics. And I don't want to get too deep in this but let me just digress a moment. This is what we call in the Greek, an anarthrus(?) construction. That is, the phrase "the Son of God" has no articles in it, no definite article THE. The Son of the God, meaning the only God. All it says is, "God's Son," theos huios, the Son of God, God's Son.

And some say, "Well, if there's no articles, it should read `a son of a god.' So what this pagan centurion is simply saying is`Hey, this must be a son of a god.'" In other words, in all the plethora of Roman deities, this is no doubt some offspring or emanation from one of the myriad of deities.

I don't think that's the intent of the text at all. Let me show you why. The soldier is using this title in reference to what the Jews have been accusing Jesus of. And if you go back to 26...chapter 26 verse 63, the Jewish accusation comes forth there, "I adjure thee, says the high priest, by the living God that Thou tell us whether Thou be the Christ, the Son of God."

Now the Jews only believed in one God. And they are accusing Jesus of claiming to be the only Son of the only God. Which is to them absolutely blasphemous. And this Roman is only responding to that Jewish accusation by saying, "Truly, He was indeed exactly who He claimed to be."

Now in John 19:7, the Jews accuse Jesus, you remember John 19, Pilate brings Jesus back out and says, "Look, here He is, isn't this enough? He's been beaten and battered and bruised and humiliated and so forth, He's a pathetic figure, isn't this enough?" And they scream, "Crucify Him, crucify Him, crucify Him." The thirst for blood is amazing. And they finally say why, "He made Himself God's Son." And they used the very same Greek construction that the centurion uses...God's Son. It is anarthrus, it doesn't have the article.

In Matthew 26:63, when the question was asked by Caiaphas, "Are You really the Son of God?" it is with the article. But when the Jews accuse Him in front of Pilate's court, they drop the articles and use the phrase a different way. Instead of saying the Son of the only God or the Son of the God, they just say God's Son which says the same thing. And so if in one place they use the article and in another place they don't to refer to the same thing, then we conclude that either way it refers to the same thing, obviously. Whether they use the articles or don't, they have in mind that He is blasphemous claiming to be the Son of God.

By the way, the very same phrase, "God's Son," just the two words without the article, is used by the disciples in Matthew 14:33 when they say to Jesus, "Truly, Theou Huios You are," truly God's Son You are. And we know what they meant. They didn't mean, "Truly, You are a son of a god." They meant God's Son.

And the same phrase, and here's the capper, the same phrase, the same two words without an article is used by Jesus Himself in Matthew 27:43 where He claims God's Son, I am. And do you know when He was born in Luke 1:35, the angels used the same phrase. They called Him, "Huios Theou," God's Son.

Now obviously, then, the phrase God's Son means exactly what we have always assumed throughout all history that it meant, the Son of God. The absence of an article doesn't mean you can translate it a son of a god, and make this pagan Roman soldier be saying nothing more than He must be offshoot of some deity somewhere. He knew exactly what he was saying. He was saying what he heard the Jews said...say. The centurion then glorifying God, affirming that Jesus is a righteous man and then calling Him the Son of God is revealing the work of the Holy Spirit in his heart, bringing him to believe

on the Lord Jesus Christ.

And I find myself in absolute agreement with the Lutheran commentator Lenski who said, "This Gentile called Longinus(?) in tradition comes to faith beneath the dead Savior's cross."

You say, "Well, why do you go through all of that to prove that?" I'll tell you why...I'll tell...it's so very important, friends. Do you understand this? Do you understand the grace of God? Do you understand the mercy of God? Do you understand the love of God? If you want to understand it, then understand this, Jesus Christ in the process of being crucified, redeemed His crucifiers. Do you understand that? That's important to understand. You want to understand the grace of God? Then understand that...that Jesus in grace and love redeemed the men who put Him on the cross. I mean, that says it. So that when He said, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do," what did the Father do? He forgave them. That prayer was no unanswered. It was answered in the very moment of His death. It's nice to know Jesus gets His prayers answered because I know He prays for us.

And so, I see in their fear a recognition of sin, but I see in their confession a recognition of salvation. And I see in that an absolutely astounding reality that Christ and God and the Holy Spirit come together to demonstrate grace in a way that is absolutely beyond understanding, to redeem the crucifiers of the Son of God themselves. And so when somebody comes along and says, "Well, I'm too evil, the Lord will never forgive me." Guess again.

