

Gospel at the Cross (1) — 4 Responses to Redemption

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1. Spiritual Battle for our Redemption

Luke 23:44-48 It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon,⁴⁵ for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the Temple was torn in two.⁴⁶ Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." When he had said this, he breathed his last. ...⁴⁸ When all the people who had gathered to witness this sight saw what took place, they beat their breasts and went away.

a. Darkness (Luke 23:44-45, 48): This was not a solar eclipse. The Jews observed a lunar calendar, and Passover always fell on a full moon. Furthermore, the darkness lasted for three hours, making a solar eclipse impossible from noon to 3 pm (v44). It was supernatural darkness. It symbolises two things:

- God's wrath on Jesus. Jesus took humanity's sin upon Himself and suffered God's wrath for our sake. Many bystanders beat their breasts in mourning because they knew Jesus was innocent. (The Old Testament prophesied about it in *Amos 8:9-10 In that day," declares the Sovereign Lord, "I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight. ¹⁰ I will turn your religious festivals into mourning and all your singing into weeping. I will make all of you wear sackcloth and shave your heads. I will make that time like mourning for an only son and the end of it like a bitter day).*
- Satan uses all his evil dark forces to defeat God's plan for Redemption (Jesus says in *Luke 22:53, "This is the hour when darkness reigns")*

b. The curtain of the Temple was torn in two (Luke 23:45). According to Jewish history, the curtain that separated the Holy of Holies was four-inch-thick, 30 feet high and 60 feet long. And Matthew tells us that it was torn from top to bottom (*Matt 27:51*), indicating four things:

- God tore the curtain, starting from the top and ending at the bottom.
- The Temple is no longer the centre of God's worship (John 4:21-24).

- We can approach God directly through Jesus' atoning death (Heb 9-10)
- Jesus wins the Cosmic Battle for our Redemption (slavery from sin).

2. Responses to Redemption

(Redemption means setting free from slavery to sin — see *Deut 7:8, Lev 11:45, John 8:34, 36*)

i. Centurion — the unclean and hated Gentile person. *Luke 23:47 The centurion, seeing what had happened, praised God and said, "Surely this was a righteous man". He also declared, "Surely this man was the Son of God"* (Matt 27:54 and Mark 15:39). So, the centurion wasn't just saying Jesus was merely innocent, and it was so sad they crucified him. But he declared that Jesus was the righteous Son of God. His declaration opposed that of the Jews who disowned the Holy and Righteous One (Acts 3:14).

The centurion was a high-ranking officer of Roman forces that occupied Israel. In the eyes of the Jews, he was an unclean Gentile and an oppressor. Yet, God opened his eyes to see what happened at the cross and responded with reverent awe and belief in Jesus, the righteous Son of God.

ii. Women were lowly social persons. *Luke 23:49,55-56 But all those who knew him, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things...⁵⁵The women who had come with Jesus from Galilee followed Joseph and saw the tomb and how his body was laid in it.⁵⁶ Then they went home and prepared spices and perfumes. But they rested on the Sabbath in obedience to the commandment.*

In the Middle Eastern culture at that time, women were social outsiders. Society excluded them from social power, and their testimony was invalid in court. But Jesus respects them. The Samaritan woman at Jacob's Well was the first evangelist, and Mary Magdalene was the first to witness and announce the resurrection of Jesus. At the very end, when most of the male disciples (excluding John) have forsaken Jesus, the women are the only ones still following Him.

iii. Penitent Criminal — the despised evil person *Luke 23:32-33, 39-43 Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed.³³ When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left...³⁹ One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"⁴⁰ But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence?"⁴¹ We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong."⁴² Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."⁴³ Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."*

The Romans executed criminals by crucifixion for major crimes like murder. So, both the criminals on either side of Jesus were evil men. Society despised such bad people. Yet, when the penitent criminal, just before dying, admitted his crimes, turned to Jesus and acknowledged Him as the Righteous King (vv 41-42), Jesus promised him instant salvation.

iv. Joseph of Arimathea — the highly esteemed wealthy person: *Luke 23:50-53 Now there was a man named Joseph, a member of the Council, a good and upright man,⁵¹ who had not consented to their decision and action. He came from the Judean town of Arimathea, and he himself was waiting for the kingdom of God.⁵² Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus' body.⁵³ Then he took it down, wrapped it in linen cloth and placed it in a tomb cut in the rock, one in which no one had yet been laid.*

John 19:39 He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds.

