

Behold Thy Son — Behold Thy Mother • John 19:25–47

For the third of Jesus' seven last words from the cross, I invite your attention to John 19:25-27:

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, this disciple took her into his home."

Suppose that you were a loving son about to die who had a last opportunity to make a conscious statement to your mother. What do you think you'd say? Might you thank her for all the things that she's done for you in your lifetime. Might you say thank you for being kind to me, for sticking with me when others gave up, for loving me when nobody else cared, for hanging in there when everybody else left me alone.

Or might you be more spiritual about it? Might you say, "Mother, I know that soon we'll be parting, but soon also we'll joined together once again. It won't be too long until, by God's goodness, we will be together in the glories of heaven. Goodbye, Mother."

Or might you simply say, "Mom, there's just one thing I want you to remember and that is that I love you."

Well, Jesus said nothing of the sort. Nothing quite so seemingly spiritual or touching or anything like that at all. In fact, as he hung dying on the cross he saw his mother and his very best friend, John, and he turned and looked at them and simply said, "Dear woman, here is your son," and to John, "Here us your mother."

It seems, at least in initial reading, kind of cold and impersonal, almost strange, that Jesus should say these words and then that John, to whom at least some of these words were spoken, should choose to record them. It would seem to be almost an embarrassment that John should have to tell other people that Jesus was so cool and impersonal in this third of the seven last words at the cross and, in particular, the ones spoken to his mother.

To better understand what here took place, we have to remember that, when a man was crucified, he could not say very much. In the whole process of

crucifixion, there was asphyxiation beginning. It was difficult for a man to speak, every breath was precious, and every word was carefully measured and counted. So not much could be said. So maybe what we need to do is dig a little bit deeper with the hope that maybe here we can discover the hidden lessons from Jesus when he used that little remaining precious breath to speak these few seemingly strange words.

Hidden lessons. Like the lesson that Jesus' family had problems. Now, maybe you find that kind of surprising. We would imagine that if ever there were a family that should have been trouble-free, it would be the family of Mary and Joseph and Jesus, that holy family. And yet when we start to page through the Bible we start to find something quite to the contrary. It is, indeed, difficult to find very many positive things about this family. We tend instead to find a preponderance of difficult things, of problems, of troubles. Let's look at them.

Personal problems lead the list. Now, keep in mind that we don't know a great deal about the family of Mary and Joseph. We don't know, for example, how old Mary was or how old Joseph was when Jesus was born. We can guess from some inferences here and there, some implications. For example, we know that the marrying age, the age of adulthood, in Jewish society was usually around 12 or 13, particularly for a girl. So, if Mary was of typical marrying age or in that range when she was impregnated by the Holy Spirit and bore Jesus, then perhaps she was 12 or 13 years old. Often the man was older, sometimes considerably older. Scholars have guessed that Joseph probably was a great deal older because he apparently died early in the marriage or at least long before Jesus reached adulthood.

What was it like? Let's go back to the Christmas story and take a look at Luke 1:26-35. Here are words that have significant impact in our understanding of what happened on the cross.

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In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said,

...every breath was precious, and every word was carefully measured and counted. So not much could be said.

“Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.”

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, “Don’t be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.”

“How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?”

The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God..”

We tend to read the Christmas story from the perspective of heaven, or at least from the perspective of the 21st Century, and to heaven it was a great blessing, a fantastic statement. “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.” And Gabriel himself was sent to deliver that message.

But to Mary it may well have seemed more like a practical curse than an actual blessing from heaven. Imagine. Imagine being a 12 or 13-year-old girl, confronted by an angel who tells you that you are going to be made pregnant by God. How do you handle something like that? Mary was a simple peasant girl.

And then she had to explain to Joseph and to her mother and to her father and to her neighbors and to her school friends and everybody else that an angel, Gabriel, came and told her this story. We don’t find Mary jumping up and down for joy or clapping her hands in glee. In verse 29 it says that she was greatly troubled at his words.

