
What If the Messiah is Not Murdered as a Sacrifice?

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In early January 2026, Renée Good was shot dead by an ICE agent. Her apparent last words were, “That’s fine, dude. I’m not mad at you.” A voice, identified as that of the man who shot her, is recording as saying, “F***ing b****.”¹

Almost three weeks later Alex Pretti, an intensive care nurse who worked for the VA, was protecting a woman who had been shoved by an ICE agent. Pretti was pepper-sprayed and pinned to the ground. Ten shots were fired into his body.²

Good had just dropped her son off at school. Pretti was part of several protests in the days following Good’s shooting and was taking a video of ICE agents and directing traffic when he was shot.

Both Good and Pretti were in the midst of ordinary activities, as were so many community members who followed ICE agents in the aftermath of the detention of Liam Conejo Ramos, a five-year-old boy who had just come home from school.

In 1961 ordinary people in the middle of ordinary lives got on buses and rode through the American South as Freedom Riders. Some of them were beaten. Some were killed. Others told stories about the interruption in their ordinary lives that changed them forever.

Ordinary people with ordinary lives were attacked and beaten when they walked across the Edmund Pettus Bridge on Bloody Sunday in 1965. Ordinary people, some of them stopping to watch the protest as they walked between classes, were shot to death at Kent State in the spring of 1970.

When ordinary people are killed in the midst of doing ordinary things, we struggle for words to describe them. Sometimes we call them victims. Sometimes we call them heroes. Lately I have been noticing how Good and Pretti, the Freedom Riders and the people who marched to Selma, were ordinary people who were acting in support of people they saw as members of their community, their family.

My father introduced me to friends of his who served with him in the 82nd Airborne during the Second World War. When I was a child, virtually every young man in my hometown had served in uniform during that war. I grew up in their shadow. It was an honor to meet my father’s buddies from the 508th Parachute

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Infantry Regiment. One of them was telling a story about how thick the flak was over Normandy on D-Day. I asked him how they could jump out of perfectly good airplanes into all of that. He said, “First of all, the C-47 we were in wasn’t perfectly good anymore. When shrapnel shot right through the skin of the plane, right next to the jumpmaster’s head, he said, ‘Let’s go, boys, no use waiting around here.’” My father’s friend said, “We jumped because we knew we were already dead.”

I have thought about those ordinary, extraordinary people for a long time. All of them.

In Mark 10:35-45 we meet a messiah on his way to the end of the story. The storyteller has informed the audience that Jesus is going up to Jerusalem just a few verses ago. This notice came as the lead-in to the third, climactic announcement of the death that waited for him in that key city. In Luke’s story, these three announcements (along with three others) were explicitly part of a long, deliberate journey to Jerusalem. In Mark’s story (not surprisingly, perhaps) the trip is much quicker, lasting only a few verses. Mark’s way of telling the story extends the tension of the center of the story until the storyteller suddenly tips and Jesus falls into the end that he has announced for three chapters.

This is a fascinating way to tell the story. Jesus announces that the messiah will be murdered at the end of the story and then goes straight up the mountain of Transfiguration. The learners who are with him understand no more after the Transfiguration than they did before it. A chapter later Jesus again announces that the messiah will be murdered. Again, no one understands, and this time the learners start an argument about their individual greatness.

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2026/jan/09/ice-agent-minneapolis-bodycam-footage> Accessed 7/20/2026.

2. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2026/01/24/us/minneapolis-shooting-alex-pretti-timeline.html> Accessed 7/20/2026.

And then the storyteller brings us to the final announcement of the murder at the end of the story, which leads immediately to the scene that is the focus of this essay. No one understands, and James and John launch into their request for good seats when Jesus enters into his glory, whatever that means.

It matters that the storyteller has bracketed this set of teetering scenes with two scenes in which Jesus heals a person who is blind. In the first scene it takes Jesus two tries to get the man able to see properly. After the first try, the man sees people that look like trees walking. Apparently, it is hard to get a blind person to see. (The storyteller in the gospel of John tells us as much: John 9:32.) Or, to risk getting all metaphorical, maybe this is a hint of the problem involved in having a murdered messiah: first all you see is the tree used in the murder, only later do you learn how to see the messiah in the midst of the murder.

To take even further risks, the murders which stand at the beginning of my reflections are, of course, not the only relevant cases. Listen for the trees and the murders in the song *Strange Fruit* sung by Billie Holiday. This bitter song about the role of murder in American social and political life was banned in many places, and there were apparently clubs in which Holiday was not allowed to sing it. Holiday's own recording company would not record it. And still it became an anthem for people who pushed back against those murders. In 2026 *Esquire* magazine included it in their list of the "25 Most American Songs of All Time,"³ (along with *This Land is Your Land* and *Surfin' Safari*, among others). Such murders are clearly part of our life. They transfix us, and we spend decades figuring out how we can think about them. Our success in this effort is mixed, at best.

