

# Divine Vandalism

The Cross (Part 18)

Mark 15:35-39 (Mt.27:47-54; Lk.23:44-47) 2/25/2023

*Is God our Savior? It depends on your definition of saving. A lot of things depend on your definition of saving. Being rescued means you're in trouble and God delivers you from that trouble. But if your concept of trouble and your idea of what it means to be saved from it don't line up with God's definitions, then you will find yourself very disappointed with God, and you might miss real salvation altogether.*

## Introduction

Is God our Savior? It depends on your definition of saving. A lot of things depend on your definition of saving. Being rescued means you're in trouble and God delivers you from that trouble. But if your concept of trouble and your idea of what it means to be saved from it don't line up with God's definitions, then you will find yourself very disappointed with God, and you might miss real salvation altogether.

## Review

We left off last time with Jesus crying out to God from the cross after three hours of darkness.

**Mark 15:33 At the sixth hour darkness came upon the whole land until the ninth hour.**

The last few sessions we've looked at the rich significance of that terrible, suffocating abyss that descended on Jesus. People debate about whether Jesus went into hell after he died. I don't believe he did, but I do believe he was there *before* he died. You don't have to go anywhere to be in hell. All it takes is for God to turn the light of his face away from you, and that's what happened to Jesus his last three hours on the cross. Instead of saying Jesus descended into hell, I would say hell descended onto Jesus. And after that happened, Jesus said "It is finished" because it was finished. He didn't have to go anywhere after that except into paradise.

At the end of those three hours, Jesus shouts the opening line of Psalm 22.

**34 And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?"-- which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"**

We've talked a lot about what Jesus meant by that, but now let's take a look at how the people took it.

**35 When some of those standing near heard this, they said, "Listen, he's calling Elijah." 36 One man ran, filled a sponge with wine vinegar, put it on a stick, and offered it to Jesus to drink. "Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to take him down," he said.**

## The Elijah Experiment

### Expectations about Elijah

Jesus says *eloi* in Aramaic, it sounds vaguely like Elijah, and immediately they think of Malachi 4:5.

## **Malachi 4:5 See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes.**

They believed the thing that would validate the Messiah was the return of Elijah.<sup>1</sup> And what would Elijah do? Obviously, he would start by rescuing Jesus from this trouble he's in. That was their concept of salvation. Salvation is very simple: We get in trouble; God gets us out of it. That's the long and short of what salvation means to most people—for God to rescue me from what I perceive as trouble.

So for someone to be taken seriously as a potential Messiah, he would have to have that same mindset. He'd have to be a man who really knew how to get God to solve his problems. So if Elijah doesn't come, we're justified in rejecting him as a fraud.

### **“Let's See”**

But if Elijah does come, that would be pretty cool to see.

**36 One man ran, filled a sponge with wine vinegar (a common drink for quenching thirst<sup>2</sup>), put it on a stick, and offered it to Jesus to drink. "Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to take him down," he said.**

Maybe this guy's mocking Jesus along with the crowd, but in the back of his mind, he's wondering.<sup>3</sup> We know the darkness had an impact on the people. And he thinks, “We've got some supernatural things going on here—could it be Jesus really is from God? No, it can't be. But what if ...? Sure would be cool to see Elijah come.”

Whatever he was thinking, one thing is clear—they are convinced that if Jesus really is the Messiah, God would rescue him from the cross. That's their idea of salvation which is yet another example of how they were focused on little life rather than big life. When Jesus said, “If you save your life you will lose it” this concept of salvation is exactly the kind of thing he had in mind. If your idea of being saved is preserving this little, immediate, right here and now life, you'll lose everything. True salvation starts with giving this little life up.

What's the right way to think about salvation and Elijah's role? Let's go back and re-view what we've learned about Elijah previously in the book.

## **Jesus Is Greater than Elijah**

The most memorable passage is the Transfiguration, where Elijah actually showed up in person. Elijah and Moses appeared and Peter made that dopey comment about building three shelters for Moses, Elijah, and Jesus. “Jesus, you're so great—you're right up there

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<sup>1</sup> This is why when Jesus revealed himself to his disciples at the Transfiguration, their first question was about Elijah.

**Mark 9:11 And they asked him, "Why do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?"**

How could you be the Messiah, Jesus? Wouldn't Elijah have to show up first?

<sup>2</sup> NICNT: A sour wine vinegar is mentioned in the OT as a refreshing drink ([Num 6:13](#); [Rth 2:14](#)), and in Greek and Roman literature as well it is a common beverage appreciated by laborers and soldiers because it relieved thirst more effectively than water and was inexpensive (e.g. Plutarch, *Cato Major* I. 13; Papyrus London 1245, 9). There are no examples of its use as a hostile gesture. The thought, then, is not of a corrosive vinegar offered as a cruel jest, but of the sour wine of the people.

