

Responses to Jesus' Death – Mark 15:38-47

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Please bow your heads with me for prayer.

Father, I praise You for the power of Your Word and of Your Spirit. We all need a supernatural experience with You today. May we all experience what we need to experience. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

According to an article on Wikipedia, Pope John Paul II's funeral was impressive in many ways. It was televised live in almost every nation in the world. An estimated 2 billion people watched the telecast. (The entire membership of the Catholic Church is 1.3 billion.) The funeral was by far the largest in the history of the world. Also, it was perhaps the most-watched live event in the history of television.

A million people viewed John Paul II's body in St. Peter's Basilica. Approximately four million people, in addition to the over three million residents, were expected to make the pilgrimage to Rome.

Four kings, five queens, at least 70 presidents and prime ministers, and more than 14 leaders of other religions attended the funeral. It is likely to have been one of the largest single gatherings of Christianity in history.

As impressive as this service was, it does not even come close to equaling the events or the company present following Jesus' death.

As we continue our journey through the book of Mark, let's consider a summary of chapter 15 verses 38-47:

After Jesus died, the veil in the temple was torn from top to bottom. The Roman centurion confessed Jesus as the Son of God. The women, who had provided for Jesus in Galilee, stood watching from a distance. And Joseph, a member of the Sanhedrin, cared for Jesus' body, placing it in the tomb and covering the tomb's opening with a large stone.

As we look more closely at this story, we notice four responses to Jesus' death. The first response is Heaven's. Mark 15:38 calls our attention to the "veil of the temple". Hebrews 9:3 reveals that there were actually two veils in the temple. One veil hung at the entrance to the holy place. A second veil covered the opening into the most holy place, where God's presence resided (Hebrews 6:19). It seems most likely that Mark here refers to the second veil. According to the Talmud (Jewish writings dating back as early as 200 AD) and the writings of Josephus, who lived in the first century, this veil was as thick as a man's hand (approximately four inches). It is said to have been 60 feet tall and 30 feet wide.

Keep in mind that this was Friday afternoon during the Passover festival. According to Deuteronomy 16:6 the evening sacrifice took place just as the sun was going down. So, it is quite likely that this veil was torn from top to bottom at the same time that the priest was preparing the sacrifice. Who could have torn this massive veil from top to bottom? It certainly would have required supernatural strength. It reminds me of the story of Noah and the ark. After Noah and his family had entered the ark, Genesis 7:16 says that the LORD shut them in. God closed the door to the ark, creating a separation between the saved and unsaved. In contrast, here in Mark 15, He tore open the way into the most holy place, creating a way for all to enter into His presence. I love how Hebrews 10:19, 20 says it. I invite you to turn there with me. (Read) The torn veil represented Jesus' body which was broken for us (1 Corinthians 11:24). Just as the torn veil allowed anyone to enter the most holy place, so Jesus body broken in death has opened the way into God's presence. Jesus' own words in John 14:6 also repeat this truth, where He declared, "I am the way".

A second response to Jesus' death that Friday afternoon was from the centurion. He was a commander of 100 Roman soldiers. Mark 15:39 says that he "stood opposite" Jesus. In other words, he was standing in front of Jesus facing him and what he saw changed him. Interestingly, the word translated, "opposite" can also be

translated "against". Perhaps he was like one of the thieves who initially joined in the insults directed at Jesus at the cross, but later had a change of heart. After seeing how Jesus died, the centurion felt compelled to confess the great truth that Jesus was more than a man. He was the Son of God. Back in Mark 14:61 Jesus had been asked if He was the Son of the Blessed. When Jesus had confessed that he was God's Son, it was used as evidence to condemn Him to death. But after Jesus' death, the centurion became convinced that Jesus had told the truth. How Jesus died spoke to him of a supernatural experience. He was convinced that it was not his soldiers that had killed Jesus. Instead, Jesus had laid down His life willingly.

A third response after Jesus' death came from the women. Mark 15:40 says that they had been watching Jesus from a distance. As you look at the layout of the temple in Jerusalem at that time, a similar picture is revealed as at the cross. The women were kept at a distance. The first woman mentioned by name is Mary Magdalene. This is the first time her name is mentioned in Mark. Luke 8:2 reveals that she had been possessed with seven demons. Likely Jesus Himself had cast them out of her, which would explain why she loved Jesus so dearly. She must have been well-known as a disciple of Jesus as she is mentioned more times in the gospels than is Jesus' mother, Mary. The second woman named is Mary, mother of James the Less and of Joses. Comparing Mark 15:40 with John 19:25, it is possible to conclude that she was the sister of Mary, Jesus' mother. A third woman mentioned by name in Mark 15:40 is Salome. Cross-referencing Mark's account with Matthew 27:56, we find that she could have been the mother of the two sons of Zebedee, James and John, who were two of Jesus' closest followers. A story is told of her in Matthew 20:20-24. She personally came to Jesus, asking that her two sons sit on Jesus' left and right in His kingdom. Mark 15:41 then mentions that many other women were present following Jesus' death. Luke 8:3 and John 19:25 mention three other women who were included in this group: Joanna, Susanna, and Jesus' mother. Mark says that they had accompanied Jesus on His way to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. What a blessing they must have been to Him as they had ministered to Him in Galilee (Mark 15:41). Apparently they had substantial means with which to provide for the needs of Jesus and His disciples. Mark 15:47 says that these women observed where Jesus was buried. And when we get to Mark 16:1, we will discover the reason for this. They would return after the Sabbath to anoint His body.