And isn't this the best fulfillment you would ever find in Scripture of John 12:32? Because in John 12:32, Christ said, "If I be lifted up, I will...what?...I'll draw all men to Myself." And there He was lifted up on the cross, and indeed He drew a thief from one side and a group of soldiers from His feet to Himself. O, great love of God, unspeakable grace of God that He won the very soldiers that killed Him on that cross.

Suddart(?) Kennedy who wrote so many beautiful pictures of Jesus Christ in poetry, lived from 1883 on till 1929, wrote a very lovely look at the soldiers around the cross. Listen to his words. "And sitting down they watched Him there, the soldiers did; there while they played with dice, He made His sacrifice and died upon the cross to rid God's world of sin. He was a gambler, too, my Christ; He took His life and threw it for a world redeemed and e'er His agony was done before the westering sun went down, crowning that day with crimson crown, He knew that He had won." Isn't that marvelous? He knew that He had won. Why? Because the sun didn't go down before He had won the very soldiers that took His life. That's the power of the cross.

So, the first and the best response that a pagan could ever have would be the response of saving faith. Would you agree to that? And the centurion sets the standard for that.

There's a second response, that's the response I like to think of as shallow conviction...the response of shallow conviction. And would you indulge me for a moment to draw you over to the twentythird chapter of Luke? We have to look there to see this. Matthew doesn't comment on it, Luke does. Luke, looking at the very same scene, reporting the very same attitude of the centurion, in verse 47 the centurion saw what was done, glorified God, said certainly this was a righteous man...just after he heard, "Father, into Thy hands I commend My spirit."

And then verse 48, and the shallow conviction is illustrated by the crowd. "And all the people that came together to that sight," in other words, all the mob and the crowd that were there, "beholding the things which were done," they saw the same things, the darkness, the earthquake, the rocks splitting, the graves opening, the veil of the temple ripped. I mean, they knew things were happening there that couldn't be explained humanly. They knew something very wrong was going on and they knew it was them, believe me. I mean, they would see that phenomena and they would hear the words of Christ and see the marvel of His personhood as He's on the cross and they would begin to remember that He raised Lazarus from the dead and they would remember that He banished disease from Palestine during His ministry and they would remember His powerful cleansing of the temple and His profound teaching while He was there. They would remember all there was about Jesus that led them on Monday to hail Him as Messiah. It would all come back and they would see all of this going around and their understanding of the Old Testament would tell them that God was judging and they would feel guilt, and they would feel sin and they know something is wrong. We know that because it says, "Beholding the things which were done, they beat on their chests."

Now what is this? This is a sign combining terror, remorse and guilt. They begin to pound on their chests uncontrollably. "Oh, woe is us." I mean, they are overwhelmed with a sense of guilt and responsibility. The conduct of Jesus, His obvious innocence, the fact that they could never pin anything on Him, that He did claim to be the Son of God, but after all, He raised the dead and healed the sick, His cries on the cross, all of it, along with the phenomena drew them to a place of absolutely overwhelming guilt. And they pounded on their breasts. That was a sign of their grief, a sign of their guilt and remorse and selfaccusation and despair.

And it still goes on today. There are people who see the cross and they understand that Jesus is there because of their sins, He's bearing their sins. They feel bad about that. They feel sad about that. The cross can be overwhelmingly penetrating, even to an unbelieving heart.

A few weeks ago when I was preaching on the cross, I don't know if you know that, but people were carried out of the service, had fainted and had to be carried out. I mean, the story of the cross, the power of the cross of Christ's bearing the sins of every man on the cross could reach deep into the heart of men. Well, if it was happening maybe in a message somewhere, imagine if you were there and you knew that He was there because you screamed for His blood. And then all of this stuff begins to happen around you and there's an overwhelming terror that grips your heart and says you maybe

have violated holy God. And fear reigns supreme and overpowers every other thought in your mind.

But what is so shocking about verse 48, it says they smote their chests and returned. The word return tells volumes. They went home. There's no salvation, there's just conviction. But they went home and it passed. Like the people who come and hear the message today and they feel conviction and maybe they shed tears and there's anxiety in their heart and their heart begins to beat and the sweat comes out on their head. And they know they're sinners and they're rejecting Jesus Christ and they're on their way to hell, but they go home and it passes. They turn on the television, they stick a sandwich in their face and watch a football game. It's gone. Back to life as usual.

