

## The Eucatastrophe of the Cross

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21 Then they compelled a certain man, Simon a Cyrenian, the father of Alexander and Rufus, as he was coming out of the country and passing by, to bear His cross. 22 And they brought Him to the place Golgotha, which is translated, Place of a Skull. 23 Then they gave Him wine mingled with myrrh to drink, but He did not take it. 24 And when they crucified Him, they divided His garments, casting lots for them to determine what every man should take. 25 Now it was the third hour, and they crucified Him. 26 And the inscription of His accusation was written above: THE KING OF THE JEWS. 27 With Him they also crucified two robbers, one on His right and the other on His left. 28 So the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "And He was numbered with the transgressors."

29 And those who passed by blasphemed Him, wagging their heads and saying, "Aha! You who destroy the temple and build it in three days, 30 "save Yourself, and come down from the cross!" 31 Likewise the chief priests also, mocking among themselves with the scribes, said, "He saved others; Himself He cannot save. 32 "Let the Christ, the King of Israel, descend now from the cross, that we may see and believe." Even those who were crucified with Him reviled Him.

33 Now when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour.

34 And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" which is translated, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" 35 Some of those who stood by, when they heard that, said, "Look, He is calling for Elijah!" 36 Then someone ran and filled a sponge full of sour wine, put it on a reed, and offered it to Him to drink, saying, "Let Him alone; let us see if Elijah will come to take Him down."

37 And Jesus cried out with a loud voice, and breathed His last. 38 Then the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. 39 So when the centurion, who stood opposite Him, saw that He cried out like this and breathed His last, he said, "Truly this Man was the Son of God!" (Mar 15:15-39)

Linguists tell us that about 14 new words are added to the English language every day. Most are words related to technology or science, but occasionally there is a newer word that ends up in common usage.

J.R.R. Tolkien felt there should be another word in the English language. He took the Greek prefix *eu*, which we see in words such as *eulogy*, or *eucharist*, which simply means good, or glad, or thankful. He added this prefix to the word *catastrophe* making the word *eucatastrophe*. Tolkien wanted a word that meant a catastrophe that turns to good, something that looks like complete and utter defeat, and at the last moment, it turns completely around. In an unpredicted, unexpected, and non-repeatable way, what looks like disaster is suddenly turned around into triumph. When all is lost, unbelievably, victory breaks through.

There can be no greater example of eucatastrophe than the Cross. Nothing else in human history looks like defeat and failure and doom like Jesus on the Cross. But the Christian Gospel is about eucatastrophe: that apparent defeat was a victory. It was the greatest victory over the greatest foes.

On that Friday afternoon, the whole thing seemed like defeat. In fact, for the ones closest to Jesus, they saw it as defeat until Sunday morning. And even then, it seemed to take them days and even weeks to properly and fully understand that Christ had won, triumphed, and His humiliating death was actually the means to the victory.

But there was one man, who recognised the eucatastrophe. He was really an unlikely candidate to be the first to see the sun breaking through the darkness. He was not a disciple of Jesus. He was not even a Jew. He was a Roman, a Gentile, and employed by the ruthless killing machine known as the

Roman army. He was the Roman centurion, and it was He, before even the Jewish disciples, who understand that he had just witnessed a victory, not a defeat.

I believe in the words of this Roman centurion we actually have the climax and high-point of the whole Gospel of Mark. Mark wrote this Gospel primarily to Gentile citizens of the Roman empire, to prove that the servant Jesus, was actually the King, the Son of God. And here we have the confession, describing who Jesus was and is, on the lips of a Gentile, on the lips of someone outside Israel.

As we trace the account, we can see how Mark describes for us four apparent defeats. We see four descriptions of the Cross that say "Defeat, defeat, defeat, defeat." And then, in verse 37 we see a eucatastrophe, and the Roman centurion also saw it.

