

Matthew 27:55-56, 61; 28:1-2, 7-9

Introduction

Last week we came to the single moment that explains and makes sense of Jesus' entire life. Jesus *came* not to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many. So last week, we watched as darkness covered all the land and the wrath of God was poured out upon His beloved Son. We watched as Jesus cried out after three hours of this darkness, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken Me?" We watched as the innocent took the punishment of the guilty. And then we watched as Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit. He was the priest and the sacrifice. He offered up Himself to God – for us.

And then the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. God would no longer fellowship and commune with His people at the temple, with all of its protective barriers, but rather now *in Christ* where there are no walls or curtains. The tearing of the temple curtain means that *at the cross*, the penalty for the sins of all God's people was finally, and fully, and completely satisfied, once and for all, and forever.

"The curtain of the temple was torn in two... and the earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened. And many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised." The wages of sin is death. But if even a few of the saints have now been raised to resurrection life with glorified, incorruptible bodies, then the power of death must be broken and the penalty for the sins of *all* God's people finally, and fully, and completely satisfied, once and for all, and forever.

This is the awesome power of the cross. At the cross, our salvation was not just made possible and then left to the chance of man's "free will." At the cross, our salvation *from beginning to end* was fully accomplished and guaranteed.

"When the centurion and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe and said, 'truly this was the Son of God!'" Some of us would correct the centurion and tell him that this *is* the Son of God. But we should remember that at that moment, Jesus was truly *dead*. "Son of God—slain for us... We stand forgiven at the cross." And now Matthew continues:

I. Matthew 27:55 — There were also many women there, looking on from a distance, who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to him.

So *why* does Matthew tell us this? Why does Mark tell us the same thing – and Luke – and John? After all of the powerful glories of the atonement, and just before the amazing story of Jesus' burial, why are we told that there were women there at the cross looking on from a distance? How does this little fact turn our attention to the *glory of God* in accomplishing our salvation?

In chapter twenty, we learned that the mother of the sons of Zebedee (the mother of James and John) was apparently traveling with Jesus and the disciples on their way to Jerusalem. But other than this, we've never had any indication that there were women among those who were

following Jesus. The only ones we've ever really heard about are the twelve male disciples. But now, suddenly, we're told that at the cross there were—in addition to the soldiers, and the religious leaders, and those passing by—many women looking on from a distance, and that these women have actually followed Jesus all the way from Galilee (more than seventy miles), ministering to His needs. Luke tells us that even when Jesus was going throughout the cities and villages of Galilee, some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities were with Jesus, providing for Jesus and His disciples out of their private means (Luke 8:1-3; cf. Mark 15:40-41). So these women contributed financially as they were able, but they would also have served in meeting the more domestic and practical needs of this itinerant group who had no permanent place to lay their heads (cf. 8:20). We might imagine that they would have taken care of things like washing clothes, and preparing meals, and various other tasks and errands. But Matthew just describes all this very simply as “*ministering to [Jesus].*” Jesus, who affirmed the equal worth and value of all human beings, apparently did not try to turn these women to other “more important” tasks. We should know that the service of these women was *equally* as acceptable and pleasing to God as that of the *twelve disciples*.