That's what these people did. Shallow conviction. They felt sad. They felt sorry. They even felt guilty. They knew God was expressing disfavor and they knew they were the object of His disfavor. But it passed. After all, at three o'clock the light came back and there weren't anymore aftershocks. And everything went back to normal. It passed.

But I have to take you to Acts 2 for a moment because there's a sequel to this. On the day of Pentecost, a few weeks later, the same crowd is in Jerusalem and the crowd is all gathered to hear Peter. And no doubt there were many in that crowd who were there at the foot of the cross, who beat all over their breasts on their way back home. And things had sort of cooled all down. But now Peter stands up to preach, and I mean, he really lays it out. And he indicts them for killing Christ. He tells about the resurrection, how Christ raised...how God raised Christ from the dead. And so in verse 36 he sums up his sermon and he says, "The same Jesus whom you crucified, God has made Lord and Messiah."

In other words, he says you have crucified the Messiah. You are at odds with God. Terrorizing thought. And Peter, a powerful Holy Spirit inspired preacher, so verse 37, "When they heard this they were pricked in their heart and they said to Peter and the rest of the Apostles, Men and brethren, what do we do?" Being pricked in the heart is like beating on the chest, they were stabbed. I mean, it was as if a great blade just went right into their hearts. They were pained deeply because of the recognition that they had killed their own Messiah. What do we do? What do we do? And Peter says, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins and you'll receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." And verse 40 says he kept on testifying and exhorting, "Save yourself from this crooked generation. And they that gladly received his word were baptized and the same day there were added unto them about 3,000 souls."

Listen, some of those three thousand were, no doubt, some of the folks that beat their chests on the cross scene. And I thank God that some of them came back here and when they were confronted again and felt conviction, they came all the way to salvation. That's wonderful, isn't it?

But, that certainly didn't happen to all of them. Now we go back to Matthew 27 again. And all it tells us there is they beat their chests...or rather in Luke 23:48, they beat their chests and went home. Shallow conviction.

So many people like that today. People like that here this morning. You'll hear the message. You'll listen to the story of the cross. You'll hear about the centurion, the proper response. You'll feel conviction but you'll pass...you'll go away, it will pass. Sad...sad. I hope and pray to God that someday there's a Peter in your life that comes along and preaches a message of conviction that you don't let pass.

Can I have you look at 2 Corinthians chapter 7 for a moment? I just want to pull out a thought here. Paul wrote 1 Corinthians and just blasted the Corinthians because of their sin. The word came back to Paul that they were very sorry about their sin, they had a right response to his letter. They wanted to clean up their church, clean up their lives. And so, in verse 8 he says, in his second epistle, "For though I made you sorry with a letter, I don't repent." I'm not sad I made you sorry, I'm glad I made you sorry.

You say why? Verse 9, "I rejoice not that you were just sorry but that you sorrowed to...what?...to repentance." You didn't just feel emotional sorrow and guilt, you turned around. You were sorry after a godly manner. And verse 10, "For godly sorrow works repentance unto salvation." But verse 10 says the sorrow of the world just works death.

You know what happens to people in the world who are just sorrowful all the time? It will kill them...it will kill them. Maybe they'll take their life. Maybe they'll get an illness and die. Maybe they'll become an alcoholic or a drug addict or try to lose themselves in something. But the sorrow of the world is just a despair without relief. Ungodly sorrow leads to nowhere but death. But godly sorrow leads to repentance which leads to what? Salvation. You see, that's the difference between the soldiers and the crowd. The soldiers were sorry. And by the power of the Spirit of God and in answer to the prayer of Jesus, "Father, forgive them," a sovereign prayer on behalf of those soldiers, they were saved. The crowd were sorry but theirs was not a godly sorrow to repentance to salvation. Theirs was an ungodly worldly sorrow to despair.

You see, ungodly sorrow hasn't got repentance, all it's got is resentment. It doesn't repent, it just resents. It resents being caught. It is sorry for itself, not for God. It is sorry for the consequences to itself.

