

“What’s Jesus Doing on the Cross?”

Rev. Lee F. Veazey

You can ask this question not looking for an answer but rather making a statement along these lines: *“He’s on the cross, but he shouldn’t be there. Look! He’s not guilty of anything. He’s done nothing wrong. This has got to be some kind of mistake.”* Indeed, this is what the Roman centurion acknowledged following the death of Jesus (Luke 23:47) when he exclaimed, *“Certainly, this man was innocent!”* (Luke 23:47). But you can ask it in another way so that it is understood as a genuine question: *“What is Jesus doing on the cross?”* From one perspective, he’s doing nothing because something is happening to him. He’s being crucified. Yet, an important aspect of what he’s doing can be seen in what he’s saying as he’s dying by crucifixion.

Here’s what we read in John 19:26-27, *“When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, “Woman, behold, your son! Then he said to the disciple, “Behold, your mother!” And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home.* In this third of what has become known as “the seven last words of Jesus on the cross”, most commentators rightly say that what we see here is a picture of Jesus’ humanity and compassion. As he dies, he provides for his earthly mother Mary’s care after his death through his spoken “last will and testament.”

Some theologians also recognize that what we see here is a picture of Jesus creating a new family. At the cross, family relationships are not based on natural birth but rather on supernatural birth and not according to a physical bloodline, but rather according to his blood-line, the line of blood that we see flowing from his torn body onto the wood of the cross and then all the way down to the ground.

These are some good answers to the meaning of Jesus words. But let’s consider the question once again: “What’s Jesus doing on the cross?” Now, this is not just another way of trying to find out why he is on the cross. Rather, this question needs to be taken at face value: What. Is. Jesus. Doing?

What Jesus is doing on the cross is him obeying his Father. You see, in making provision for the care of Mary, his earthly mother, what Jesus is doing is obeying God. Not only is he obeying his Father by going to the cross (as Paul would say in Philippians 2:8 *“he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on the cross”*), but he also is honoring his mother. In other words, Jesus is obeying the 5th Commandment: *“Honor your father and your mother . . .”* (Exodus 20:12)

In the sacrificial system of Israel in Jesus’ day, in order to be accepted, the sacrifice had to be perfect. For an animal, perfection meant no blemish, no imperfection visible on the outside. God called his people then and calls his people now to be holy (or perfect), and so perfection means no sins of commission nor sins of omission, that is not doing wrong nor failing to do right not only with the hands (the outside) but also from the heart (the inside).

And so, here on the cross, in these final words of instruction, Jesus provides for his earthly mother. In honoring his mother he is fulfilling the 5th Commandment. He is obedient to his heavenly Father to the end of his earthly life, to the excruciatingly painful end.

But there is much more going on here. For in providing for and thus honoring his mother, Jesus is also providing for every person who is trusting in him alone for salvation as he is offered in the gospel. Once again, what’s Jesus doing on the cross?

On the cross Jesus is living the life of perfect obedience that we should live, while at the same time he is dying the death for the rebellious life that we do live. And he is doing this both in our place and on our behalf. On the cross Jesus is rescuing his people both through his sinless life and through his sin-bearing and wrath-of-God-exhausting death!

The death of Jesus Christ was no mistake, for as the apostle Peter would later write: *“For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God”* (1 Peter 3:18). Hallelujah, what a Savior! What a love! What a cost! The Scriptures declare and personal faith attests that we stand forgiven at the cross!

Rev. Lee F. Veazey is the pastor of Grace and Peace Presbyterian Church, located on the corner of Taylor Avenue and Center Street in Bellevue, Kentucky.