<sup>3</sup> Interpreters debate about whether this guy was serious or if this was just more mockery. In Luke's account, it sounds like it's connected to the soldiers' mockery (Luke 23:36-37). You get the feeling from Mark's account that the man was serious. I'm not sure we have to decide between the two.

with the likes of Moses and Elijah!" But then Moses and Elijah disappear leaving Jesus standing alone and God says, "*This* is my beloved Son. Listen to *him*." Jesus is the eternal Son of God who shares God's glory, he's far greater than Elijah and Moses, and his word supersedes even the law and the prophets.

The people at the cross thought it would really be a huge sign from God if Elijah were to appear and save Jesus. Then maybe they would believe Jesus is someone special. But the reader knows, that's backwards. Elijah showing up wouldn't give Jesus legitimacy; Jesus is greater than Elijah. Jesus isn't dependent on Elijah's saving grace; Elijah is dependent on Jesus' saving grace.

## **Elijah Paved the Way of Suffering**

What if Elijah had come in that moment? They say, "Let's see if Elijah comes," and Elijah drops out of the sky and says, "You called? Here I am." What would have happened? Would they have dropped to their knees and repented?

No. Here's what would have happened: If Elijah showed up at the cross, they would have killed him too. I know that because Elijah had come, and that's what they did. After the Transfiguration, the disciples were trying to figure out how Jesus could be the Messiah since Elijah hadn't come yet.

**Mark 9:11 And they asked him, "Why do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?" 12 Jesus replied, "To be sure, Elijah does come first, and restores all things. Why then is it written that the Son of Man must suffer much and be rejected? 13 But I tell you, Elijah has come, and they have done to him everything they wished, just as it is written about him."**

John the Baptist came in the role of Elijah and what did they do? They rejected him, mocked him, and killed him.

Elijah's role was not to come rescue the Messiah. He came to prepare the way for the Messiah. And one way he did that was by showing what would happen to the Messiah by suffering the very things Jesus would suffer. He was rejected, unjustly accused, and put to death laying down the pattern of the path Jesus would take.

## **God's Idea of Salvation**

So their idea of salvation was simplistic and focused on this little life—we get in trouble; God gets us out of it. And their definition of trouble was Rome. The Messiah's job is to deliver us from Rome. God says, "I'll send the Messiah to rescue you from trouble, but the trouble you're in is infinitely worse than political and military trouble. The trouble you're in is your enslavement to sin, your rebellion against God, and the fact that you're rocketing toward eternal wrath and punishment. And the way of salvation will be for the Messiah to take upon himself all that guilt and die in your place as a sacrifice in misery and disgrace."

## **Breathed His Last – Authoritative Death**

Well, the guy with the wine vinegar has his experiment set up.

**36 ... "Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to take him down," he said.**

“I gave him a drink, I’ve got him revived, awake—now let’s watch and see.” So he gets his bowl of popcorn, sits down, looks up at Jesus, and Jesus ... immediately dies.

**36 ... "Let's see if Elijah comes to take him down," he said. 37 With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last.**

Before the guy takes his first handful of the popcorn, Jesus is already dead. Jesus chose the moment when he would die. And when they came up with this stupid Elijah idea, Jesus can’t die fast enough. He gives zero chance for anyone to think he’s even a little bit open to this wait-for-Elijah idea.

### *Jesus’ Authoritative Death*

**37 With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last.**

The word “last” isn’t there in the Greek. Literally it’s just, “he breathed out.” It’s like our word “expire”—a natural euphemism for dying. And it’s loud. The other gospels tell us what Jesus said right before he died, but Mark wants our attention not on what Jesus said, but on the volume.

And grammatically, the act of shouting is itself the death. It’s not that he shouts and then a moment later he dies. His death manifests itself as a strong shout. And by telling it that way, Mark is showing us that Jesus’ death was yet another display his power. Even the release of his spirit is awesome.

Normally, when someone died on a cross, it was a very slow death, sometimes lasting days. At some point they would go unconscious, then eventually die of exhaustion or asphyxiation. They became too weak to push up on the nails and get another breath, and they just kind of fade out. Not Jesus. Jesus goes right from full consciousness to being dead. And even in his last moment, he has plenty of wind. He didn’t croak out a little whisper. He belts out this thunderous shout. He made it obvious that he voluntary and deliberately died.

**John 10:17 ... I lay down my life--only to take it up again. 18 No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again.**

During his ministry, the people marveled at his authority over demons. And they marveled at his authoritative preaching. They said he preaches as one who has authority, not as the teachers of the law. They were amazed at his authority over disease. He had authority over the wind and waves and storms. And that he had authority on earth to forgive sins. Jesus was a man of awesome authority, and here we see he even died authoritatively. Almost like in order to die he had to command death to take him.

