

Responses to the Death of Christ

I. Introduction

Matt. 27:54-56. These verses and the parallel verses give four responses to the death of Christ—the same kind of responses we see today: *saving faith*, *shallow conviction*, *sympathetic loyalty*, and *selfish fear*. Two are responses of unbelievers and two of believers.

1. SAVING FAITH: Matt. 27:54

A. The Character of Christ's Crucifiers

1. **Their responsibility:** The centurion is the focal point of our discussion about the response of saving faith. He commanded more than a hundred men—a man of some significance in the ranks of Roman soldiers. He and the men under his command were given the unique responsibility of guarding Jesus Christ.
2. **Their ignorance:** The soldiers serving the centurion were the same men who nailed Jesus to the cross after mocking Him. They didn't have anything against Jesus; they were at the cross of Christ because their commander wanted them there.
3. **Their participation:** The centurion and his soldiers knew the Jews hated Christ. They knew the Jewish leaders accused Jesus of claiming to be the Son of God and a king—that He was a threat to Rome and Judaism. But all that seemed ludicrous in view of the beaten and pathetic man now hanging on a cross. How could He be anything more than just a common criminal? To them He was a fake, a nobody.

B. The Fear of Christ's Crucifiers

1. **The cause of their fear:** When the sun instantly became dark at noon, when the earthquake split the ground and the rocks, and when the graves were opened, they knew something out of the ordinary was happening.
 - a. **"They feared greatly.":** The Greek word translated "fear" is *phobeo*, from which we get the word *phobia*—sheer terror, a state of panic causing the heart to beat rapidly and the body to sweat profusely.
2. **The context of their fear:** Inherent within their fear was spiritual awe—a reverential terror. They concluded that Jesus was not just another criminal or rebel.

3. **The conviction of their fear:** The centurion heard Jesus speak profound words that penetrated his heart while He hung on the cross. Now he had seen miraculous phenomena take place when Christ died. His fear indicates a sense of his sin. He feared he might be under the judgment of God. Although the soldiers were pagans, that possibility no doubt penetrated their hearts.

C. The Confession of Christ's Crucifiers

1. **They affirmed Christ's Sonship:** If their fear merely was natural human fear, they would have cried for help or run away. However theirs was awe reserved only for God (Mark 15:39). It wasn't just the phenomena; the final words of Jesus drove the truth into his heart. With His final words Jesus implied He was God's Son (Luke 23:46) and the centurion affirmed it (Matt. 27:54). You can't come to that conclusion on your own (1 Cor. 12:3). Through Christ's attitude and words on the cross, and through the supernatural phenomena, the Holy Spirit brought them to an affirmation of faith that can come only from God.
2. **They affirmed Christ's righteousness;** Matt. 27:19, 24; Luke 23:47
3. **They glorified God:** Luke 23:47

The centurion glorified the one true God, affirmed the righteousness of Jesus Christ, and declared Him to be the Son of God. That is saving faith. There is no question in my mind that the centurion and perhaps several of his men were redeemed at the foot of the cross.

The Case of the Missing Article

Some have wanted to argue the validity of the centurion's faith based on linguistics. We find in Matthew 27:54 what is called an anarthrous construction in the Greek language—the phrase "the Son of God" has no definite article in it. The Greek doesn't translate to "the Son of the God," meaning the only God; it says theou huios—"Son of God." Some claim this pagan centurion was saying, "This man must be a son of a god"—that of all the Roman deities, the centurion supposedly thought of Jesus as some offspring or emanation from one those deities. I don't think that's the intent of the text. Let me show you why.

1. **The Jewish leaders didn't use the article:** *The Jews believed in only one God, and they were accusing Jesus of claiming to be the only Son of the only God (Matt. 26:63; John 19:67).*
2. **The disciples didn't use the article:** *Theou Huios was used by the disciples (Matt. 14:33).*
3. **Jesus didn't use the article:** *Matt. 27:43*

4. *Gabriel didn't use the article: Luke 1:35*

D. The Redemption of Christ's Crucifiers

1. **The Father's forgiveness:** In the soldiers' fear I see a recognition of sin and in their confession I see salvation. When someone says, "I'm too evil; the Lord will never forgive me," he needs to understand that Christ forgives the worst of sinners (Luke 23:34).
2. **The Scripture's fulfillment:** John 12:32: As He was lifted up on the cross, He drew a thief and a group of soldiers to Himself. It is unspeakable love and grace that won those who killed Jesus on the cross.

The best response anyone can have toward the gospel is saving faith. The centurion sets the standard.