And that was only the beginning of her troubles. The troubles continued. It wasn’t long after that, to fulfill prophecy and because of what was happening in the taxation of society under the Roman rule, that she had to move—full term pregnant, across country, from Nazareth to Bethlehem. And when she got there, there was no place to stay, and her baby had to be born in a stable. And, if that wasn’t enough, her privacy was invaded by complete strangers - shepherds whom she had never met, wise men who came from a different country and spoke a different language.

Things continued to get worse and her troubles mounted when King Herod issued an edict that all the boy babies would be killed. She escaped that, but

what about her friends? What about the other mothers who had babies then? What about all of those that she knew, all those that she shared her joy with? They must have hated her for bringing this upon their families if they knew that Jesus had anything to do with it. They must have communicated that hate.

And then Mary and her family had another move to another country, to another language, to another job, to all kinds of new problems and difficulties. You see, life was not easy for the family of Jesus. It was loaded with trouble from before the time he was born, personal problems.

Sometimes we think that when we are associated with Jesus Christ our personal problems simply disappear, that from that day on there are no personal difficulties that we as believers face. But both experience and the record of the Bible says it is not always that way.

It was not just personal problems, there were in that family relational problems as well. The few times that we see a little glimpse of Jesus’ relationship with his family, we see some relational strains.

Take a look again in your Bibles at Luke 2:41-51. You may recall the story of how Jesus officially came to that time of manhood, his bar mitzvah, and he was in Jerusalem, and the family was treating him as an adult and assuming that he would travel with them back to Nazareth. But then Mary and Joseph discovered that Jesus wasn’t along with them and so they went back and had to find him. In verse 48 we read: “When his parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him, ‘Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you.’”

She sounds just like a mother, just the way she says that!

And he said to them, “ ‘Why were you searching for me? Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?’ But they did not understand what he was saying to them.”

The relationships in the family must have been strained. It hardly could have been easy to raise a child who was the Son of God, to have a stepson who was the Son of God, to have a brother who was the Son of God.

It continues in the well-known story of John, chapter 2, in the first miracle of Jesus at Cana in Galilee. You remember that there was a wedding feast. Jesus was there, and they run out of wine. Mary wanted Jesus to do something about it, but, with a coolness that makes us uncomfortable, he said, “Dear woman, why do you involve me? My time has not

yet come.” And Mary again must have been embarrassed in front of everyone to have Jesus speak to her that way.

Or take a look at Matthew 13:53-58. In this case it’s Jesus’ first sermon in the synagogue, the local synagogue in Nazareth, the place where they all went to church on the Sabbath day. It was time for Jesus, who was increasingly well known, to speak in the synagogue at home to the people whom everybody in the family knew. And so he did.

When Jesus had finished these parables, he moved on from there. Coming to his hometown, he began teaching the people in their synagogue, and they were amazed.

“Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?” they asked. “Isn’t this the carpenter’s son? Isn’t his mother’s name Mary, and aren’t his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas? Aren’t all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?” And they took offense at him.

But Jesus said to them, “Only in his hometown and in his own house is a prophet without honor.”

And he did not do many mighty works there because of their lack of faith.

Again, you can only begin to imagine what it must have been like after church that Sabbath day when they went back home and when they had their Sabbath day dinner. When his brothers and sisters were in conversation, would they have been embarrassed because they had told everybody to come and hear Jesus. He’s doing miracles, and he’s saying mighty things. And then everybody’s friends said, “He isn’t so great. I didn’t see him do any miracles.”

It would be kind of like having somebody who leaves and goes away to another place, maybe your son. And he comes back and shares publicly what he’s been doing

and everybody starts saying about your son, “You know, I don’t know what everybody is so excited about—he didn’t seem that good to me. I don’t know why everybody is going to hear him. You know, what’s the big deal with your son, anyway? Who does your brother think he is? What’s this all about?”

