

Words of Comfort and Loyalty

Writers of the four gospel accounts, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, give us a record of the words that Jesus spoke when he was hanging on the cross—seven statements in all. The third one is perhaps the most touching scene and the most tender of all of the scenes that we have from Calvary. It's the scene when Jesus looks at his mother and said "Woman behold thy Son," and then to John the beloved disciple, "behold thy mother." This is a beautiful and touching scene of comfort and of loyalty.

"When the soldiers crucified Jesus, they took his clothes, dividing them into four shares, one for each of them, with the undergarment remaining. This garment was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom. 'Let's not tear it,' they said to one another. 'Let's decide by lot who will get it.' This happened that the scripture might be fulfilled which said, 'They divided my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing.' So this is what the soldiers did. Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. 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,' and to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' From that time on, the disciple took her into his home." (John 19:23-27)

There were four soldiers who crucified Jesus who divided his clothing into four different parts. But to help us understand the pattern of what's happening let's step back a little bit in history and look at some of the Jewish customs of dress as well as some of the Roman customs that surrounded crucifixion.

A Jewish man typically wore five pieces of clothing. He had first of all a headpiece, maybe a turban or some kind of cloth. You've seen pictures on your television before of the kind of headgear people in the Far East and Middle East wear to keep their hair out of their face and in place. It was a traditional headpiece that has been worn for centuries.

But the Jewish male would have on some type of shoe, usually a leather sandal. A third piece of garment would be a long robe, generally with a slit in the top, sometimes completely open or slit down the sides. It hung down close to the ankles and was a loose fitting garment.

The fourth piece of clothing was his girdle or his belt as we would call it. It was either another piece of cloth, or sometimes a piece of leather used to tie around his waist. This kept the long, flowing outer garment from just blowing away, and yet allowed it to be loose. Lastly a Jewish man wore an undergarment. In the case of Jesus, it was seamless made out of one piece of cloth woven from top to bottom.

Customarily, that undergarment was made by a mother and given to her son when he reached maturity, when he came into his own adulthood. More than likely, that's exactly what Mary had done for Jesus. Now remember because it will come into play in just a moment.

The Romans also had some customs regarding the crucifixion. There were five Roman soldiers always assigned to the crucifixion duty. Four were given the responsibility to actually drive the nails and pull the cross into position. But after the cross was in its standing and upright position, they formed kind of a four-cornered guard post. If there was any kind of threat, then they were the ones there to protect the victim as he was on the cross to die a painful death.

The soldier who was responsible for the other four was the Centurion. He was supervising the crucifixion. One of the benefits that came to the four soldiers was that they could divide up whatever clothing the victim might be wearing that day. That's what they were doing with Jesus' clothing as He hung there naked and humiliated. They were gambling for his clothes.

The problem was Jesus probably had five pieces of clothing but only four soldiers. The centurion apparently didn't get involved in this activity. Therefore, one took the headpiece, one took his sandals, one took his outer garment and one took his belt. But who would get the fifth garment, the undergarment? How do they decide? John tells us in order to decide which one of the four would get that undergarment by casting lots or gamble for it. We might say they were throwing dice to see which one of them was actually going to get the undergarment. No doubt they did not know but John tells us, they were actually fulfilling a prophecy of David recorded in Psalm 22:18.

So, with that kind of background in place, knowing the customs of how Jewish men dressed and knowing something of the customs of the Romans soldiers as they crucified their victims, let's come back now to the scene and see if it makes a little more sense.

There were others present at the crucifixion besides the soldiers who crucified him and the jeering mob who were yelling insults at him. At least one of His disciples who had deserted him returned. John was with Mary and at least three other women. There must have been a bit of a dangerous thing for those four women to be there around the cross with Jesus. After all, for a man to be considered such a criminal that the Roman government would deem him worthy of being crucified, makes him the kind of person that you probably don't want to be around for fear something might happen to you. After all, isn't that why all the other disciples fled? Even after Jesus had been resurrected and ascended into heaven, the apostles all gathered in the Upper Room in Jerusalem afraid to even go out for fear that probably the same thing might happen to them?