So Jesus died, not with a pathetic whimper but with a powerful roar.<sup>4</sup> How powerful? When the lion of the tribe of Judah roared, what happened? Oh, nothing much. Just the destruction of the Temple and the capture of the death squad commander. That’s what Mark describes in the next two verses as a clear result of Jesus’ death. We’ll take them one at a time.

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<sup>4</sup> Some say this cry was like his last one—a cry of desperation and sorrow that once again went unanswered by God. They point to Ps.22, where after he says “My God, why have you forsaken me?” he goes on to talk about how he prays day and night and God doesn’t answer. But that’s not the whole story in Psalm 22. Section 1 of the psalm, which focuses on how he feels says all that. But then section 2 of the psalm, which is about reality as opposed to how things seem, affirms that God has indeed listened to his cry for help.

## The Curtain

**Mark 15:38** The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.<sup>5</sup>

### Act of God

I'd say that's pretty significant. Remember section two of Psalm 22—even though the feels forsaken by God ...

**Psalm 22:24** ... God has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry.

When Jesus cried out, God listened, and responded, not by sending Elijah, but by destroying the barrier that closed off the Holy of Holies. More evidence that God did not forsake Jesus. I don't know about you, but I've never had one of my prayers answered in quite that dramatic a fashion. That curtain was very thick and over 80 ft. high. God made it clear it was his doing by ripping it from top to bottom. I don't think any of the disciples were 80 ft. tall. The Temple insurance company would clearly have to classify this as an act of God.

### Response to Jesus' Death

And it's clear that Mark wants us to see this as a direct response to Jesus' cry and his death because it's such an intrusion in the story. This whole event is taking place at Golgotha, outside the city walls. And Mark suddenly jumps inside the city walls, inside the Temple. Then in the next sentence we're right back on scene at the cross. The fact that he shoe-horns that report right here between Jesus' death and the Centurion's response shows that he wants us to know it was a direct, immediate result of Jesus' death.

This is God's commentary on the cross. Jesus accomplished a lot of different things by dying on the cross. But if you want to simplify it and boil it down to its most basic, most essential meaning, this is it.

### Divine Vandalism

But why? Why would God vandalize his own temple?

Well, for one to show the Temple was now officially obsolete. Now that the one, true sacrifice had been offered, there was no longer any place for animal sacrifices. And that building is no longer God's dwelling place and it's no longer the way to approach him in worship.

In the trial they had falsely accused Jesus of threatening to tear the Temple down. They were half right. He didn't tear it down, but he did destroy it. He destroyed it by rendering it obsolete.

### Throwing the Doors to God Open

The purpose of the curtain was to block access to the presence of God in the Holy of Holies.<sup>6</sup> No one could enter the Holy of Holies without dropping dead.<sup>7</sup> There was no direct

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<sup>5</sup> There are ancient Jewish traditions about some remarkable happenings at the entrance to the Temple 40 years before the Temple was destroyed, which would be around the time of Jesus' death.

<sup>6</sup> There were two curtains in the temple—an outer one between the courtyard and the temple building. And then another one that blocked the way into the Holy of Holies. The same word (τὸ καταπέτασμα) was used of both (Josephus, Antiqui-

access to God. And when Jesus died and God shredded that curtain, God was saying, “That thing that just happened on that tree—that just opened direct access to my presence.” In his death, Jesus blew the doors to God wide open.

And I love the way Mark says it. Mark has so many bookends—things that appear at the very beginning of the book and again at the very end. Elijah is one of them, Son of God is one, and this tearing open access to God is also one. The only other time Mark uses this word for tearing is at Jesus’ baptism in ch.1.

**Mark 1:10 As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open.**

We found Mark was using the language of Isaiah 64:1.

**Isaiah 64:1 Oh, that you would tear the heavens and come down.**

The people of Isaiah’s time were desperate for God to come rescue them, so begged God to rip the heavens apart in his haste to come. Picture a father who sees a bully beating up on his kid and instead of opening the screen door, he runs right through it. “Come, right now God—just blast through whatever’s in your way.” The beginning of Jesus’ ministry was God ripping apart that which separated him from us. And right after God ripped open the heavens, what did he say to Jesus? “You are my Son.”

And what’s the first thing that’s said here after the curtain of the temple is ripped open? The Centurion says, “Surely this was the Son of God.” Just another clue that Mark wants us to make this connection between these bookends.

And here’s what’s so striking about that. God ripped open the heavens, not for us to go up but for him to come down. And Mark is laying out the curtain thing in those same terms. I’ve always assumed the point of the curtain being torn was that it opened up access so that we could freely approach God. But by casting it in the same language as the tearing of the heavens in ch.1, Mark gives it a different slant. It wasn’t just opening access for us to come in. The violent ripping of that curtain was God bursting out of the Holy of Holies to come save us. Just like that dad who busts through his screen door to help his child, God breaks through that barrier and runs to us like the father of the prodigal son running to embrace his beloved son.