The second healing scene is odd in its own way. Bartimaeus is sitting by the roadside as Jesus is passing. When he hears that Jesus of Nazareth is passing by, he calls Jesus "Son of David." Which is to say he calls Jesus "messiah." And having addressed Jesus as the one whose task was to turn the world right-side-up, he calls for Jesus to exercise some of that awe-inspiring power in his direction. Which Jesus then does, and Bartimaeus can see.

I just might have written somewhere that at this moment in Mark's story, a blind man sees better than anybody else. I just might have written that.⁴

I just might have been wrong.

When I read the scene these days, it sounds to me like Bartimaeus sees no better than Peter, who rejects the notion of a murdered messiah. Bartimaeus sees no better than James and John, who expect Jesus, as messiah, to sit enthroned in glory. Bartimaeus sees Jesus as messiah and sees that implying all-conquering power. The storyteller makes it clear that things are more complicated than that. Lived experience makes it clear that things are more complicated than that.

That is the great thing about writing things down in public.

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People who read your work can see you learn that things are more complicated than you had imagined.

When I was in undergrad, interpreters generally accused Peter and the disciples of misunderstanding Jesus' announcements of the murder at the end of the story. They opined, generally, that Peter obviously held what one of my teachers called "foolishly nationalistic hopes" concerning the messiah. Other interpreters said the same thing. Some of them (but not my teacher) went on to say that this revealed that Judaism had completely misunderstood what "messiah" meant.

Once again, it is more complicated than that.

In 66 CE and again in 132 CE rebels rose up against the Roman Empire in hopes that God was about to turn the world right-side-up. A few years later in each case the rebellion and its hopes were crushed. The stories of the slaughter that followed from these hope-filled uprisings are horrific. Mark's story of the murdered messiah is told, in the form in which we now have it, in the middle of the same tense period. That moment in history shaped the way this story is composed and told. Jacob Neusner has argued that the disaster of the crushing of the Second Jewish Revolt (the Bar Kokhba Rebellion), because it was explicitly messianic (Bar Kokhba means "Son of the Star," which was an allusion to the leader of the rebellion being the messiah), led to a settled decision among the rabbis to abandon the notion that messianic hopes would ever be acted out on the plane of human history. Jewish faith became spiritual, he argues.⁵

3. Alan Light, "25 Most American Songs of All Time" *Esquire* (06/17/2026). Retrieved 07/10/2026.

4. Richard W. Swanson, *Provoking the Gospel of Mark: A Storyteller's Commentary* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2005), 237.

5. Neusner's analysis and argument are complicated, and sprawl across much of his massive output of books. For a good glimpse of the argument, see *Messiah in Context: Israel's History and Destiny in*

One could argue that the same thing happened in the Christian movement, though it took longer and followed a particularly winding course. In each case the notion of “messiah” morphed into something else, something quite new, because of the very real complications of the very real world of power and coercion. For Jewish faith, says Neusner, “The version of the Messiah myth incorporated into the rabbinic system through the Talmuds simply restates the obvious: Israel’s sanctification is what governs. So, if Israel will keep a single Sabbath (or two in succession), the Messiah will come. . . . The operative category is not salvation through what Israel *does* but sanctification of what Israel *is*.”⁶

For Christians, customary interpretation of the scene in Mark 10:35-45 shows how messiah has become spiritual, so much so that most people sitting in church don’t even question that spiritualization.

In this scene the spiritualization hangs on the Greek word *lytron*. The word is almost universally translated, no matter what denominational clientele the translation serves, as “ransom.” This word is only used twice in Christian scripture (here and in the parallel in Matthew’s story), and even its other forms are rare.

Translators learn to proceed cautiously with rarely used words, especially when the words appear to refer to practices not known in our contemporary world. We learn even more caution when the words have the kind of metaphorical polyvalence that *lytron* has.

But even a quick survey of customary Christian interpretation of this word and this scene reveals little in the way of caution. Friedrich Büchsel, writing in the classic text, *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, tells us that “the ransom saying undoubtedly implies substitution.” He also intones, “For Jesus the true misery of man is his separation from God, his subjection to death, his sin. Hence the liberation is obviously liberation from sin.”⁷

Once it is “obvious” that the only liberation that happens is liberation from sin, the messiah has been spiritualized.