One more place to look is in Luke, chapter 8. Maybe this is the most pressing of all of the difficul-

ties in family relationships. Jesus is preaching and Mary and the family come together and Jesus is so busy, in Luke 8:19-21, that they can’t even get an appointment with him. So verse 19 says:

Now Jesus’ mother and brothers came to see him, but they were not able to get near him because of the crowd. Someone told him, “Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to see you.”

He replied, “My mother and brothers are those who hear God’s word and put it into practice.”

Once again, what do you think it was like? What do you think the conversation was as they left and couldn’t even get an appointment to see Jesus? Do you think they were saying kind and warm things about him? Do you think that helped family relationships, that they couldn’t even manage to see their popular son and brother?

Now I do not want by any means to give the impression that Jesus treated his family sinfully because he did not. But understand that it wasn’t easy to have God for your son, to have God for your brother. As Jesus reached adulthood, his mission, his calling, that which God had sent him to do, was not primarily focused in that little nuclear family. He was called to redeem Israel, to redeem the world, and so his ministry from age 12 onward was like a flower that was blossoming open to all the world and was not any longer limited to a little household in Nazareth.

But it wasn’t just personal problems and it wasn’t just relational problems, there were financial problems in that family, too. You may remember that after

Jesus was born and after the ritual time of purification had taken place, Mary took Jesus to the Temple and there he was to be presented. The Old Testament law was explicit that at that time when a son, particularly a first-born son, was presented

at the Temple that a lamb was to be sacrificed. But maybe you remember reading in Luke, chapter 2, that Mary and Joseph didn’t sacrifice a lamb, but instead they sacrificed a pair of turtle doves and two pigeons. That’s a far cry from a lamb. But there was a provision in the law, it’s back in the Old Testament in Leviticus 12:8, that if people were so absolutely poor that they couldn’t afford one lamb to sacrifice

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for their first-born son, it was okay for those poorest of poor to instead sacrifice turtle doves and pigeons. Jesus was born into one poor, poor, poor family. They couldn't even afford a lamb.

Now today in our society, fortunately, we have many, many provisions to help the poor, perhaps not enough. We have government assistance and we have our own savings and we have social security and Medicare and Medicaid and all kinds of things. But in those days there were none of those things, particularly for those who couldn't work.

By the time Jesus was 30 years old, Joseph had probably died leaving Mary a widow. And as you read through the Bible you find repeatedly the exhortation to take care of widows. You know why? Because usually widows had only a couple of means of subsistence left and often those were begging and prostitution. And so the church was called upon to care for widows, and Mary was in that category. She was poor. She was poor from the time she was married until the time she was widowed.

Poor people don't save for the next day. Poor people are grateful if they can make it through that day! And so there were financial problems that pressed in upon them.

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Well, maybe you've identified with some of these things. That's because you've had problems in your family, because you've had personal problems. Maybe you've never thought about Jesus' family having problems, too. Or maybe there have been relational problems in your household where parents and children or brothers and sisters haven't gotten along with one another. Maybe you take a certain level of comfort in finding out that the household of Jesus Christ was not exempt from the difficulties that we all struggle with.

Or maybe for you it's been financial. Maybe ends have not been meeting. Maybe you're widowed or a single parent or perhaps you are unemployed or savings are running out or you have to fall back upon the good will of others.

But you know what is the greatest problem of all? For Christians, the toughest of all problems is spiritual. That's harder for us than all of the others put together. Do you have children who are not saved? Who do not know Jesus Christ as personal savior? Or maybe it's a brother or sister or mom or dad who are unbelievers. Did you know that Jesus' family had the same problem you have? Did you know that?

Jesus had at least four brothers and two sisters.

Let's look at Mark 6:3 because their names are given there. It's a parallel passage to what we have already read in Matthew. It says, "Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James..." - that's one brother - "and Joseph..." actually, in other translations you will have Joseph or Joseph Junior, the son was named after his father Joseph - "and Judas..." - who is also known in the Bible as Jude [this isn't Judas Iscariot], "and Simon? Aren't his sisters [plural] here with us?"