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ties, VIII.3.3; LXX Exod. 26:33, 37).

Interpreters debate about which curtain was torn. Those who argue for the outer curtain point out that if it were the inner curtain, no one but the priests would have seen it. The tearing of the outer curtain would be a very public sign. Also, Josephus describes the outer curtain as a tapestry portraying “a panorama of the heavens” (War 5.213). That is a striking parallel to the tearing of heaven in 1:10 (the only other place Mark uses the this word “tear”). Both rendings would be an opening of the sky. Also, both Jewish and Christian traditions speak of an astonishing happening around this time at the outer entrance.

Those who argue for the inner curtain point to the book of Hebrews, which repeatedly says Jesus opened access to the Holy of Holies through the curtain (Hebrews 10:20, 6:19, 9:3). And while this word for curtain was used of both curtains, it was used of the inner curtain more often, whereas a different word (*kallyma*) is normally used of the curtain before the Court of Israel. And while a public sign would fit the context of Mark 15 (along the lines of the darkness), the theological significance connected to the inner curtain would also fit Mark’s style.

We can’t be sure which curtain it was, but I find the arguments for the inner curtain more compelling. An additional argument I would add is that it’s unlikely God even recognized the outer curtain as legitimate. Nothing in the Bible endorses the idea of the court system in the Temple, where Gentiles could only proceed so far, women in another court, and only Jewish men beyond that. Keeping Gentiles and women at a distance was a Jewish invention originating after the end of the Old Testament. Jesus didn’t seem to be a fan of the idea when he reminded them that the Temple was supposed to be a house of prayer for all nations (Gentiles). But the removal of the inner curtain blocking all people from the presence of God—that would be a very significant statement by God.

Whichever curtain it was, the symbolism points to opened access to the presence of God.

<sup>7</sup> Not even the high priest could enter, except for once a year on the Day of Atonement.

It's still perfectly accurate to say it opened access for us to approach God. That's how the book of Hebrews describes it,<sup>8</sup> so that is the primary way we should think of it. But Mark adds a little extra to the idea. He wants us to see God tearing his way out to come to us.

### *God Pursues Us*

Don't ever think of the gospel as a mere offer. If you see a commercial with a limited time offer, it's 100% on you to take the initiative and go claim that offer. There is one sense in which the gospel is like that. It is an offer of salvation to which we must respond.

But that's only half the story. The other half is that God is bursting out to run after us. Whenever we take the initiative to go to God we always discover that we only did that because he first took the initiative to pursue us.

It started with the heavens being torn open; it ends with the curtain being torn open. From beginning to end, the work of Christ is all about ripping to shreds all that stands between us and God.

## **The Son of God**

### **Theological Climax**

And when you look at it that way, you understand the next verse. What's the first thing that happens after God busts out of the Holy of Holies to pursue men?

**39 And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, saw how he breathed his last, he said, "Surely this man was the Son of God!"**

God went straight from the Holy of Holies to Golgotha and immediately claimed a Centurion's heart for himself.

### **Divine Man?**

Most commentators would argue with me on that. They insist this Centurion most likely meant "son of god" in the same sense that Caesar was called the son of god, referring to an especially powerful divine man. If someone was especially powerful or magnificent, the Romans would call him a son of god. He was a Roman, so he must have meant it in that pagan sense, not in the Jewish messianic sense.

### *The Son of God in the OT*

What was the messianic sense?<sup>9</sup> In 2 Samuel 7 God made a covenant with David promising him that one of David's descendants would be the unique Son of God.

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<sup>8</sup> See Hebrews 10:19; 6:19.

<sup>9</sup> The first reference to sons of God in the Bible is in Genesis 6 in reference to divine beings. They were Gods sons in the sense that they were his direct creation (like Adam—see Lk.3:38).

The first reference in Scripture to "the" son of God referred to the nation of Israel. It was at the Exodus when God said to Pharaoh, "These people, Israel, they are my son. You let my son go or you forfeit your son." So at the beginning, the whole nation of Israel was God's son. But as they fell short of fulfilling that role, the concept narrowed to refer to one specific individual who would represent the nation of Israel.

## **2 Samuel 7:14 I will be his father, and he will be my son.**

And that Son of God would be far more than a human king like David. He would share God's sovereign throne and reign over the whole world. And he's even to be worshipped alongside the Father.

**Psalm 2:6 "I have installed my King on Zion. 7 ... He said to me, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father. ... 8 ...I will make the ... ends of the earth your possession. 9 You will rule them ... 10 Therefore ... be warned, you rulers of the earth. 11 Serve the Lord with fear and rejoice with trembling. 12 Kiss the Son, lest he be angry and you be destroyed in your way, for his wrath can flare up in a moment. Blessed are all who take refuge in him.**

This Son of God will share God's throne and receive worship alongside the Father. That's why in Jesus' trial, then they ask Jesus, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?" and he says yes, they freak out and call it blaspheme.