Even a quick survey of commentaries on this scene reveals that some interpreters are glad to embrace some form of substitutionary atonement, and most others find themselves working strenuously to resist that dogmatic move. Johannes Weiss noted that “the idea of expiatory sacrifice presents many difficulties” for him and for his contemporaries.⁸ But even as Weiss and his contemporaries reject ransom as expiatory sacrifice, still they have to raise the matter and wrestle with it. No matter where you land on this issue, Christian interpretation of this scene drips with the blood of sacrificial atonement, all because of the single, rare word, *lytron* or “ransom.”

But *lytron* is more interesting than that.

The word for Christians has invited notions of some kind of

A go’el was the nearest of kin who carried (and carried out) the responsibility of bringing captives home to their families. And go’el is frequently translated as “redeemer.”

expiation into the theological discussion, but the word comes to this scene from a very different location. As interpreters frequently note, this is the word used for the ransom paid to release prisoners of war. It is certainly possible that ancient audiences could have made the leap from liberation in time of war to liberation from sin, but we would do well to note that any imaginable ancient audience for Mark’s story would know a great deal about war and its casualties. Mark’s story was told in this form in the midst of a century of revolt and defeat. Rome killed rebels and presumably took prisoners. Actual ransoms were actually paid. War was a memory, not a metaphor, just as it was in my childhood in the shadow of the Second World War. The father of one of my closest friends was badly shot up on Okinawa. When I saw him in the Post Office where he worked, I learned the duty of remembering events that were just beyond the span of my life and experience. To repeat: war was a memory, not a metaphor.

If we take the word *lytron* seriously, we soon discover that it comes into Mark’s story connected to older social realities. A *lytron* was paid by a *go’el*. A *go’el* was the nearest of kin who carried (and carried out) the responsibility of bringing captives home to their families. And *go’el* is frequently translated as “redeemer.” See Job’s declaration in Job 19:25. Or listen to Handel’s *Messiah*: “I know that my Redeemer lives.” This translational reality has long given aid and theological comfort to Christians who understand Jesus as the Redeemer who paid the ransom, even if J. Weiss (and many of us) can no longer make easy sense of expiatory sacrifice.

But the key to understanding the link between *lytron* and *go’el* lies in recognizing that a *go’el* acts to reclaim members of their family. No family member is left behind: that is the responsibility of a *go’el*, even if it costs the *go’el* their life.

This matters. We are animated, and given life, by family. We wither without family, without community, without the shared life and tradition that both provide. A *go’el* acts to restore that life. This is complicated, as the story of Ruth and Naomi makes clear. The tension of that story grows when Ruth, an outsider, an immigrant, has no one who will act as *go’el* for her.

What did it mean for Ruth to be foreign? Perhaps she dressed differently. Perhaps her accent revealed that her mother sang to her in a language her current neighbors did not understand. Perhaps the house smelled different when she cooked: different culture, different spices, and different smells that neighbors sometimes complain about. And the tension tears her world apart when her husband dies.

Formative Judaism. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984.) Note especially his chapters “Introduction: Messiah in Context,” and “Eschatology with Messiah: Teleology beyond Time” in that book.

6. Neusner, *Messiah in Context*, 230.

7. Friedrich Büchsel, in TDNT, vol. 4, 343.

8. Quoted in Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1966), 445.

Until someone is willing to act as a *go'el* for her, she is alone,⁹ without family, without support, and without a future. And then Boaz acts. Ruth is treated as family even though she is foreign.

Pay attention to how the tension in the story is set and then released. The threat to Ruth vanishes when she is embraced as family. Pay attention to how this story affects you as Ruth is restored. This is not merely a nice tale to be told on a random evening. This is a story that lets the audience feel Ruth's restoration. Family heals what was broken.

With that in mind, pay attention also to the role that family plays in Mark's whole story. The story begins with no mention of Jesus' family-of-origin. He steps into the story as a separate adult. Simon has a mother-in-law. If Jesus has a mother-in-law, or any other family, we never hear of them until a bit later in the story when his mother and siblings, having concluded that he is a danger to himself (and perhaps others?), arrive to bring him home. Jesus dismisses them with a rude remark and identifies his family-of-choice over against his family-of-origin. Interpreters, having been trained to prefer spiritualized readings, applaud the way Jesus "expands" his concept of family. Interpreters should read more closely than that. Jesus cuts himself off from the family that gave him life and links himself with the followers who seem (in Mark's story) consistently to misunderstand him. As we have seen, in the complex of scenes around 10:35-45 these followers look at Jesus and see power and glory. This is the misunderstanding that the storyteller explicitly rejects as a reading of Jesus as messiah, and (in Mark's story as a whole) it is the reading that most characterizes his family-of-choice.

In the final scene of Mark's story, it is possible that we learn something about Jesus' actual family. If "Mary the mother of James" is also the mother of Jesus, we learn at the end of the story that Jesus may have left his family in chapter 3, but his family never left him. Pay attention to how this affects you. This is fancy storytelling.