Yet here these women were there out of their love and devotion for Jesus Christ, really not caring very much about the potential danger. Who were those three other women? One of them was Mary, the wife of Clopas. Now we have no idea who she was other than she was the wife of Clopas. We don't have any other information about her, but she was one who loved Jesus.

Another woman was according to Matthew the mother of the sons of Zebedee, James and John; according to Mark Salome and according to John the sister of Jesus' mother. Thus, James and John were Jesus' first cousins. Do you remember something about Salome, something that she had done earlier in the ministry of Jesus? She was the one who came to Jesus and said to him, "Lord, when you establish your kingdom, I want you to give thrones, one on your right-hand and one on your left-hand to my sons, James and John." Jesus' response was a loving rebuke as that kind of self-centered ambition was not the way the kingdom was to be. As a matter of fact, Salome had no idea the kind of problems that were going to come and the price that would be paid by his disciples at a later date.

The third woman is identified as Mary of Magdala, the woman out of whom Jesus had cast evil spirits. She was so grateful for what Jesus had done that she could never forget it. She didn't really care that there was danger at the cross. She loved her Lord and she could never lose her gratitude for what Jesus had done for her. So, she is right there at the foot of the cross.

But then there is one other woman named, actually she's named first even though we are discussing her last. It was his mother, Mary. Though Mary had been there all along, she **is** introduced to us in conjunction with the undergarment that we read just a moment ago. Look again at the text and you'll see after the undergarment is mentioned; it's at that point when his undergarment is being gambled for that Jesus then speaks to his mother. Apparently when the soldiers touched that undergarment, they touched something that was very near and dear to his heart as well as to his mother's heart because more than likely she had made that undergarment for Jesus. Little wonder then as they were gambling for that undergarment, he would turn and address his beloved mother.

Maybe Mary was not able to understand all that was going on at that time. I doubt she was. But she was able to love him; after all, that was her son—that was her firstborn son. Is there anything like a mother's love in all the world? I don't think there is. Can you imagine what Mary must have been experiencing as she stood there at the foot of the cross, seeing her son, her firstborn hanging, dying, bleeding, suffering, struggling for every breath? He was the one conceived by the Holy Spirit that the angel said would be called the Son of God. You'd think that no one would want to stand and watch that, but that was his mother and that was her boy. She had to be there, it's the most natural thing in the world for her to be there as painful as it was. Jesus might be a criminal in the eyes of the law, Jesus was still her son.

Think of all the things that Mary had seen, all the things that she had heard, and all the things that she had experienced up to this point. When Jesus was only eight days old, do you remember she and Joseph took Baby Jesus to the temple? They were going to dedicate him, and it was time for his circumcision. They took him to the temple where Simeon, a wise old godly man to whom the Holy Spirit had made a promise stating "Simeon, you will not die until you see the Messiah." Upon seeing Jesus Simeon realized that the promise had been fulfilled. It was the Son of God. "Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: 'This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.'" (Luke 2:34-35)

Do you think Mary had any idea what Simeon was talking about when Jesus was eight days old, when he said to her, "And a sword will pierce your soul too?" I doubt it very seriously. But she lived to see her worst fears come true. She lived to see her son, who came to give his life for all, have a sword pierce his side. Mary lived to see the day when they drove nails in his hands. She lived to see the day when they shoved that crown of thorns down upon his brow. She lived to see the day when he breathed his last. It cost Mary greatly to submit to God's will, didn't it? Think of all the various incidences that must have been running through her mind as she stood there at the foot of the cross and watched Jesus die. Now had come the time when the ultimate plan of God was coming to pass for her firstborn son. Jesus would be a martyr and he would die for the sins of the whole world.

Notice something else about Mary. It would be easy to miss it. It says Mary was standing there. She stood. She didn't faint, she didn't fall. Outwardly she was still that same calm woman who had met the salutation of the angel some three decades earlier. She said to that angel, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it unto me according to thy word," Mary still showed that same kind of strength. So at this day she entered into her son's great suffering and she drank the cup right down to the bitter dreges.