### ***God's Isaac***

One other important feature Mark emphasizes—the fact that Jesus was God's unique, firstborn, beloved son. Both times when God speaks from heaven he makes the point that Jesus is "my Son whom I love." My Son whom I love is a direct reference to Abraham and Isaac.

**Genesis 22:2 Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and ... Sacrifice him."**

By using that same language twice about Jesus, God was letting us know "This is my Isaac." And now, at this final affirmation of Jesus as God's Son, we see the Isaac drama actually played out. For a couple thousand years that image of Abraham raising the knife above Isaac, ready to plunge it into his chest on the assumption that God would raise him from the dead and still fulfill the promise, only stopping at the last second when God provided a substitute sacrifice... —for 2000 years that image had been pointing God's people forward to some greater fulfillment.

And finally, right here at Golgotha, the fulfillment happens. God the Father takes his Isaac, binds him up, raises the knife, but this time nothing stops his hand. The blade comes down and his beloved firstborn breathes his last. Jesus plays the role of both the beloved son and the ram.

And by the way, do you remember where that Abraham Isaac incident happened? Mt. Moriah, which, in Jesus' day was called ... *Jerusalem*. God sacrificed his beloved Son on the same site where he called Abraham to sacrifice his.

### ***Could He Have Understood?***

That's the Jewish concept of the Son of God. And we're told there's no way a Centurion could have understood all that, and so we shouldn't think of this as a genuine conversion. He just meant son of God in the pagan, divine man sense.

Here's why I strongly disagree. The Romans wouldn't call someone a son of god unless they rose to the level of Caesar. Strong, majestic, feared by all, powerful, magnificent. Dy-



ing a shameful, humiliating death on a cross as a public laughingstock would be 100% disqualification.

Second, he doesn't say *a* son of god; he says *the* Son of God.<sup>10</sup>

Third, why would we assume a Centurion, living in Jerusalem in the time of Jesus, couldn't have understood the Jewish concept of Son of God? He knew more about Jewish culture than any expert living today—he lived there.

And beyond that, he's in charge of crucifying a man who was convicted of the crime of claiming to be the Son of God in the Jewish sense.

**Mark 14:61 ... "Are you ... the Son of the Blessed One?" 62 "I am," said Jesus. ... 64 They all condemned him as worthy of death.**

Is it such a leap to assume that this Centurion could have been aware of the charges leveled against the man he was executing? Am I crazy to think when a man is executed for claiming to be the Son of God and the executioner ends up saying, "Surely this man was the Son of God" that he might have meant it in the same sense?

So those are my little reasons. Now let me give you the big, compelling reasons.

Big reason #1: Jesus as the Son of God is a massive theme in the book of Mark. According to Mark, it's the main point of his whole book.

**Mark 1:1 The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.**

That's the main topic of the whole book of Mark. It's in the first line, and it's also the main feature of the climax of the book. The center of the book, the Transfiguration, God speaks from heaven and says, "This is my Son, listen to him." And here it is again at the end. Beginning, middle, and end.

And many other times as well.<sup>11</sup> Twice God speaks from heaven and calls Jesus his Son. The demons have said it over and over. Jesus refers to himself that way in the parable of the vineyard. He affirms it as his trial. When he wouldn't respond to anything else, he responds to that.

So are we to think that after all that building and building on this theme, Mark would have the final, closing reference at the very foot of the cross be something that carried an entirely different meaning? That strikes me as incredibly farfetched.

And what Mark implies, Luke just comes right out and states in his account.

**Luke 23:47 The centurion, seeing what had happened, glorified God.**

It wouldn't glorify God to say Jesus was some kind of pagan idea of a divine man.

Big reason #2: it happens immediately after God rips open the curtain of the temple. Jesus blows the doors to God wide open and in the very next line a Gentile soldier confesses the central truth of the gospel, that Jesus was indeed the Son of God. And we're going to say, "No, there's no way God have reached that man's heart"?

When the scholars say he couldn't have been converted because he was a pagan Gentile, I want to ask them, is it possible for a Gentile in our day to be converted to Christianity? I'm a Gentile and I was converted. "Oh, well that's because someone told you about the

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<sup>10</sup> It's true there is no definite article ("the"). But there isn't one in Mark 1:1 either, and there all agree it is "the Son of God" in that verse. This is a Greek construction that indicates a definite noun even without the word "the." Any time a predicate noun precedes the verb, the word "the" is implied. There are no exceptions in the entire New Testament.

<sup>11</sup> Mark 1:1; 1:11; 3:11; 5:7; 9:7; 12:6; 13:32; 14:61–62, 15:39.

cross.” Exactly! Did someone tell the Centurion about the cross? No. He *saw* the cross! He was there! If I could be saved by just hearing about it, couldn’t he be saved by actually witnessing it?