But Bruner takes a very different approach when he writes: “Some traditional and conservative students of this text will gladly allow women to ‘follow and serve,’ to pour the coffee, but not to lead and teach... This will not do,” he says, and he then goes on to argue that women should have the same roles in the church as men. What Bruner has utterly failed to understand in this case is the *holy sacredness* of serving – of “pouring the coffee.” Without meaning to, he has treated “pouring the coffee” as though it were in some way of *lesser* importance and of *lesser* value to God. On the other hand, Bruner has *far too highly* esteemed the roles of leading and teaching – as though to lead and teach was not in reality just another *form* of serving – as though the service of those who lead and teach is somehow of *more* worth and value to God than the service of those who “pour the coffee.” Away with such human nonsense! The thinking and reasoning of those who would urge that women *must* be allowed to serve as pastors and elders actually ends up distorting the biblical teaching about humility, and servanthood, and about our true worth and value – not only as women, but also as men. Our worth and fulfillment is not found in our roles or in our jobs, but in the one who has *given* us our roles and jobs and who is pleased to receive from us the exercise of our roles as service and worship offered to Him. This means that in all of my teaching and leading, I am nothing and a nobody – *unless* and *until* God is pleased to receive my teaching and leading as service and worship offered to Him. And this means, in turn, that all of my teaching and leading is of absolutely *no more importance and value* to God than the faithful labors of my wife in keeping the home. When we push for the ordination of women as pastors in the church we're actually only creating a terrible crisis of identity not only for women, but also for men because we're invariably equating roles with *worth*. But how many times does Jesus have to remind us that it is the “last” who will be first, and the “least” who will be greatest? The world has proved overwhelmingly that it has no answer to the question of what it means to be created male and female. And so when the church tries to offer a solution to the world by adopting the world's thinking and ordaining women as pastors, this only opens the door for the very heart of the *Gospel* itself to be compromised and betrayed. Our worth and fulfillment is not found in our roles or jobs, but in the one who has *given* us our roles and who is pleased to receive from us the fulfillment of our roles as service and worship offered to Him. Will we embrace this truth, and live out this truth *by faith* in God's Word?

Matthew tells us that “there were also many women there [at the cross], looking on from a distance, who had followed Jesus from Galilee, *ministering to him*.” This verse can’t be used as a proof text either for or against women’s leadership in the church. But one thing we do know – Jesus didn’t try to turn these women to other “more important” tasks, as though such tasks could possibly have existed. Instead, we can truly know that the quiet service of these women was equally as acceptable and pleasing to **God** as that of the *twelve disciples*. But is this really the main reason that Matthew tells us about the women standing at the cross? We ask again: What is it about the women’s faithful service and devotion that reveals to us the glory of God in accomplishing our *salvation*?

II. Matthew 27:55–56 — There were also many women there, looking on from a distance, who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to him, among whom were Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.

So among the many women who were there, Matthew actually singles out and names three of them. First there was Mary Magdalene. She was probably from the village of Magdala on the westernmost shore of the Sea of Galilee. Luke also tells us of “Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out” (Luke 8:1-3). That’s all we really know of this Mary (she was not the one who anointed Jesus’ feet in Luke chapter seven). Standing with Mary Magdalene was also Mary, the mother of James and Joseph. Some believe that this Mary was Jesus’ mother since John tells us that she was also there at the cross, and since she did have two sons named James and Joseph (13:55). But there are significant reasons to believe that this was actually another Mary of which nothing else is known.¹ The third woman that Matthew mentions along with the two Mary’s is the mother of the sons of Zebedee (the mother of James and John, the disciples of Jesus). If Mark points out the same three women as Matthew does, then the only additional thing we can know about her is that her name was Salome.

Of the “*many women*” who were standing there that day, we know next to nothing, if even anything at all.² But three of them are mentioned here by name. These three women had ministered to Jesus in Galilee and on the long journey to Jerusalem – washing clothes, preparing

¹ First of all, “roughly half of all Jewish women whose names are recorded in Palestine at this time were called [either] Mary or Salome” (Ilan; quoted in France). So a third Mary at the cross would not at all be unlikely. Second of all, James and Joseph were also very, very common names (there were two James’ just in Jesus’ twelve disciples – not including James, the brother of Jesus). So it would not at all be strange to find two Mary’s who both had two sons named James and Joseph. Thirdly, Jesus’ mother actually had four other sons (James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas) and in Matthew’s day the most prominent of these four would probably have been James and Judas (or Jude) who each wrote a book in the New Testament. So wouldn’t it have been more likely for Matthew to say “Mary, the mother of James and Jude,” or even just “Mary, the mother of Jesus” (12:46)? Mark says that she was the mother of James *the younger* (Mark 15:40-41), so it’s possible that she was the mother of James, one of the twelve disciples of Jesus, and that he is called “the younger” to distinguish him from the older and more prominent James, the son of Zebedee). It’s also possible that this Mary was the same as the Mary that John says was there at the cross and who was the wife of Clopas (John 19:25-27). But the main reason that I doubt this Mary is the mother of Jesus is because Matthew refers to her in verse 61 and in 28:1 as “the other Mary.” This seems very unlikely to me as a reference to Jesus’ mother.