## **I. Defeat – The Apparent Victory of Gentile Soldiers**

*15 So Pilate, wanting to gratify the crowd, released Barabbas to them; and he delivered Jesus, after he had scourged Him, to be crucified. 16 Then the soldiers led Him away into the hall called Praetorium, and they called together the whole garrison. 17 And they clothed Him with purple; and they twisted a crown of thorns, put it on His head, 18 and began to salute Him, "Hail, King of the Jews!" 19 Then they struck Him on the head with a reed and spat on Him; and bowing the knee, they worshiped Him. 20 And when they had mocked Him, they took the purple off Him, put His own clothes on Him, and led Him out to crucify Him.*

The first seeming defeat is when Jesus is given over to crucifixion by the cowardice of Pilate. And he is not led straight up to the cross. Instead, he becomes a toy for bored and brutal Roman soldiers to play with. We have seen in our era how soldiers, when given a chance, can resort to abuse and torture of their prisoners. Here these Roman soldiers, who hated the Jews, probably despised their assignment to dusty Judea, are given an opportunity to vent their violence.

When you train men in violence, and teach them to be ruthless killing machines, and then post them to a land where they must be peacekeepers, probably enduring the sneers and disgusted looks of the Jewish population day after day, you can bet there is pent-up anger.

Verse 16 tells us they called the whole garrison. Every soldier was called to be part of this abuse. And you can imagine these soldiers getting just a fragment of information. "This Jew says He's the true King of this land!"

"Oh, really?", they say. "Well, he doesn't look the part, does He? He needs a crown. Come, let's get him one!" You can picture the scene. Young men, barely out of their teens, trying to outdo each other, mockingly bowing and trembling, and then rising up to spit in His face, cuff him, trip him. Romans knew kings. The Caesars they followed were warriors. What kind of a warrior king is bleeding, bruised, his back ripped open by scourging, and just standing there and taking abuse?

It looks like utter defeat. Israel often saw in the contempt of the Gentile nations a kind of humiliation for them nationally. As the chosen nation, they didn't think they should be under the control of any other nation. But here the Messiah of Israel, the King, is being abused by a group of Gentile, foreign soldiers. There is seemingly no stopping them; they have their way with Jesus, they toy with him as a cat playing with its prey before devouring it.

Nothing could look more pitiful, more humiliating, more demeaning than to see this battered man in his mocked robe, wearing this crown pressed into his skull. Where is the power now? Where is the authority that commanded wind and waves? Where is the authority that seemed to silence everyone? It looks like defeat.

## II. Defeat – Apparent Helplessness and Utter Shame

*21 Then they compelled a certain man, Simon a Cyrenian, the father of Alexander and Rufus, as he was coming out of the country and passing by, to bear His cross. 22 And they brought Him to the place Golgotha, which is translated, Place of a Skull. 23 Then they gave Him wine mingled with myrrh to drink, but He did not take it. 24 And when they crucified Him, they divided His garments, casting lots for them to determine what every man should take. 25 Now it was the third hour, and they crucified Him. 26 And the inscription of His accusation was written above: THE KING OF THE JEWS. 27 With Him they also crucified two robbers, one on His right and the other on His left. 28 So the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "And He was numbered with the transgressors."*

Once the Roman soldiers have had their fun, they know it is time to get on with their grizzly business. Typically, one of the forms of humiliation was to have the prisoner, who was going to be crucified, carry the one section of his cross. It was likely the T-section, the section that the arms were nailed to, because the vertical pole was too heavy.

But here, Jesus, after six trials through the night, having experienced betrayal, denial, physical abuse from both Jewish leaders and Roman soldiers, and finally having been scourged till he was probably bleeding half to death, is physically without strength. He cannot carry even that horizontal section, so a man called Simon was drafted into carrying it for Jesus.

The women who knew Jesus, weep when they see Him, because He is stumbling, and physically weaker than they have ever known Him. What happened to the kingdom? What happened to the promises of thrones? What happened to the promise that the Son of Man would come with great glory?

When they reach Golgotha, Jesus is all passive. He is offered myrrh and wine, a kind of anaesthetic, but surprisingly Jesus doesn't take it. He is going to be alive for every moment of this agony.

Now He is stretched out, His arms and legs nailed. Of all the humanly invented forms of execution, could there have been one which all at once exposes you to total humiliation, and exposes you as totally helpless? Nailed. Unable to move even your limbs, while people gaze on your nakedness, your agonising thirst, your asphyxiation.