A fourth response following Jesus' death came from Joseph of Arimathea. The word, "Arimathea", comes from the Hebrew word, "Ramath". There are several known places by this name in the Old Testament. One of them was the birthplace of the prophet Samuel. Mark 15:42 sets the stage for Joseph's response. The sun was going down at the end of the "Preparation", which would have been Friday. Mark also refers to this day as "Prosabbaton", or the day before Sabbath. According to John 19:31, it would have been dishonorable for Jesus' body to have remained on the cross on Sabbath. This likely was part of the reason why Joseph took the initiative to publically care for Jesus' body that afternoon. Mark 15:42 also is helpful in that it is quite clear that Jesus was crucified on Friday, a fact which some Christians have questioned.

Mark describes Joseph as a prominent council member. The council referred to was the Sanhedrin, the Supreme Court of the Jewish nation. The word translated, "prominent", can also be translated, "honorable". Apparently Mark felt it necessary to distinguish Joseph from the typical member of the Sanhedrin. Today it might be like referring to someone as an honest politician. They are two words that usually don't go together. Joseph was "waiting for the kingdom of God" (Mark 15:43). A similar description is given to Simeon in Luke 2:25, revealing someone unusually devout and godly. Following Jesus' death, Joseph took courage. According to John 19:38, up to this point Joseph had followed Jesus "secretly for fear of the Jews". But now that Jesus was dead, Joseph overcame his fear and publically revealed himself as a disciple of Jesus. Mark 15:43-46 list a series of six actions of Joseph that Jesus' closest eleven disciples could not have accomplished. Their poverty and low societal status prevented them from being able to do so.

Joseph's first action was to go directly to Pilate, the Roman governor. He asked Pilate for Jesus' body. Mark 15:44-45 describe Pilate's response. He was amazed at the thought that Jesus could already be dead. He had to find out for sure from his own centurion. And when the centurion confirmed Joseph's report, he allowed Joseph to take possession of Jesus' body. This brief narrative regarding Pilate's response confirms with certainty Jesus' death. Jesus did not simply go into a coma and later awaken. Joseph's second action was to buy a linen cloth at the market. He then took Jesus down from the cross. John 19:39, 40 reveals that

Nicodemus, another ruler of the Jews, (see John 3:1) assisted Joseph with this task. Joseph then wrapped Jesus' body with the linen cloth. Finally, he laid Jesus' body in a tomb that was carved out of a rock face and rolled a stone over the entrance. The stone seemed to shut out the bright Light that had been shining on Israel for 33 years. Little did any of them realize that what seemed so final that evening would only last until Sunday morning.

Before we end the story, though, there is one more thing worth considering. According to Luke 23:53 and John 19:4, Jesus was laid in a tomb that had never been used before. Typically someone crucified would have been buried in a field used for criminals. The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary describes a typical tomb in Jesus' day. It would have typically been carved out of the side of a rock. Inside the tomb, walls on both sides were recessed with shelves. Bodies of family members were laid on these shelves. A room was located in the rear with the bones of previous generations, so that more bodies could be brought in with successive generations. What a luxury it was for someone to be placed in a new tomb! Only someone very wealthy, such as Joseph, could have afforded his own private tomb. Isaiah 53:9 says it well: "they made His grave with the wicked (the two thieves crucified with Him) – but with the rich at His death." Instead of being buried in a field of criminals, Jesus was laid in a newly constructed tomb, intended by Joseph of Arimathea for himself. Joseph's sacrificial gift to Jesus in death was as Mary's costly gift of ointment before His death (John 12:1-8).

So what about you? When you hear the story of Jesus' death, how do you respond? Maybe your response is like that of Heaven – celebration! Something burns within you. Your face lights up. Your heart bursts forth into praise for the amazing sacrifice Jesus made for you. You rejoice because you know that His death has brought you life! This is the depiction from Revelation 12:10. I invite you to turn there with me. (Read) What a shout of victory! Is that what you experience, when you recall Jesus' death for you?

Perhaps you can identify with the response of the centurion – an ever-growing faith. The longer the centurion watched Jesus, the stronger his faith grew, until finally it found expression with a cry acknowledging Jesus to really be God's Son. Romans 10:14-17 makes the same point. (Read) Before someone can hear the gospel, a preacher or a Bible has to be sent to them. And before someone can believe, she has to hear the good news of what Jesus has done for her. And every time she hears of Jesus' death for her, the faith in her heart continues to grow. Is that your experience?