Let me say it a simple way. True godly sorrow hates the sin more than it hates the result of it. I'll tell you where true godly sorrow is, when someone hates the sin because it is a defiance of holy God, not because they feel that it's created some problems in their life. Godly sorrow leads to repentance which leads to salvation. Now that was the centurion not the crowd.

Now back to Matthew 27. And there's a third group, and this is so beautiful. The third response...by the way, the first two were true of unbelievers, the second true (two) are characteristics of believers. The centurion and the soldiers were unbelievers when they came to saving faith. The crowd were unbelievers when they came to shallow conviction. The centurion and the soldiers were changed to believers. The crowd was not.

But the second two, both of them were believers. Now the first of the second two, or the third response, is called sympathetic loyalty. We'll just call that sympathetic loyalty because it's really a good descriptive phrase of what we see. And it is characteristic of these women. They are the illustration. Verse 55, "Many women were there." Stop at that point.

Around the cross of Christ afar off, by the way, Matthew says, and apparently at the beginning of the crucifixion they were afar off. There would be the cross, there would be some space so the people would be kept back from the cross. There would be the soldiers, then the rabble crowd of the Jews passing by along the road. And then somewhere in the distance, these women. They're...they're...they're not way up...way far so that they're not really part of the scene. They're far off and yet they're definitely a part of the recognizable scene of the cross.

Later on, according to John's gospel, they approach the cross and it is then that Jesus speaks to them and says, "Mary, here's John. John, here's Mary," and commits the two to each other for care. So they start off in a distance and they move closer. That's wonderful, too. They become more and more bold and courageous and finally, no doubt, are collected around the foot of the cross itself.

Now here are these women, loving, sympathetic, though their hopes are crushed and their dreams are dead and they can't see beyond tomorrow and Jesus is gone. And they have been watching their Master die. Their loyalties are so deep. Their hearts are so filled with love and sympathy that they are...they're not all led to leave, to flee, to run. They have no fear of the Jews. They have no fear of the Romans. Nothing can overpower their love and their sympathy for Christ.

May I be so bold as to suggest to you that this is one of the most beautiful characteristics of a godly women, sympathetic loyalty? You show me a virtuous godly woman and I'll show you in that woman's life a sympathy and a loyalty that extends beyond that which can be produced in the life of a man, in most cases. Women have a capacity for incredible loyalty and sympathy that men don't have. And we see this in the beauty of these women. They're fearless. They don't even mind the identification with the crucified Christ who has been mocked and scorned and ridiculed. And this by their own people in the society in which they must exist. They are lovely. Their sympathy is magnificent. Their courage is beautiful.

I mean, you ask yourself, where are the disciples? According to John 19 verses 26 and 27, only John was there. The other ten, Judas is doing his thing, the other ten are long gone. They're the big macho guys, right? None of them are around. Just the women and John who seemed to have almost the kind of sympathetic heart that you see usually in a woman, although he was anything but feminine since his nickname was "son of thunder."

Now it is interesting to me, also, to note that Mark links the centurion with the women. Having discussed the centurion he says, "And there were also women," as if to include the centurion with the women. And that's a fair inclusion, I believe. He would include the centurion with the women as over against the unbelieving crowd.

And so, there they are. G. Campbell Morgan writes of them, "Hopeless, disappointed, bereaved and heartbroken, but the love He had erected in those hearts for Himself could not be quenched even by His dying; could not be overcome even though they were disappointed; could not be extinguished even though the light of hope had gone out. And over the sea of their sorrow there was no sighing wind that told of the dawn," end quote. A beautiful way to say there was no hope, no sighing wind to tell of the dawn, to tomorrow for them and yet they were there.

Now look a minute. Many women...we don't know how many...many women. Listen, Jesus' ministry included many women. No one has ever said that women are not a part of the ministry of Christ...many women. We don't know all of them. According to Luke chapter 8 the first three verses we get a little bit of a glimpse. It says Jesus and His ministry in Galilee was preaching and showing the glad tidings of the Kingdom of God, and the Twelve are with Him. And it says they were going throughout every city and village. And then it says not only were the Twelve there, "And certain women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities." So they were women who were healed of demons, women who were healed of illnesses.