While nailed, what could be a greater sign of defeat than to have the man's last earthly possession become the prize for a game of gambling by the soldiers. He has nothing left. All has come to an end. All He has worked for, all His miracles, all His teaching have come to this ignominious end – a bunch of Roman soldiers gambling for the robe on his back. He leaves no inheritance, He doesn't seem to have a successor, His own ones have abandoned Him.

Worst of all, the whole scene says humiliation. He is not alongside noble martyrs, prisoners of conscience. He is crucified between two criminals: murderers and thieves. What does that imply about Jesus? No noble execution for Him, with final words before an admiring crowd. No, Jesus is identified with criminals.

Where is the strength that confronted sin, and was always serene and calmly in control? Where is the power that could heal diseases, create bread out of nothing, put demons to flight?

But look at the third defeat, because it seems to have the worst sting of all.

## III. Defeat – His Enemies Taunt Jesus With His Own Words

*29 And those who passed by blasphemed Him, wagging their heads and saying, "Aha! You who destroy the temple and build it in three days, 30 "save Yourself, and come down from the cross!" 31 Likewise the chief priests also, mocking among themselves with the scribes, said, "He saved others; Himself He cannot save. 32 "Let the Christ, the King of Israel, descend now from the cross, that we may see and believe." Even those who were crucified with Him reviled Him.*

What is worse than having your enemies gloat? What is worse than having those who have dogged your ministry, questioning your integrity, calling you a liar, a deceiver, servant of Satan, those whom you defeated in argument again and again; what can be worse than to have them lick their lips, rub their hands, and mock your humiliation?

And the weapon they use is to take Jesus' words and wave them under His nose. Jesus had said He would raise up His body after three days, and they taunt him, "Where's that power now? Surely the man who can rebuild the Temple in three days can come down from a cross?"

He said, "The Son of Man is come to seek and save those who were lost." And now they plunge in the knife and twist it: "Come on, Saviour, start with yourself! If you're going to save others, you might want to get yourself out of danger first, right? Save yourself first."

He taught them that He was the promised Messiah, the King of Israel. Now they say, "Come, here is the ultimate test for your Messiahship. Come on down. It's that simple. Use your miraculous power to come off this cross. What are three nails to the Messiah. Prove yourself, here and now, and we will believe."

Of course, they would not have, but here the shame and defeat seems complete. Jesus is being taunted and mocked by those who hated him, schemed against him, and wanted his destruction from the beginning. They saw him as a threat, He humiliated them in debate, He revealed their greedy and proud ways, and they wanted to murder Him. And here, they are not only getting to do that, they are getting to dance on His grave as it were. They are getting to cackle and gloat and revel in His apparent defeat.

I wonder what temptation was harder, when Satan challenged Him to throw Himself off the Temple and prove He was Messiah, or when these men tempted Him to come off the cross and prove He was Messiah. We know that nails didn't keep Jesus to the Cross. Meekness, and love, and mercy kept Him on the Cross.

But from an observer's point of view, Jesus has been soundly defeated. He is dying, and His enemies are watching Him expire, drinking in every moment of His suffering with sadistic glee, watching His torture with satisfied pleasure.

And now, there seems to be one final defeat.

#### **IV. Defeat – The Apparent Displeasure of God**

*33 Now when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. 34 And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" which is translated, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" 35 Some of those who stood by, when they heard that, said, "Look, He is calling for Elijah!" 36 Then someone ran and filled a sponge full of sour wine, put it on a reed, and offered it to Him to drink, saying, "Let Him alone; let us see if Elijah will come to take Him down."*

At midday, after three hours on the cross, darkness comes over the land. The gloom and despair

seems reinforced by nature itself. It is not a day of bright, glad victory, but a day of darkness, muted tones, silence.

For three hours, the darkness shadows the land. It probably put a damper on everyone's mood, including those mocking Jesus. But no one knows what the darkness means. Does it mean God is angry with this man on the cross? Is He adding His statement of displeasure on Jesus? Or Is God angry at those doing this to Jesus? You can't tell by just looking at the sky.