It’s crazy to say this can’t be a real conversion because he was a pagan. Real conversion of the pagans is the whole point! Mark is showing us—this is how powerful the death of Christ was. Section three of Psalm 22.

**Psalm 22:27 All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations will bow down before him.**

Jesus quotes that psalm the moment before he dies and the moment after he dies Mark shows us a Gentile confessing him as the Son of God. Can we not put 2 and 2 together?

## **The Power of the Cross**

When we say a man couldn’t have been converted just by witnessing the cross, we’re doubting the power of the cross. Which is understandable. The cross is foolishness to the natural mind. Humanly speaking, it seems impossible the message of the cross would ever transform anybody. A man being crucified—that’s our amazing message? What kind of message is that?

That’s why so many churches abandon the preaching of the gospel and try all kinds of other methods to reach people. Concerts, 12-step recovery programs, community service, doing whatever we can to make them like us so they will be moved by our kindness and they will bow the knee to Christ. Or we argue with them online or pass legislation. But over and over in the New Testament we’re told, the power is not in any of that. The power is in the gospel, and at the center of the gospel is the cross.

It takes supernatural power to change a heart, and the key to unlock that supernatural power from God is to show people a clear picture of the cross and what it means. That’s the only thing that has the power to give life to dead hearts. Of course this was a true conversion. Mark is showing us, this is how conversion happens—when people really see the cross. We have all kinds of clever ideas of how to win people, but the best way is preach the cross and get out of the way.

### ***Power***

This Centurion had no idea that he was the first of millions and millions of Gentiles who would make this very same confession about Jesus. There were dozens of messianic movements around the time of Jesus. In every case, when the leader died, the movement died with him. Only one didn’t collapse after the death of the leader. And not only did it not collapse; it exploded. Within just 300 years it had spread throughout the world.

## **The Secret Is Out**

This is a climactic moment in Mark’s gospel because after building and building and building this theme of Jesus as the Son of God, this is the first human character (other than Jesus himself) to actually get it. Demons get it, God says it, Jesus affirms it. But only now, after Jesus dies, does a human character finally see it.

The reader of Mark can get frustrated with what scholars call “the messianic secret.” All through the gospel Jesus keeps commanding people, “Don’t tell anyone who I am.” But right here and now at the foot of the cross, the veil of the messianic secret is lifted.

The reason Jesus kept saying, “Don’t tell anyone” is because if you try to tell people about Jesus but you don’t understand the cross, you’ll get it wrong. The fact that no one ever has his eyes opened to see Jesus as the Son of God until the moment he died... —Mark’s showing us that his identity is inextricably linked to his death. You don’t understand Jesus until you understand the cross.

And again, the fact that he’s a Gentile and an unlikely candidate is the whole point. This is the power of the cross! The moment Jesus dies the barrier between God and man is ripped apart and a piece of garbage Gentile who just mocked and murdered Jesus, the leader of the death squad, is given eyes to see and understands and confesses more clearly than anyone else in the entire Gospel who Jesus is. We shouldn’t doubt his conversion; we should marvel at the power of the cross.

Every Roman coin in circulation affirmed Caesar as the son of god. When this Centurion confesses Jesus as the Son of God, it’s a very big deal. He’s switching his first allegiance from Caesar to Jesus.

## Unlikely?

Maybe you’re reluctant to share the gospel with certain people because that person is so hardened, so uninterested, it would be a waste of breath to share the gospel with them. I don’t think you can get much more uninterested in following Jesus than this Centurion. Would you have seen that pagan savage torturing Jesus and laughing about it and thought, “He looks like a hot prospect. I see if I can get him to confess that the man he’s killing is the Son of God.”

## This Is the Salvation They Should Have Been Looking For

Mark showed us the whole Elijah thing to make the point about how they had the wrong idea about salvation. Then he shows us this. Mark is saying, “This is God’s idea of salvation.” Dying on the cross and winning Gentile hearts.

## How the Centurion Was Converted

But why *this* Gentile? A lot of people witnessed the cross—why this Centurion? What was different about him? Was it some brilliant argument from a disciple? Did he receive some special blessings on his life that warmed him up to God? No. What does the text say?

**39 And when the centurion who stood there in front of Jesus saw how he breathed his last, he said, "Surely this man was the Son of God!"**

He stood in front of Jesus, literally opposite Jesus, and saw how he died. The language is specific—opposite Jesus. Not off to the side, not standing at an angle, not looking away—standing directly opposite Jesus facing him.

The point is, he watched. Carefully. He looked and looked and finally, just after Jesus breathed his last, *he saw!* He saw past the bloodied, mutilated body and saw the most amazing thing he’d ever seen. There before him, within arm’s reach, the Son of God!

## *The Way Jesus Died*

What opened his eyes? Mark says it was when he saw the way Jesus died. This man had seen someone die hundreds if not thousands of times. But never one like this.