In the gospels, when Jesus meets a religious leader, influential person, or moral person, they oppose Him. But every time Jesus meets a person the world calls a failure or a loser, they respond to Jesus, and He

embraces them.

Yet, when it comes to Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, two upright men of the highly esteemed and wealthy members of the Sanhedrin (Jewish Council), they seem to find favour with God. **Why are they exceptions?** Because salvation is by grace alone, by faith alone, in Christ alone. **This is the gospel— the good news!** Therefore, being an outsider or an insider, being rich or poor, being good or bad, being high caste or outcast — our moral performance, our social status—none matter! None can earn salvation because Jesus' salvation is strictly by grace alone that you receive by faith alone. We see everybody on the same level at the foot of the cross — all sinners whose only hope of salvation is by faith in a gracious Divine Saviour, Jesus Christ. Nothing else!

But we also notice a pattern. When it comes to the gospel, generally:

- women respond to it before men,
- people at the bottom of the social ladder respond to it before those at the top,
- laypeople respond to it before the priests.

Why so? Because Jesus tries to tell us that success, high social status, power, or wealth will generally draw our focus more towards the world than God. It will drive us toward what we can accomplish ourselves rather than our dependency on Him. From birth, our parents, teachers, media, and society influence us with worldly values — be beautiful, outstanding, intelligent, wealthy, etc. But the value of God's kingdom is *"be poor in spirit"*. In other words, the poor can't make worldly standards, so they need God desperately.

When Jesus came on the scene, He began preaching: *"Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand"*. By "repent", He means, "Stop. Stop. Stop the way you are going. You are going along the way of the world. The kingdom of God is near, and if you don't stop and turn around, you will entirely miss the kingdom of God".

- Jesus is **not** on the side of the failures because they are failures.
- Jesus is **not** on the side of the poor because they are poor.
- Jesus is **not** on the side of the outcast because they are outcasts.

But, the entrance to the kingdom of God and the way of salvation is such that women respond to it before men; people at the bottom of society tend to respond to it before those at the top. Jesus says, *"So the last will be first, and the first will be last (Matt 20:16, Mark 10:31, Luke 13:30)*. Jesus means that those first and highly esteemed by the world are blinded by it and find it hard to be spiritually aware of God's kingdom. At the same time, those who are the least and last in the world are the first to become aware of God's kingdom and salvation. **It will always happen that way everywhere in the world.** It is happening in India right now. The Dalit (outcaste) responds to the kingdom of God before the Brahmin (highest caste). And most high-caste Hindus think that Christianity is a "Dalit" religion. The way of salvation is such that the last (the Dalit) will be the first to see it, and the first (the Brahmin) will be the last to see it. But there are exceptions!

And Joseph of Arimathea, a highly esteemed and wealthy member of the Jewish Council, was an exception because he was waiting for the kingdom of God (Luke 23:50-53). When he noticed something of it in Jesus, he went boldly to Pilate. He asked for the body of Jesus to bury in a particular tomb. Nicodemus accompanied him (John 19:39). In the face of widespread rejection of Jesus (Luke 23:10-11, 18, 21, 23, 35-36), both Joseph and Nicodemus did not seek to please men but sought to please God.

So, here is another principle for us. *Luke 14:33 In the same way, those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples.* So, the essence of discipleship is a total commitment to Him. It involves holding the things of this world loosely—wealth, reputation, social status, accomplishments etc.

It involves not holding them tightly to find identity in them. A disciple's identity is fully realised only as a child of God through the gospel. We must keep all other things at a distance. If we fail here, it will lead us to spiritual blindness. Therefore, Jesus gives clear instructions to his disciples in Mark 9:35 *Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all."* Jesus demonstrated this **by washing His disciple's feet** in John 13. He said, *"Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them"* (John 13:17). Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus were highly esteemed and wealthy. But they held their wealth, reputation and social status lightly. They did not keep it as their identity. Therefore, they could see, enter, and go for the kingdom of God.

End Note: I mentioned, "A disciple's identity is fully realised only as a child of God through the gospel". Christians should build one another up to see themselves as chosen children of God. This will please our Father in Heaven.

Ps 16:2-3 I say to the Lord, "You are my Lord; apart from you I have no good thing."³ I say of the holy people who are in the land, "They are the noble ones in whom is all my delight."