It must have been a shock to all those people who heard Jesus shout, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" What a painful shock that must have been; but it didn't crush anybody's heart anymore than it crushed Mary's. She stood there and listened to that. Never has sorrow presented itself in a form more touching than we see in the life of Mary. But even in all of his bitter anguish, who is he concerned about? He's concerned about his mother, isn't he? Seeing her standing with John by her side, he said to his mother, "Dear woman," as the King James has it, "Behold thy son, here is your son." Now surely that was Jesus' way of saying to her and to John, that John was now going to take responsibility for Mary. Jesus' earthly life was about over and someone needed to take care of her. Though she was strong, she was going to need support. John was the one Jesus trusted to provide that support.

Perhaps it seems a little bit strange, but there was nobody there from her immediate family to help. Why did Jesus have to give that responsibility to John? Apparently, Joseph, her husband, had died. We don't know that for sure, but we don't have any mention of the name of Joseph after Jesus was 12 years old. So Mary is probably a widow. Jesus couldn't call on any of his brothers to come and take care of his mother because although she believed in him, John tells us that none of his brothers yet believed that he was the Christ. Apparently, none of them were around, they were long gone. They may never have even been there at all. So, he looks to John, his beloved friend, and says, "John, take care of this woman, she's your mother."

The Bible tells us that all the disciples deserted Jesus. But John was at the cross, standing at the very foot of the cross. Who knows where the other 11 or the other 10 were? Judas had killed himself, the other 10 were in hiding somewhere, but John was right there loyal to Jesus. Jesus knew he could trust John. So as John stands beside Mary, the mother of Jesus, Jesus says to John, "John, I know I can trust you. You are loyal to me, and you will be as loyal to my mother as you've been to me. I want you to take care of her." What a compliment that was to John. It meant more than just providing a roof over her head; it meant taking responsibility for her. The last time Mary is mentioned in the New Testament is in the book of Acts when she is in the presence of other disciples who are waiting for the gift of the Holy Spirit, but the Bible tells us that she's there with John. So, John is living up to the trust that Jesus put in him.

It's a powerful story; it's only part of the story, that's only one of the seven statements. There's so much richness in this scene of the death of Jesus Christ. But let's try to make three brief applications from this:

1. **Grace is extended to those who fail.** If there is one thing in John's life that he would like to have gone back and been able to undo and erase, it would have been the time when he too, like all the others, deserted Jesus, but he couldn't erase that.

Aren't you glad that when John made that mistake, the Lord didn't say "Okay John, you had your shot at it, but you messed up, just sit down. You're out." His grace was more than sufficient for John and he accepted John back and even gave him this blessed responsibility of caring for his mother. Folks, when you fail—not if you fail, but when you fail and we all will and we all do — turn back to Jesus like John did because our Lord is a Lord who is gracious and who will accept us back and restore us.

2. **Water is thicker than blood.** Now we've all heard that old expression: "Blood is thicker than water," In Jesus "Water is thicker than blood." The reference I'm trying to make is through the waters of baptism one comes in contact with the blood of Jesus Christ. When we confess our sins, express our belief in Jesus Christ and are buried in water baptism for the forgiveness of our sins, we are brought up, resurrected, out of that water a new life, creation. We become Christians. We become brothers

and sisters of each other and of the Lord Jesus Christ. A new relationship is formed as we are born in water into a far more precious and far more powerful relationship than even than our own blood relationships. We who have been washed in the blood of Jesus Christ in the waters of baptism know that oftentimes, water is thicker than blood.

3. **Never get beyond the call to honor our parents.** Paul wrote "Children, obey your parents in the name of the Lord, for this is right—Honor your father and mother which is the first commandment with a promise—that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth." (Ephesians 6:1-3) Jesus, even in his dying moments, paid honor and tribute to his dear sweet mother. No matter what the circumstances might be for us, or what they might be for our parents, we never get too old, never get too sophisticated and never get beyond the call to honor our father and mother. Jesus, even in his dying moments, displays that very truth. Amazing Grace Lesson #1253 Steve Flatt March 10, 1996