He saw the weakness and humility and meekness of Christ in his death. He saw the total, willing surrender to the Father. He saw his love for the very ones killing him. He saw Jesus following the path he had laid out—giving up his little life in favor of big life. Caring more about the kingdom of God than about any human kingdom. Seeing a man of such power and authority voluntarily give up his life like Jesus did opened the Centurion's eyes to see who Jesus really is. No other religion has a God who suffers, who actually cries out in suffering.

## *New Holy of Holies*

Here's a trivia question you can use to stump your friends. Who was the first person to see inside the Holy of Holies after the curtain was torn? The Centurion. "But I thought he couldn't see the Temple from where he was at the cross?" He couldn't see inside the Temple building, but the moment that curtain was torn, the Holy of Holies was no longer in that building. It was on that cross.

The Holy of Holies room in the Temple building was actually empty in Jesus' time because the ark had been lost. On the Day of Atonement, the High Priest was supposed to sprinkle blood on the lid of the ark (referred to as the atonement cover, or the mercy seat). But at this time there was no mercy seat, so they just sprinkled it on the floor.

And the emptiness of that room became really obvious to everyone when God ripped that curtain open. And that physical emptiness was now emblematic of the spiritual emptiness. The presence of God was no longer there.

But there is a mercy seat.

## **Romans 3:25 God presented [Jesus Christ] as a mercy seat through faith in his blood.**

The moment Jesus died, the new Holy of Holies and the new ark of the covenant and atonement cover was Jesus. He was the new Temple, the dwelling place of God, the only place where man could approach God in worship, the new altar, the entire sacrificial system. That Centurion faced Jesus and looked and looked until he saw right into the new Holy of Holies. And he saw Jesus as the Son of God.

## **Imperfect Faith**

The Centurion's statement is loaded with theology.<sup>12</sup> The man was the Son of God. He's both human and divine, two natures in one person. The statement is right on ... except

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<sup>12</sup> The statement is loaded with theology. Instead of just saying "he was the Son of God," He says, "This *man* was the Son of God." Jesus was both divine and human. A very clear statement on the two natures of Christ. A nature is a set of characteristics. Jesus is one person with two natures—two sets of characteristics. For all eternity past, the second member of the Trinity had one nature—his divine nature. But when he took on human flesh, he added a second nature—a human nature.

What's the relationship between those two natures? The seminary word for that is the hypostatic union. And here are the basics:

- 1) Not everything that's true of one nature is true of the other nature. For example, in his human nature, Jesus could get tired and weak and fall asleep. His divine nature remained omnipotent at all times.
- 2) Everything that's true of either nature is true of the person, Jesus. Was Jesus weak and tired at times? Yes. Was Jesus almighty God? Yes. Whatever is true of one of his natures is true of Jesus.

for one word—that word “was.” It would have been more proper to say, “Surely this man is the Son of God” not past tense. So he got it a little bit wrong.

Aren't you glad you don't have to have flawless theology to know God? You can have an imperfect profession of faith, just as long as you have faith.

## Horrible Past

And another thing we learn from this—not only can you have imperfect faith, you can also have a horrific past. Some of you might feel hamstrung by a constant cloud of guilt because of your past. You can't imagine how God could fully forgive you for what you've done. You're just damaged beyond repair.

I don't know what you did, but I'm guessing it can't hold a candle to what this Centurion had just done. I'm guessing you didn't mock Jesus, torture him to within an inch of his life, and then murder him and think it was funny.

## Conclusion

When that Centurion mocked Jesus and said, “If you're the Son of God, why don't you save yourself? Or call Elijah to save you?” Jesus' answer was, “I'm not the one who needs saving right now. You are.”

Is Jesus your Savior? Will he deliver you from your troubles? He will deliver you from your troubles only when you let him define what “trouble” means, and what “deliver” means. And that will happen when you gaze so intently at him that you finally see who he really is. You look and look and look until you finally see.

Harmony

Matthew 27:45 From the sixth hour until the ninth hour darkness came over all the land. 46 About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?*”—which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” 47 When some of those standing there heard this, they said, “He's calling Elijah.” 48 Immediately one of them ran and got a sponge. He filled it with wine vinegar, put it on a stick, and offered it to Jesus to drink. 49 **The rest** said, “Now leave him

Mark 15:33 At the sixth hour darkness came upon the whole land until the ninth hour. 34 And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?*”—which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” 35 When some of those standing near heard this, they said, “Listen, he's calling Elijah.” 36 One man ran, filled a sponge with wine vinegar, put it on a stick, and offered it to Jesus to drink. “Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to take him down,” he said.