Maybe your response is like that of the women – grief. There is no record of any words or action by the women following Jesus' death. Mark simply says that they watched everything that happened. Theirs was a response of grief. It reminds me of Jesus' words in Matthew 5:4 – "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." It wouldn't be long before their sorrow would be turned into joy. But notice also the experience of those who heard Peter on the day of Pentecost. Turn with me to Acts 2:36-39. (Read) Peter charged the house of Israel with the crime of crucifying Jesus. And their hearts became filled with conviction and sorrow. Notice their cry – "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" I can hear the desperation in their voices and see the tears on their faces. Maybe that's your response when you realize that your sins and selfishness are why Jesus had to die.

Then maybe reading about Jesus' death awakens a response in you like that of Joseph - boldness. Joseph had been a secret follower of Jesus until after Jesus was dead. Suddenly he became filled with courage and boldness. It didn't matter to him anymore what his peers thought. He decided to do what he knew needed to be done and what he knew was right. I love the boldness of Peter and John in Acts 4. They, like Jesus, were interrogated by the Sanhedrin. The day before, Peter and John had healed a lame man. And now they were questioned as to what power they had used to do this. Notice Peter's response in Acts 4:8-13. (Read) The story doesn't end there. The Sanhedrin commanded Peter and John not to teach in Jesus' name. Peter's response is recorded in verses 18-20. (Read) Instead of being silenced, Peter and John join in a praise service. Notice the end of their prayer in Acts 4:29-31. (Read) Maybe as you see the great sacrifice Jesus made on the cross for you, a holy boldness arises in your heart. It doesn't matter anymore what your peers think. It doesn't matter if people disagree with you. When it comes to standing up for Jesus, you overcome your fear and testify of your faith in Him.

In closing, I would like to address the fact that most of us don't always have such heartfelt responses to Jesus' death. I grew up in the Seventh-day Adventist church. Over and over I heard about Jesus dying for me on the cross. The sad part was that I could hear the story and have none of the responses of those in our story. I remained largely unresponsive and/or unchanged by the message of Jesus' death. How did I get there? Or, more importantly, how do I keep from getting there? I will share with you three sure ways to get there. Then we will look at three ways to keep from getting there.

So, here are three sure ways to be unaffected or unchanged by Jesus' death. First, make it a subject of controversy. For hundreds of years the church has argued about whether Jesus died for the entire human race or just for those who will be saved. Did He die on Wednesday or Friday? Did He stay in the tomb for 72 hours or is three days just an estimate? These type of questions keep us from experiencing the power of the cross. They are distractions that keep our hearts from being deeply moved by Jesus' death for us.

Here's a second sure way to keep your heart from being moved by Jesus' death on the cross: Reduce it to a common symbol. Put crosses everywhere. Use it as a good luck charm. You'll be sure to see it and never even think about Jesus' great love for you.

A third way to stay calloused to the cross is to speak of it casually or only when "necessary". Make it a part of repetitious prayers, where you get so used to saying it that your heart is no longer engaged. Or another practice that is just as effective is restricting the mention of Jesus' death to sermons or Bible studies. Unless it's the pastor preaching or saying a prayer, make it odd for anyone to talk about Jesus dying on the cross.

On the other hand, if you want to always have your heart moved by the thought of Jesus dying for you, here are three suggestions for you: (1) Thank God for Christ's victory in death. When you are struggling to maintain your Christianity, thank God that Jesus' death has set you free from sin. When depression settles over you, remember that Jesus died to give you an abundant, joy-filled life. (2) Share this good news with others. When other people tell you about their struggles, (and ask for your advice) tell them how Christ's death has set you free and changed your life. That's why Jesus came and died. His death put our misery in the grave! (3) And finally, don't look anywhere else for help. This one can be misunderstood, so please listen carefully. I used to get so discouraged. I faithfully put in my devotional time. And shortly after, it seemed like any benefit that had been gained was lost. But my time with God does not save me. My hope is fixed on Jesus and His death for me. (I now experience many wonderful blessings in my time with God!) I used to think that to be more like Jesus I just need to go through some more trials. God needed to get rid of the rough edges, as it were. Or perhaps I needed to make some great sacrifice for God. Then He would reward me. Salvation by my trials and my sacrifices is not biblical. My only hope to be free from slavery to sin is Jesus' death for me on the cross.

Here's a great quote to close with from the book, Counsels for the Church, page 3:

Looking upon the crucified Redeemer, we more fully comprehend the magnitude and meaning of the sacrifice made by the Majesty of heaven. The plan of salvation is glorified before us, and the thought of Calvary awakens living and sacred emotions in our hearts. Praise to God and the Lamb will be in our hearts and on our lips; for pride and self-worship cannot flourish in the soul that keeps fresh in memory the scenes of Calvary.

Thank God for the death of His Son! May our hearts always be stirred within us as we reflect upon His great sacrifice for us.