For example, Mary called Magdalene out of whom went seven demons. And Joanna, the wife of Chuza who was the serv...the steward of Herod. That's getting pretty close. And Susanna and many others who ministered unto Him of their substance. They provided meals. They gave money. They gave garments. They gave out of their possessions, many women, provisions, resources, finances, hospitality. They attended the disciples and the Savior as they went about in their Galilean ministry.

It says then, in verse 55, they followed Jesus from Galilee. Luke 8 says they worked with Him in Galilee and of course when He left Galilee He came to Jerusalem for Passover and all the families would come. And these women who had attended to Jesus along with their own families came with Jesus. And all the way through Peraea and it was a long journey, you'll remember, all the way to the south across the Jordan, into Jericho and up to Bethany and they finally arrived. All during that time they were there to provide meals, to provide hospitality, to give financial help, to provide provision in any way they could.

And they're a marvelous group. Their service began in Galilee and ended up at the foot of the cross...loyal, sympathetic, unwavering, faithful. And Jesus, says one old writer said was the magnet of their souls. He just drew them and they stuck. He held them to Himself like the sun holds the planets in their orbit. They just never got away.

And they ministered, diakoneo, you get the word "deacon" from it. But originally in the gospels the word had to do with waiting on tables. They served those unique needs of food and sustenance. And that's the core. That's not the perimeter of a woman's service, but that's the heart of it. That's why you read in Paul's letters that the widow who is to be the widow cared for by the church is the one who has made provision for people in need and washed people's feet and shown hospitality and served people. That's the heart of it. The woman's role...its heart is in the home and in the caring to meet spirit...physical needs, as wellof courseas spiritual ministry. We're not limiting that, but that's the heart of it. When you look at Luke 4:39 and Luke 10 verse 40 and you see the same word diakoneo, it has to do with serving tables with providing for physical needs.

You say, "Well, isn't that kind of a demeaning thing?" Not hardly. Listen, do you realize...and you probably haven't thought about it...do you realize that these women while all the disciples are hiding among the olive trees somewhere or in a cave, do you realize that these women are the original eye witnesses to the death of Jesus Christ and do you realize before any man ever saw the risen Christ, a woman did? And not just any woman, but one of these women. Therefore, in the early church the primary sources for the reality of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ would be these loyally sympathetic women. Do you think they would have a special place of love and recognition in the early church? I hope to tell you.

And don't you think the story rang down through those early years about the disciples hiding and the women standing by? And so, when the Apostles stood up to preach about their great courage, there might be some silent women smiling. Don't ever underestimate how the Lord Jesus Christ looks upon the role of a woman, the Lord Jesus gave these dear women the privilege of being the original eye witnesses of the death and resurrection because they proved to be so faithful to Him. In what looks to us so often as a small thing, but in His mind was a great thing because it marked out genuine faithfulness.

And I suppose because of that marvelous character in these women, the Holy Spirit allows us the privilege to meet a few of them in verse 56. First, Mary Magdalene. Now not only does Matthew tell us about them, but the other writers tell us about them, particularly John does. But every time you read about Mary, and she hasn't appeared since Luke 8 where I read earlier that she was with Jesus in Galilee and had cast out of her seven demons. Please don't...please don't mix her up with the woman of sin. She is not to be at all connected with that woman of sin in Luke 7. She was a woman demon possessed. The Lord sovereignly delivered her and redeemed her.

She's always called Mary of Magdalene. Mary...simply means she's a Magdalene, she's from Magdala. Magdala was a little town on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee south of Capernaum. Now the reason she is called that is because she has no husband and no children. If she had a husband or children, she would be Mary the wife of, or Mary the mother of as the other two. Would you please notice the second one is Mary the mother of, and the next one is both the mother of and the wife of. She is the mother of Zebedee's children which is another way of saying she is Zebedee's wife.

Now the point here, I believe, is...and this is a beautiful picture...one of these women is noted for her children. Mary the mother of Jamesby the way, that's James the Less or James the little, little James who was an Apostle, she is known as the mother of an Apostle. And the other one isn't even given a name. She is just the mother of the children of Zebedee. So she is a woman known by her husband, the other is a woman known by her children, the other is a woman known by her town which is because she...she has no husband or children.