² We know from John that among the many other women who were standing there was Jesus’ mother, and His mother’s sister (John 19:25-27). And we can guess from Luke that Joanna the wife of Herod’s steward was also there, and a woman named Susanna (Luke 8:1-3; 24:10).

meals, running errands – and now we see them standing at a distance, watching as Jesus hangs, and suffers, and dies on a Roman cross. They stayed with Jesus to the end.

But where were the twelve disciples? When Jesus was arrested in the garden of Gethsemane, we read that “all the disciples left Him and fled” (26:56). Peter mustered enough courage to follow Jesus into the courtyard of the high priest, only to deny Him three times (26:69-75). It’s only from John’s gospel that we find out that one of the disciples was present at the cross (probably John himself). Otherwise, they had all fled into hiding – as Jesus had told them, “You will all fall away because of me this night” (26:31-32).

But the women were still there. They may not have had as much to fear as the inner circle of Jesus’ disciples (because women wouldn’t have been considered a threat; cf. Blomberg), but nevertheless, they were still there, and that took courage – a courage that had failed the disciples. They would not leave Jesus. They stayed with Him to the very end. They didn’t do anything outwardly heroic. There was nothing they could do. But they showed the depth of their love for Jesus by just *being there*. Bruner gets it right when he says: “The accolade heard by those pleasing the Lord is ‘well done, thou good and *faithful* servant’ (25:21), not ‘thou good and flashy servant.’” Not “thou good and heroic servant.” Just “thou good and faithful servant.” These women were *faithful* because they were truly and simply devoted to Jesus. And so they were not only a rebuke to the twelve disciples, but they have also given to all of us a wonderful and beautiful example to follow. May God cause us to be sincerely, genuinely, and simply devoted to Jesus.

But is this the *main* reason that Matthew has told us about these three women who were standing at the cross? Is there anything about this simple fact of the women’s devotion that sets forth to us the glory of God in accomplishing our salvation?

III. Matthew 27:61; 28:1-2, 7-9

In verses 57-60 Matthew tells about the burial of Jesus’ body by a man named Joseph, from Arimathea. Matthew finishes his account by telling us that Joseph “rolled a great stone to the entrance of the tomb and went away” (27:60). But then, before he moves on to tell about the plotting of the chief priests and the Pharisees, Matthew includes this one simple little note:

- ✓ Matthew 27:60-61 — Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb.

In light of the great events of redemptive that are now unfolding, we might ask again, “Why does this little detail really *matter*?” Why does Matthew tell us that Mary Magdalene and the other Mary (the mother of James and Joseph) were there, sitting opposite the tomb as the body of Jesus was buried (Mark 15:47)? Luke tells us that the women were watching to see how Jesus’ body was laid, and that when they returned home they prepared spices and ointments to anoint Jesus’ body when the Sabbath was over (Luke 23:55-56). And so the two Mary’s *continue* to set for us an example by the *strength* of their simple love and devotion to Jesus. But what is it about these beautiful acts of devotion that reveals to us the wisdom and glory of God in accomplishing our salvation?

Matthew has mentioned these two Mary's twice now (before this, they'd never been mentioned anywhere else in Matthew's Gospel). And now in Matthew 28, Matthew mentions the same two Mary's again, by name, for the third and last time.

- ✓ Matthew 28:1-2 — Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And behold...