So we know that Jesus had four brothers and at least two sisters, although Matthew refers to all of his sisters. If there are two sisters, you usually say both of them, you don't usually say all of them. So perhaps there were at least three or four sisters, as well as those four brothers.

But one of the tragic verses is over in John 7:5. It describes the ministry of Jesus and all that was happening, and it says, "For even his own brothers did not believe in him." Can you imagine that heartache? Did you know that Mary had four sons who were not Christians? Did you know that Mary had four, at least four in her family, who were unbelievers?

Have you ever said to yourself, "You know, the reason my kids aren't believers is because of me? If I spoke differently, if I shared my testimony more forthrightly, if I had been kinder, if I had lived the Christian life before my children as they were growing up, then they would believe. It's all my fault!

Or have you said to yourself, maybe a million times, "If somehow I could live the life I should before my mother or father, then he would believe, then she would come to Jesus Christ?"

It's true and necessary that we should live the Christian life as we ought before members of our family, but let's also understand that no one lives the Christian life better than Jesus Christ. And let's understand that there was no one who bore better testimony than the Son of God incarnate. Let's be clear that no one was more powerful in influencing any family than Jesus Christ, and that none of his brothers believed. Every single one of them was an unbeliever.

Now we come back to the cross, and all this sheds quite a different light on that scene at Calvary's cross. Do you know why Mary was alone there at the cross? It's because her sons didn't believe. Her sons didn't believe in Jesus who was dying. That's why she didn't have them to come along. That's why she had to turn to John. In fact, to go to the cross she had to break

with her sons who were of record unbelievers, her sons who were, in all probability, her last likely means of support. For her to go to the cross that day meant that she was taking a stand with her son Jesus. That she believed in him. In all probability that meant that her other four sons would cut off her last means of support.

Imagine an elderly person in our society knowing that going one day to stand at the foot of the cross of Jesus Christ would mean that there would never be another social security check coming and there were no savings, no employment, no means of support.

It wasn't easy.

Do you remember some other words that Jesus said as recorded in Luke 12:51? He said:

Do you think I came to bring peace on earth?

No, I tell you, but division. From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.

That day on the cross the eyes of Jesus caught the eyes of Mary and she remembered those words. That prediction had been fulfilled within her own family. And there is one of the hidden meanings of those last words on the cross. That maybe that moment, only Mary and Jesus understood that, like my family and yours, Jesus' family had problems too.

Another hidden meaning is that Jesus' love did not preclude difficulty. Here were the two people whom Jesus loved the most in the world. According to John 19, most of his friends and supporters have forsaken him; but there were two that came close, Mary his mother and John, the disciple whom he loved. John 19:25 says that they were standing by the cross and, in case that is misunderstood, in verse 26 it says they were standing near the cross. Now close means close. They were perhaps only feet, maybe inches away from the cross as Jesus hung there, as he bled and agonized and suffered.

Some of us have watched those that we love die, watched those that we love suffer. And so we understand, maybe better than others, what Mary and John saw that day on Calvary's Hill. I am not sure if that is

the most difficult or the most difficult thing is to be the one who is suffering and dying and realizing the pain and anguish being caused to those who stand nearby.

Mary had been forewarned, back when she had been a brand new mother, excited with the birth of her son Jesus and still pondering in her heart all the things that had been told to her. She went to the Temple, and there she met an old man that she hadn't known before named Simeon. In Luke chapter 2 we read that he spoke some marvelous words. But right in the midst of the words that he spoke, he had a parenthesis that Mary must have pondered all the more because old Simeon looked her in the eye and said, "And a sword will pierce your own soul too." And that came true. Her soul was pierced as her son died.

All of that is to say that because Jesus loved Mary and because Jesus loved John did not preclude difficulty in their lives. For Mary it was the difficulty of being a virgin mother, of having to explain that to everyone around her. It was the difficulty of poverty, the difficulty of frequent moves, the difficulty of watching her husband die. It was the difficulty of being a single parent in a society where single parents did not have a niche, the difficulty of seeing her son rejected and despised, the difficulty of unbelieving children. And it was the difficulty of watching her Jesus be crucified and die. And so Mary knew what Simeon meant when he said that a sword would pierce her own soul also.