And the Lord, I think, gives all the categories to women. A woman's dignity can be as a single woman. And there is a marvelous and unique and blessed role for a single woman to play in the provision of God and in fact Mary was the first one to see the risen Christ, Mary Magdalene. There is also, of course, the great commendation of a woman who is a mother and an equally great commendation of a woman who is a wife. That is the singular greatest commendation of woman. She is the mother of, or the wife of...if she indeed is married. And so that we wouldn't slur single ones, Mary Magdalene heads the list. But when it comes to a woman's unique role, it is a role of loyal sympathetic service to Christ as wife and mother, unless specially called to the role of singleness.

Mary, by the way, the mother of James and Joses, or Joseph, as I said is the mother of James the Less. And Mark 14...Mark 15:45 talks about James, the little James so you don't get him mixed up with big James, James the brother of John, the sons of Alphaeus...or the sons of Zebedee, rather. So we find here that this woman is identified as Mary the mother of James the Less and Joses. Now in the other texts, she is called the wife of Cleophas which means she is the mother of James and Joses and the wife of Cleophas. And that is always how the Bible identifies women, as the mother of and the wife of. James the little is also called James the son of Alphaeus. So, Cleophas and Alphaeus may be variations on the same name, the conseq...consonants are the same all through, l, ph, and s. So, it's a real reasonable proximity there in those names indicating they're the same individual.

And further it says, the mother of Zebedee's children, she isn't even named but John tells us her name was Salome. She also is the sister of the mother of Jesus, Mary. So the James and John are His cousins.

So, here's this little group, Mary of Magdala, Mary the wife of Cleophas also known as Alphaeus who's the mother of James and John, and then Salome who is the sister of Mary, the mother of Jesus and the wife of Zebedee and the mother of James and John. And, also, John tells us Mary the mother of Jesus was there.

Well, I just wanted you to know who they were because I think it's worth noting. And I wanted you to know that they're always identified if they're married and if they have children as the wife of and the mother of because that is the distinct and wonderful and beautiful role of a woman. And it is in that role that she provides out of her provision substance for those who labor in the cause of Christ. And God so highly honors that, that God has set these women in a unique place as special witnesses of His death and resurrection.

When God wants to extol the highest virtue of woman, listen to what He says in Psalm 1:13. It goes on, "Praise the Lord, Praise ye the servants of the Lord, Praise the name of the Lord, Blessed be the name of the Lord from this time forth and forever, from the rising of the sun to the going down of the same, the Lord's name is to praised. The Lord is high above all nations, His glory above the heavens. Who is like the Lord our God who dwells on high?" And He goes on talking about the Lord is this, the Lord is this. And when He comes to the last verse, here's how He extols the Lord. "He makes the barren woman to keep house and be a joyful mother of children, praise ye the Lord." That's the sunum bonum. I mean, it isn't He makes the barren woman to have a career and a briefcase. And I'm just being pretty frank but that's not what He said. What He says is He makes her to be a keeper of the house and to bear children.

Now I'm not despairing about folks that God doesn't give children to or that are single or that have a ministry to the Lord. All I'm saying is that's God's highest calling for a woman and that's supported in the way they're identified even in the narrative in the gospel record and by the way through that faithfulness at that level, God has exalted them to be eye witnesses of His Son's death and resurrection.

Now that's what I call sympathetic loyalty. How about you? Is that you? I mean, when the world is hostile toward Christ and they're jeering Christ and mocking Christ and laughing at Christ and scorning Christ, do you just fade away or are you there? Are you there and the whole world around can know that you belong to Jesus Christ? Is your love for Christ and loyalty to Christ so magnetic that you're attached to Jesus Christ no matter what it costs, no matter what anybody says, no matter what hostilities you have to endure, you are unwavering in your commitment? I mean, should there be anything else for those who love Christ?

There is, though, and that's the final point...selfish fear. You say, "Well, you've exhausted all the verses, what verse is this in?" It isn't in any verse. But you want to know something? It speaks so loudly I have to include it.

You say, "But it doesn't say anything about selfish fear. Who's the illustration?" The disciple. "But it doesn't say anything about them." I know, that's what's so amazing. It doesn't say anything about them there because they weren't there. But that says a lot. So somewhere between verse 56 and verse 57 in the white spaces you can put this point. Selfish fear, you can't ignore it...where were these guys?