Luke 23:44 It was now about the sixth hour, and darkness came upon the whole land until the ninth hour, 45 **for the sun stopped shining.**

Matthew 27:50 And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, **he gave up his spirit.** 51 **At that moment** the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. **The earth shook and the rocks split.** 52 The tombs broke open and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. 53 They came out of the tombs, and after Jesus' resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many people. 54 When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and **exclaimed, “Surely he was the Son of God!”**

*sabachthani?*”—which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” 35 When some of those standing near heard this, they said, “Listen, he's calling Elijah.” 36 One man ran, filled a sponge with wine vinegar, put it on a stick, and offered it to Jesus to drink. “Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to take him down,” he said. 37 With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last. 38 The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. 39 And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, saw how he breathed his last, he said, “Surely this man was the Son of God!”

called out with a loud voice, “**Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.**” When he had said this, he breathed his last. 47 The centurion, seeing what had happened, **praised God and said, “Surely this was a righteous man.”**

John 19:25 Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. 26 When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, "Dear woman, here is your son," 27 and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that time on, this disciple took her into his home. 28 Later, knowing that all was now completed, and so that the Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, "I am thirsty." 29 A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus' lips. 30 When he had received the drink,

Luke 23:27 A large number of people followed him, including women who mourned and wailed for him. 28 Jesus turned and said to them, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children. 29 For the time will come when you will say, 'Blessed are the barren women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!' 30 Then "they will say to the mountains, "Fall on us!" and to the hills, "Cover us!" 31 For if men do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?"

Matthew 27:55 Many women were there, watching from a distance. They had followed Jesus from Galilee to care for his needs. 56 Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and the mother of Zebedee's sons.

Mark 15:40 Some women were watching from a distance. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. 41 In Galilee these women had followed him and cared for his needs. Many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem were also there.

Luke 23:48 When all the people who had gathered to witness this sight saw what took place, they beat their breasts and went away. 49 But all those who knew him, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.

John 19:30 When he had received the drink, Jesus said, "It is finished." With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. 31 Now it was the day of Preparation, and the next day was to be a special Sabbath. Because the Jews did not want the bodies left on the crosses during the Sabbath, they asked Pilate to have the legs broken and the bodies taken down. 32 The soldiers therefore came and broke the legs of the first man who had been crucified with Jesus, and then those of the other. 33 But when they came to Jesus and found that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. 34 Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water. 35 The man who saw it has given testimony, and his testimony is true. He knows that he tells the truth, and he testifies so that you also may believe. 36 These things happened so that the scripture would be fulfilled: "Not one of his bones will be broken," 37 and, as another scripture says, "They will look on the one they have pierced."

Matthew 27:57

As evening approached, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who had himself become a disciple of Jesus. 58 Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus' body, and Pilate ordered that it be given to him. 59 Joseph took the body, wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, 60 and placed it in his own new tomb that he had cut out of the rock. He rolled a big stone in front of the entrance to the tomb and went away. 61 Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were sitting there opposite the tomb.

Mark 15:42 It was Preparation Day (that is, the day before the Sabbath). So as evening approached, 43 Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent member of the Council, who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body. 44 Pilate was surprised to hear that he was already dead. Summoning the centurion, he asked him if Jesus had already died. 45 When he learned from the centurion that it was so, he gave the body to Joseph. 46 So Joseph bought some linen cloth, took down the body, wrapped it in the linen, and placed it in a tomb cut out of rock. Then he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb. 47 Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus saw where he was laid.

Luke 23:50 Now there was a man named Joseph, a member of the Council, a good and upright man, 51 who had not consented to their decision and action. He came from the Judean town of Arimathea and he was waiting for the kingdom of God. 52 Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus' body. 53 Then he took it down, wrapped it in linen cloth and placed it in a tomb cut in the rock, one in which no one had yet been laid. 54 It was Preparation Day, and the Sabbath was about to begin. 55 The women who had come with Jesus from Galilee followed Joseph and saw the tomb and how his body was laid in it. 56 Then they went home and prepared spices and perfumes. But they rested on the Sabbath in obedience to the commandment.

John 19:38 Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jews. With Pilate's permission, he came and took the body away. 39 He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds. 40 Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs. 41 At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had ever been laid. 42 Because it was the Jewish day of Preparation and since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

Mark 15:33 At the sixth hour darkness came upon the whole land until the ninth hour. 34 And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?*"-- which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" 35 When some of those standing near heard this, they said, "Listen, he's calling Elijah." 36 One man ran, filled a sponge with wine vinegar, put it on a stick, and offered it to Jesus to drink. "Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to take him down," he said. 37 With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last. 38 The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. 39 And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, saw how he breathed his last, he said, "Surely this man was the Son of God!"

## Summary

The people assumed Jesus would call on Elijah and that if Elijah came, he would take Jesus down from the cross. That was their idea of salvation. When they started their experiment, Jesus immediately gave up his life. Then God showed his idea of salvation. Two responses to Jesus' death. 1) The curtain was torn like the heavens, picturing God bursting out to save people. 2) The first person God claimed was the Centurion, who confessed Jesus as the Son of God in the theological climax of the gospel.

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