Conclusion

It was only the women, specifically Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, with perhaps some others (cf. Luke 23:55-56; 24:10), who were at the cross and who stayed at the cross to the very end, who *also* witnessed the burial of Jesus' body and saw the place where he was laid (Mark 15:47; Luke 23:55), and who *also* first discovered the empty tomb and witnessed the risen Christ (28:8-10). And so it was *the women* whom God sent to tell *the disciples* that Jesus had risen from the dead (28:7). One commentator writes: "At Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection, the three pivotal events in salvation history, the women supply 'the deserted place of the Apostles.'" (Bruner) And so in His wonderful providence and sovereignty, God Himself raised up these faithful and devoted women to be the primary *eyewitnesses* to the redemptive-historical events that changed the entire course of history and upon which the salvation of all God's people depends.

When Matthew (who was *not present* at the sufferings and death of Jesus) had finished recounting the story of Jesus' sufferings and death, he seems to conclude by naming his eyewitness sources.

- ✓ Matthew 27:55-56 — There were also many women there, looking on from a distance, who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to him, among whom were Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.

When Matthew (who was *not present* at the burial of Jesus) had finished recounting the story of Jesus' burial, he seems to conclude once again by naming his eyewitness sources.

- ✓ Matthew 27:60-61 — Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb.

And of course when Matthew (who was *not present* at the first discovery of the empty tomb and the resurrected Jesus), was about to recount the story of the empty tomb and the resurrected Jesus, it was only natural that he should introduce his eyewitness sources one last time.

- ✓ Matthew 28:1-2 — Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And behold...

Calvin says: "Let us observe, that it proceeded from the inconceivable goodness of God, that even to us should come that gospel which speaks of the [atonement] by which God has been reconciled to us. For during the general desertion of those who ought to have run before others,

God encouraged [these women who]... should be witnesses to us of that history, without the belief of which we cannot be saved.” By the living out of their simple devotion and faithfulness to Jesus, these women, without ever meaning to, were used by God as eyewitnesses to the facts of redemption upon which every one of us here now depends for our faith (cf. Hendriksen).

On the one hand, we see the wonderful example of the women – not in any heroic deeds, but in quiet, steadfast devotion. They had long been serving behind the scenes, joyfully content to “pour the coffee.” And now when God appoints *them* as the primary eyewitnesses of His beloved Son’s death, burial, and resurrection, He is not calling them up to something “better” or to something more “important.” He is rather demonstrating His supreme pleasure and delight in what they have already been doing all along the way (washing the clothes, preparing the meals, running the errands, pouring the coffee). What matters is not the lot we’ve received in life or what roles we’ve been given to fulfill, but rather our faithfulness to fulfill whatever those roles may be as an expression of simple devotion to Jesus. What matters is just the knowledge that God is pleased to receive from us the obedient fulfillment of our roles as a sweet and fragrant sacrifice of worship.

- ✓ 1 Corinthians 10:31 — So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.
- ✓ Colossians 3:17 — And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

On the one hand, we see the wonderful example of the women. But on the other hand we see the wonderful glory of God in preserving for us an eyewitness testimony to those three events upon which our very salvation and faith depends (cf. 1 Cor. 15:3-4).

Now the women were eyewitness to the *facts*, but we know that only God’s Spirit can testify to what those facts actually *mean*. We don’t finally believe unto salvation because of the testimony of human eyewitnesses, but because of the testimony of God through His Word and Spirit (cf. 1 John 5:6-12). In the same way, no one ever doubts or disbelieves because of a lack of evidence, but because he would rather make God a liar than submit to His sovereign authority over all (cf. 1 John 5:6-12). So knowing this, the fact that the testimony of women was largely considered at that time to be unreliable and “incompetent witness” (Carson; Bruner; cf. Luke 24:10-11) was actually *all the more reason* for God to appoint *women* as the chief eyewitnesses of His salvation.

- ✓ 1 Corinthians 1:26–28 — For consider [our] calling, brothers [and sisters]: not many of [us] were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are.

May the living of our lives be the constant expression of simple devotion to Jesus, so that regardless of the “weak” and “foolish” vessels we may be, He may somehow use even us for the furtherance of His great glory.