

The Spectacle of Christ

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This morning we'll be looking at the Easter story in a very interesting set of verses in the Gospel of Matthew. And what I'd like to do is invite you to relive the narrative or, perhaps for the first time, get into the narrative by looking at Jesus from three different perspectives: the passerby, the religious leader, and the Roman centurion. You might say the casual observer, the religiously invested, and the indifferent secularist. Each has a unique perspective on Jesus as he hangs on the cross. See which one you identify with, which one makes the most sense of the events in the story: the passerby, the religious, and the centurion.

Passerby

We pick up pretty late in the story of Jesus this morning, so let me catch you up a bit. Jesus has entered Jewish society making a very controversial claim—that he is the *Son of God*. It's controversial because Caesar claimed very the same title, albeit with a mythological flavor. But its also was attached to a story of deliverance among the Jews. The story went something like this. At the end of time, the Son of God would come to earth and overthrow the enemies of Israel. Then, he would raise everyone from the dead to be judged—destroying the wicked and delivering the righteous

into God's newly renovated creation. There, the Son of God would rule securing joy and peace forever and ever. Sounds pretty good, unless you're Rome. Now Jesus, claiming to be the Son of God, adds a wrinkle to the story. Instead of overthrowing the wicked, he submits to the wicked. He's betrayed by a friend to religious leaders, endures a mock trial, a Roman trial, is found innocent but handed over to the Jews for crucifixion. We pick up the story where Jesus is dying a tortuous Roman death, nailed to two pieces of wood, reserved for criminals of the state: "And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying, "You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross" (39-40). Roman crucifixions occurred along the dusty, well-traveled roads to remind people of the high cost of crime against the Roman Empire. Here we have the perspective of **passersby**, probably nominal Jews not really invested, but have heard the word on the street; Jesus claiming to be the Son of God, and that he'd destroy the temple and raise it up again, which would be quite an architectural feat. But Jesus privately disclosed this was a statement about his own body. So here's Jesus, hanging to the death, on the cusp of a self-fulfilling prophecy, and the passersby are incredulous. It's actually worse; they're *deriding* him. The word deride is the word to *blaspheme*; to blaspheme is to slander something sacred. We might think of someone graffiti-ing a

church, or using Jesus' name as a curse word. That kind of gets at it, defacing or bringing Christ down. It's essentially saying, "Jesus has no place here." He's ordinary. It's banishing him from your life, saying Jesus has no power or right to tell me how to live my life, run my business, spend my money, or how I know God. The passerby isn't really antagonistic; they just know better. They "wag their heads." When someone cuts in front of you in traffic, and you wag your head, what are we saying? "That was a stupid move." We're saying we know better. Not just that we know better that we *are* better. It's a way to put someone down (while putting yourself up). You could say the passersby are putting Jesus down to put themselves up. If they downgrade him, they don't really have to deal with him. They can find significance *above the cross* not in the cross. So they throw out a stab, "[If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.](#)"

Religious Leaders

The next perspective we get is of the **religious** leaders. These are the people who know the story, who pride themselves on having the right doctrine, on being in places of religious influence. People that know best, that if Jesus is true, they'd know it, they've be on the inside. How do they respond? "[He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the](#)

cross, and we will believe in him” (42). Since they’ve got more invested; they take it up a notch, taunting Jesus. King of Israel! Sure, he saved others; he healed the blind, the sick and the lame. But if you’d just come down off the cross, then we’d believe. Remember, they’re looking for a Son of God who’s got power and might to overthrow the wicked Romans. And they’re showing that they really don’t know the story of Israel like they think they do. See, they overlooked all the passages that expose their *need* for a *suffering* Son of God, one who atones for their sins: “*he was pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities*” (Isa 53:5). They never conceived that they might be the wicked. Self-righteous. Power-hungry. And they miss the redemptive wrinkle in the story. Instead, they demand more evidence, and there’s nothing wrong with wanting evidence, but more evidence isn’t really going to change their mind. *Why? Because they’re on a power trip. The influence and knowledge has gone to their head* Listen: “**let God deliver him now, if he desires him**” (43). Now they’re putting God on the stand, bossing God around, down to the minute. Let God deliver him *now*. They presume upon God’s timing, and God’s desires. Dangerous ground. God if you get me out of this mess, I’ll follow you. God if you appear in front of me I’ll believe in you. Making demands of God. The religious become skeptic also standing above the cross, but higher, they’ve put themselves above God. Who are we to put God on the

stand? As if God would never disagree with us? To make demands of God? Where's the **fear of God**? We all know a little fear does everyone good. Keeps your hand away from the flame. But we've blown the roof off of reverence. There is no more sacred. I am sacred says the modern self, the self-righteous religious person. What we all need, the casual observer and the religiously invested, is a little more fear. Blaise Pascal, the philosopher, once said, "Are you afraid; don't be afraid. If you're not afraid, be afraid." At the end of the Gospel, the mighty, resurrected Christ appears to his disciples, and we're told that "*many worshipped/feared/adored but some doubted.*" See, it's possible to have all the evidence in the world, the risen Christ standing in front of you, and still not believe. You know why? Belief isn't just a matter of the head; it's a matter of the heart. It's fear and facts. It's standing underneath the cross, and saying, "I need you." They remain fearless.