Does that mean that Jesus loved her less because he let her go through all of those difficulties? No. No. Absolutely no! He loved her with a completely perfect love. He loved her. She was his mother. And

...it was the difficulty of watching her Jesus be crucified and die. And so Mary knew what Simeon meant when he said that a sword would pierce her own soul also.

it must have been with a greater anguish that we can begin to understand for Jesus to see his mother and his best friend go through these things, but you see his love did not prevent the

difficulty, his love carried her through the difficulty.

And what about you? Have there been times in your Christian life when you have thought that the problems that you face – the problems of pain or of a bad prognosis or of family difficulties or moves or unemployment or the myriad of difficulties that touch your life - are some kind of indication that God loves you less?

I have sometimes wondered, “God do you really care? Do you love more those who seem to have fewer problems?” But the answer is exactly the same. Jesus’ love for us does not preclude difficulty in our lives any more than it did for Mary and John. What his perfect love does for us is not prevent the difficulties, but carries us through them.

And finally, in those last words on the cross, there is a third hidden meaning and that is that Jesus’ ministry stayed practical. There he was, providing eternal salvation - and let there be no doubt why Jesus was on the cross. He was on the cross to pay the penalty for human sin and to purchase for us the forgiveness of that sin and life eternal in heaven. That is primarily what it was all about. But there is a lesson for us in this, that while Jesus was about that which was spiritual, he did not forget that which was practical and physical.

Sometimes we can do that, you know. I know pastors and Sunday School teachers, elders and Christian workers, and godly people who sometimes can get so caught up in the spiritual routines of prayer and ministry and witnessing and Bible reading and service that they forget their own families and they forget the practical aspects of what God has called them to do.

Jesus, while dying on the cross for the sins of the world, did not forget his responsibility in a practical way to his own family, and so he met an individual need. What could he do for Mary? Mary, who was there, widowed, and watching her son die?

I suppose we could think that he might perform a miracle. But Jesus had established the criteria that he did not perform miracles for personal benefit or for his family’s good use. He always performed miracles, and selectively so, for the cause of bringing people to believe. And so, by the criteria that he had already established, he could not perform a miracle.

Or you say, maybe what he could have done is turn her over to his whole band of disciples and say to all of the 11 that were left, “You take care of my mother.” But there weren’t 11 left. One had committed suicide and 10 had forsaken him.

Well then, you say, he could have gotten down from the cross and he could have done it himself. He should have taken care of her. He should have met his own responsibility to his own mother, but that would have contradicted his whole mission in life. And so, instead, Jesus called upon the one disciple who was there. He said, “Dear woman, from now on John will be your son and he will take care of you.”

“John, my beloved friend, from now on she’s your mother.”

You know, that’s the way Jesus usually operates. Seldom does he perform a miracle simply for our convenience; seldom is he able to call upon all of the people who claim to be his disciples because when the press gets going, many of those disciples have disappeared. Seldom does he ever leave the throne of heaven to step down into the train of time in order to meet the practical concerns that we have. But do you know what he does? He calls upon the disciple who is there, the one who hangs on, and says, “Will you meet that practical need for that widow, for that single parent, for that poor person, for that problem person?”

Maybe you are that disciple. Today, like then, there are a lot of disciples who are hiding when the going gets tough. And so Jesus operates today as he operated then, with a ministry that stays practical even when he is doing that which is spiritual, a ministry in which he calls upon the disciples who are there and available to do what must be done.

Hidden lessons - that his family had problems, that his love didn’t preclude difficulty, that his ministry stayed practical.

In conclusion, let me draw your attention to one more Bible passage that is particularly given to those who have heavy hearts about unbelieving family members, children, parents. It’s Acts 1:12-14. Here are words that report what happened after the crucifixion, after the resurrection, after the ascension:

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day’s walk from the city. When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying. Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers. At last they believed!

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