But then, at 3pm, Jesus cries out. And His cry seems to tell us what the darkness meant. He quotes Psalm 22:1, saying in in Aramaic. He cries out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken Me?" If God has abandoned Jesus, then His defeat seems complete. Not only has every man forsaken Jesus, but God Himself has. The darkness has shown God's displeasure with Jesus.

Even on top of this, comes more mockery. Some people think His cries of Eli, Eli are cries to Elijah. And when someone offers him something to drink, another says mockingly, "Wait, let's see if Elijah comes!" Now, if at this point, Jesus makes one last cry of pain, no one, in all the world, would turn around and say He had just won. If Jesus cries out, and His cry is one of anguish, we would say, "Truly this man thought He was more than He actually was." or "Truly this man was deluded into thinking He was the Messiah."

But look at what happens next, because it is the eucatastrophe.

## **V. The Victory Shout**

*37 And Jesus cried out with a loud voice, and breathed His last. 38 Then the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. 39 So when the centurion, who stood opposite Him, saw that He cried out like this and breathed His last, he said, "Truly this Man was the Son of God!" (Mar 15:15-39)*

Jesus cries out with a loud voice, and then dies. But his cry was not just a scream of pain. It was not just a yell. It was in fact, an announcement. This announcement was what showed whether this whole scene was defeat or victory.

The Gospel of John tells us what He said in that last cry.

*29 Now a vessel full of sour wine was sitting there; and they filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on hyssop, and put it to His mouth.  
30 So when Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, "It is finished!" And bowing His head, He gave up His spirit.  
(Joh 19:29-30)*

Jesus cried out, "It is finished." The Greek word is *tetelestai*, which was a word used in commercial transactions. When a debt had been paid, or when a price had been paid, *tetelestai* was written. It's in the perfect tense, which is a tense which means completed action. The payment does not continue, the payment has been made and completed. It's in the singular – a debt, one big price, containing all the sins, all the wrath, all the punishment. It has been paid.

That's what Jesus cried out. That's what Jesus announced. And after that, He said, Father, into your hands I commit my spirit. Then He gave - He surrendered up His spirit.

As this Roman centurion watched that, he saw something that everyone else missed. This Jesus, had announced to everyone that what He had just endured had been a race He was running, a price He was paying. All the insults, all the abuse, all the taunts, all the humiliation, He had endured as part

of the race, as part of the price. He could have answered back, He could have come down, He could have saved Himself, but then it would not have been finished. He could have vindicated Himself, but then it would not have been paid in full.

Out of everyone, including the woman who followed Jesus, including the disciples, only this Roma Gentile saw that this was not a defeat. He saw that at this moment, this man announced that this had all been planned. Notice the words in verse 39, “When the centurion saw that he cried out like *this*” It was the quality of Jesus' cry that converted this man.

He had shouted like someone who had won. He shouted like He had achieved something He meant to do. He shouted like a victorious man. Then it made sense. God had not forsaken him. He had not died for himself, He had died for others. That's why he had taken the punishment. That's why He had endured the accusations. That's why He had not come down. He had died to save others.

So what did the Roman centurion conclude, long before the Jewish disciples understood it? “Truly, this man was the Son of God.” He understood: this man had not been a victim, He was a victor. He had not been beaten, He had surrendered voluntarily, so as to win.

And not far from there, as many priests were doing the Passover sacrifices, they looked at the thick leather curtain separating the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place was torn from top to bottom. Only the High Priest could enter the Most Holy Place, once a year, to obtain atonement for Israel. Alfred Edersheim tells us “The Veils before the Most Holy Place were 20 metres long and 10 metres wide, of the thickness of the palm of the hand, and wrought in 72 squares, which were joined together” Edersheim, 2:611.

No earthquake could do that. This was God tearing apart the veil that had barred access. His Son had just paid the sin debt in full. His Son had just turned the victory of sin, death and Satan into defeat, and turned the defeat of righteousness, life and God into victory. The Son said “Paid in Full”, and the Father said, tearing the veil from top to bottom, “Paid in Full”.

Sunday was the proof and the vindication, and the evidence that it had been paid in full. But one man saw the eucatastrophe. He saw the defeat actually turned into victory. Unlike Thomas, He didn't need to see risen nail-pierced hands to believe. He listened, and saw a victory cry from the Cross, and believed.