Spectacle of Abandonment

Suddenly, there's a scene change. Darkness covers the land, for three full hours. Jesus lets out a great cry, "[Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?](#)" that is, "[My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?](#)" (46). Who is this man that signs of judgment accompany his death? The last the heavens changed and a voice appeared, it was with a bright cloud and God the Father's approving words at Jesus' transfiguration,

"This is my Son in whom I am well pleased." Here we have the opposite. Foreboding. People who don't know Hebrew/Aramaic (which are blended in his agony) mistake his words of lament for words of summons, as if Jesus were summoning Elijah the prophet from heaven to come to his aid. But Jesus is denying his spectacle of scorn in favor of another spectacle; he will create his own. A spectacle of **abandonment**: *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* With this cry, Jesus identifies with every isolated, abandoned person. Jesus cried. In a loud voice. With genuine sorrow. As the clouds darkened, passersby and the religious, must have wondered, "What's really happening?" Jesus refuses the numbing sour wine, saving his wits to the end. He repeats, My God, my God. It's urgent not distant, imploring, and personal. You have forsaken me. Forsaken. The word means *"to separate connection with someone,"* to abandon them. Why would God, the Father abandon his Son? Has he done something wrong? Did Jesus just "feel" abandoned, when in reality he is not? What are we to make of his words? It would be blasphemous to speculate. We must go with the words of Christ, and accept that Jesus experienced real abandonment, which leads us back to "Why?" Jesus cries a second loud cry and prematurely gives up his spirit. **And behold the temple curtain was torn in two, from top to bottom.** *Why?* The temple curtain separated the holy of holies, from the holy place; the presence of God, from the rest of the

temple. Only the high priest could go into the holy of holies. In fact, he wore a rope around his foot so that, if he was unclean and was struck dead, his body could be dragged out without going in. And when Jesus dies, the curtain falls. Why? Jesus is fulfilling Israel's story; he's just doing it early. Judgment day has been rolled back into the middle of history, falling not on the wicked but on the innocent, on Christ, to make a way for fearless, deriding, demanding wicked people. To open up a way for all to enter the holy of holies, to enjoy God's presence and grace. Remember the earlier demand by the religious leaders, "*If you're the Son of God...let God deliver him now, if he desires him...*" If the Father desires the Son, but the Father did not desire him (he abandoned him), or if he did desire him, he had to desire *something more* in that moment (1 Tim 2). What more could he desire? **You. He was willing to part with his Son temporarily to have you eternally.** God the Father desires *you, you* to receive his forgiveness, *you* to encounter his love, *you* to enjoy his grace, *you* to join his family. If Jesus had done what they demanded, and come down from the cross, **would have averted the greatest act of love in human history.** The Son of God rejected so we could be accepted; abandoned so we could be embraced. *Jesus put his neck in the noose because he desired, more than the comforts of heaven, salvation on earth; more than union with the Father union with you;*

to confer on you significance, love, and joy that no other person or thing could ever confer!

The Centurion: Spectacle of Grace

The final perspective: “**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”** (54). The centurion, commander of a hundred soldiers, had no reason to fear a bleeding Jew. But how does he respond? Awe. Holy fear of God. The disinterested secularist has what neither the casual Jew nor invested leader had, and the least reason to have it—*the fear of God*. Ever consider the relevance of fear? Fear keeps you from harm, from burning your hand in the flame. But fear also shows you what’s great. The fire. Everyone needs fear. Fear teaches us to revere the flame, not to blaspheme its power. Fearlessness can force us to do foolish things, like stand above the cross, put God in the dock, but fearfulness puts you below the cross, under the cascading love of God. Your judgment falling on Jesus. Beneath the cross there is grace: “*T’ws grace that taught my heart to fear and grace my fears relived.*” **Pascal**. Standing below the cross, he saw clearly, “**Truly, this was the Son of God!**” Three days later, Jesus rises from the dead, conquering sin, death, and evil. To show us another grace, that **resurrection** not just judgment, is rolled back from the

end of history. And it is so powerful, and so true, that his victory over death was accompanied by “many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many” (52-3). No other Gospel writer includes this detail. Why is it here? To reinforce the resurrection to them and to us. The resurrected saints went into the holy city and “appeared” to many. Why? To show off their new body? Perhaps they were competing with Jesus for messianic status? The text says “*after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared.*” Jesus’ resurrection is so unique it *triggers* other resurrections. He is the firstborn from the dead (Col 1:19) but he is not the only one. The saints go into the city to “appear”; it means “to explain,” to explain that you too can be resurrected, given new life, in Christ. The risen are there, not as contenders but as witnesses, that Jesus brings, not just a new verdict but also a new day. Put faith in Jesus and he will resurrect you, and when he returns, a whole new body fit for his whole new world. *The centurion took Christ at his word. Will you? Will you stand above the cross, head wagging, above God, demanding, or below the cross arms wide open, Truly this is the Son of God? Will you receive his mercy? Will you tremble at his greatness? If you do, you’ll get the rest of the story.*