Now listen, I think Peter would...I really would have thought Peter would be there. You say why Peter? Well, he'd gone out and denied Christ three times, heard the cock crow and the Bible says when he heard the cock crow, he went out and did what? He wept bitterly, poured out his heart, "O God, forgive me." Poured out his heart in weeping. And he went through all the catharsis of cleansing his soul because of his denial. And you have thought, "Boy, when he gets that deal over, he'll be there."

You know something? He went out and wept bitterly then went back in hiding. Macho Peter...see. Where are they? I'll tell you where they are. Matthew chapter 26 verse 56, "Then all the disciples forsook Him and fled." And when they should have been courageous they were cowards. And in Luke 22:31 to 34, Jesus said to them, Peter in particular but all the others, "Satan desires to sift you." You know, they used to take a little sifter and shake it like this...to separate the wheat from the chaff and what He's saying is Satan is going to shake you, shake you loose every way he can. "But I have prayed for you that your faith fail not and when you're converted..." and He goes on.

Did they lose their salvation? No, because the Lord upholds them. But they sure...they sure entered into a terrible time of cowardice. They were in a spiritual struggle. They violated the basic principle of discipleship from Matthew chapter 10, "You're not worthy to be My disciple unless you take up your...what?...cross and follow Me." And that was an indicator of a willingness to die for Me, whatever the cost. If you're going to be My disciples, you have to be willing to give your life. Well, they weren't, boy, when they thought they might lose their life, they were long gone. And Satan was shaking them violently. But Jesus said I prayed for you, your faith won't fail. No matter how violently Satan may shake the believer and he may come to times of doubt and fear, he'll never lose his faith because his faith isn't in his own hands, it's in the hands of Jesus Christ.

Great hope, but how sad. Isn't it sad that they weren't there? Isn't it sad that He died alone with only the women and John? Isn't it pathetic after all He'd done they weren't there? And it still goes on. There are still those of us and times for all of us when we should be standing for Christ in a situation and we aren't. We're gone somewhere. We hide, we fade. The sifting is more than we want to endure, we want to save our reputation or our name or our prestige or our career. We don't want to be named with Jesus Christ.

And so, I guess you need to ask yourself where you are. Saving faithhave you seen the cross and said I want like that centurion to say truly this is God's Son? Or are you like the crowd? You feel the conviction but you're going to go home and it will pass. If you're a believer, are you like the women? Are you there with sympathetic loyalty standing for Jesus Christ whatever the cost, no matter goes on around you? Or are you like the disciples in selfish fear, hiding somewhere so nobody finds out who you really belong to? It's a pretty clear scene, isn't it?

In the thirteenth century, there's a man by the name of Arnolf Van Lowen(?). And he wrote one of the most beautiful and magnificent hymns on the cross that's ever been penned. Some time in the nineteenth century it was translated by James Alexander into English and I want you to listen to it.

O sacred head now wounded with grief and shame way down, now scornfully surrounded with thorns, Thy only crown. How art Thou pale with anguish, with sore abuse and scorn? How does that visage languish which once was bright as morn? What Thou, my Lord, has suffered, was all for sinners gain; Mine, mine was the transgression but Thine the deadly pain. Lo, here I fall, my Savior, tis I deserve Thy place. Look on me with Thy favor, vouch safe to me Thy grace. What language shall I borrow to thank Thee, dearest friend, for this Thy dying sorrow, Thy pity without end. O make me Thine forever, and should I fainting be, Lord, let me never never outlive my love to Thee.

O, what a great statement. O make me Thine forever and should I fainting be, Lord, let me never never outlive my love for Thee.

Father, we come to You in this final word of prayer. Our hearts having been drawn to that magnificent scene at the foot of the cross to see there the beauty of response and the ugliness as well, the beauty of a centurion and a few soldiers saved though they crucified the Son of glory. The beauty of women standing there in loyal sympathy, tearstruck without hope, thinking there's no tomorrow and yet held by undying love. O may we be like that centurion, like those women and not like the shallow crowd and the selfish disciples who thinking only of their own despair left the Savior to die alone without those in whom He had made the greatest deposit of personal affection. For Christ's sake, amen.

Available online at: http://www.gty.org
COPYRIGHT (C) 2016 Grace to You
You may reproduce this Grace to You content for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Grace to You's Copyright Policy (http://www.gty.org/connect/copyright).