2. SHALLOW CONVICTION: Luke 23:47–48

A. The Scene

1. **Initial conviction:** Based on their understanding of the Old Testament, the people should have realized that God was judging them. They should have experienced guilt from their sin, and some did (Luke 23:48). Even today people look at the cross and understand Jesus was there because of their sins. They feel bad about that. The cross can be overwhelmingly penetrating, even to an unbelieving heart.
2. **Eventual rejection:** They went home (v. 48). There was no salvation for them, just conviction. Many who hear the gospel today are convicted, and perhaps shed tears, but the conviction passes and their life is back to normal.

B. The Sequel: Pentecost. No doubt many there had been at the foot of the cross.

1. **Confrontation:** Acts 2:36
2. **Conviction:** Acts 2:37
3. **Repentance:** Acts 2:38–41

Some of the people at the foot of the cross never were saved. Once they went home the conviction passed. So many people are like that today.

Godly Sorrow vs. Worldly Sorrow Godly sorrow leads to repentance, which leads to salvation and life (2 Cor. 7:8–10). That's the difference between the soldiers and the crowd. The soldiers were repentant. Through the power of the Spirit of God and in answer to the prayer of Jesus, they were saved. The crowd was sorry, but theirs was an ungodly sorrow leading to despair and not salvation.

3. **SYMPATHETIC LOYALTY: Matt. 27:55**

A. **The Importance of the Women:** The women stood afar off at the beginning of the crucifixion (v. 55). Later, according to John 19:26, they had come close enough to the cross so that Jesus could speak to them. That tells me the women became more bold and courageous as time went on.

1. **Their love:** They stayed with Jesus to the end. Where were the disciples? Only John was at the cross (John 19:26-27). The other ten were nowhere to be found. Show me a godly woman and I'll show you a life marked by sympathy and loyalty extending beyond anything a man can usually produce in his life. These women were fearless. They didn't mind being identified with the crucified Christ, who had been mocked, scorned, and ridiculed by people in their society.
2. **Their number:** We don't know how many women were at the cross. Jesus' ministry included numerous women (Luke 8:1-3).
3. **Their service:** Their service began in Galilee and ended up at the foot of the cross (Matt. 27:55). They remained loyal, sympathetic, unwavering, and faithful. Serving was the core of their service, not the perimeter (1 Tim. 5:10).
4. **Their privilege:** The Lord gave them the privilege of being the original eyewitnesses to the death and resurrection because they proved to be faithful.

B. **The Identification of the Women**

1. **Mary Magdalene:** Luke 8:2. She was called Mary of Magdalene because she had no husband or children. If she had a husband or children, she would be Mary the wife of, or Mary the mother of. A woman can have dignity as a single woman. We see that God had a marvelous and unique role for a single woman to play in the plan of God. Mary Magdalene was the first one to see the risen Christ.
2. **Mary, the mother of James and Joses:** Mark 15:40; John 19:25
3. **The mother of Zebedee's children:** Her name was Salome (Mark 15:40) and John tells us she was the sister of Mary, the mother of Jesus (John 19:25).

Extolling the Virtue of Women

Psalm 113:9, "He grants the barren woman a home, like a joyful mother of children. Praise the Lord." God doesn't make the barren woman to have a career and a briefcase, but to be a keeper of the house and to bear children. This is not to disparage those whom God has not blessed with children, or those who are single; it's just that Scripture says child-bearing is God's highest calling for women. That's supported in the way they're identified in the narrative of the gospel record.

God allowed the women to be eyewitnesses of His Son's death and resurrection because they were faithful.

4. **SELFISH FEAR:** You won't find this response in any verse, but it can be deduced by the absence of the disciples. Nothing is said about them because they weren't at the cross. Where were they?
 - A. **Denying the Power of Faith:** Matt. 26:56, 75. Peter "went out and wept bitterly," but after weeping he went back into hiding. Did the disciples lose their salvation? No, because the Lord upheld them (Luke 22:32).
 - B. **Violating the Principle of Discipleship:** Matt. 10:38. If anyone is going to be His disciple, he must be willing to give his life if necessary. At that time, the disciples weren't. When they thought they might lose their life, they were long gone.

II. Conclusion: There are times when we should stand for Christ in a particular situation, but we don't. Instead we hide. We want to save our reputation, name, or career. We don't want to be named with Jesus Christ. You need to ask yourself about where you are. Do you need to respond to Christ with saving faith? Do you want to say with the centurion, "Truly this was the Son of God"? Are you like the crowd? Are you going to let the conviction pass? If you're a believer, are you like the women? Do you loyally stand by Christ, whatever the cost? Or are you like the disciples, hiding somewhere so no one can find out whom you belong to?