And if Mary is to be understood to have been steadily among the group of women we suddenly discover standing there as Jesus is murdered, then we may have to imagine that Jesus' harsh words¹⁰ were the beginning of Mary's choice to join the group of women who followed Jesus from the beginning in Galilee all the way to the murder that was waiting at the end of the story. If this is how we are to imagine the story, this is fancy storytelling indeed. The women emerge at the end when all the named male followers have run off in terror, and then we suddenly discover that the women have always been there. Why didn't we see them? How did we miss them? Those are good questions.

And when the storyteller reveals that we were blind to the

9. Yes, of course, she is paired with Naomi, and the mutual support between these two women is not to be overlooked. But even together, Ruth and Naomi have to glean from the fields to hold off starvation. And even when Ruth is with Naomi, still she is a foreigner, vulnerable the way such immigrants often are.

10. Read Mark 3:33 slowly. I shudder to imagine how my mother would have reacted had I spoken to her that way.

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women who were always there, we also discover that these women "served" Jesus the whole time. The word in this scene is *διηκόνουν*, which can indeed mean "served." But Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel has pointed out that customary translation of this word reveals something telling.¹¹ When this word has women as its subject it is translated as "serving," which is understood to include cooking, waiting table, and acting out other kinds of hospitality. When the word has men as its subject, however, customary translation renders it as "served as deacon in church." A deacon was responsible for connecting need with resource. If a member of the community was hungry, a deacon connected them with someone who had extra food. If a member of the community was out of work, a deacon connected them with someone who was hiring.

I love to cook, and acting out hospitality matters in our family. But anytime translators shut women out of an essential community function by the way they render a word, you have to notice. Mark's storyteller has just sprung an important surprise. Interpreters have, over recent decades, often wondered how the Syrophoenician mother heard about Jesus. They have asked how the woman with the flow of blood knew which man to touch in that crushing crowd. It may be that the storyteller has just told us: this large group of women deaconed for Jesus, they connected the needs they encountered with the resource they believed to be the messiah.

And the storyteller may even have stretched this surprise back to near the very beginning of the story. When Simon's mother-in-law got up from her sickbed (1:29-31) she "served" them. She might well have made them coffee and maybe a nice salad, but the next thing that happens in Mark's story is that the whole town gathers to the gates of the house, bringing people who were sick or otherwise needing help. How did they know to come? It may be that the storyteller has told us: Simon's mother-in-law deaconed for Jesus, and everyone with a need came to connect with the resource. The storyteller just showed us that the whole story of messiah only works because a whole crowd of unseen "servants" made it possible.

The little scene in chapter 10 is still deeply complex, but this way of reading Mark's story lends a human touch to Jesus' words

11. Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, *The Women Around Jesus* (New York: Crossroad, 1982).

about “coming to serve.” Perhaps the storyteller wants us to watch Jesus learn a lesson from his mother (who wasn’t driven off by his harsh words) as she and all the women help him to serve the community.

I say “perhaps” a lot. I think all reading is experimental, or ought to be.

With that in mind, come along for one further experiment.

Perhaps the storyteller has also just revealed what the link between *lytron* and *go’el* brings to Mark’s story of messiah. Perhaps the “serving” of the unseen women has served to connect need with resource, and as a result has served also to restore people to family and community. Look at the healings and restorations in Mark’s story. They consistently involve people whose malady cuts them off from community. Lepers were understood to carry infectious uncleanness. The same goes for women who bled without ceasing. Blind people and people with only a single working hand could not be effective working members of society. And people who were seen as being seized by demons were a danger to both family and community. In each of these healings, Jesus restores people to community and family. Perhaps messiah has been acting as a *go’el* from the very start of the story.

If that were the case, what would be the impact of Rome murdering Jesus at the end of the story? The storyteller has taken the historical (and historic) catastrophe of that murder and has shaped it into the murder of the *go’el*, the murder of the one who has learned to act as a member of his family and community, who has acted to restore and heal his community.

This, I think, does a few things. First, since the *go’el* plays a crucial role in the preservation of community and family, by murdering the messiah Rome is attacking every faithful family. This makes Mark’s story tragic; but more than that, it makes it a story of challenge that calls the community to refuse defeat.

Second, because on this reading of Mark’s story, Jesus learned to be messiah and a member of his family from his mother who refused to stop following him and deaconing for him, the story of Rome’s murder becomes also the story of Rome’s attack on a mother. Though Mark’s storyteller does not give us an explicit Johannine “Woman, behold your son” scene, the storyteller may give us something stronger in terms of human impact. When the storyteller springs on the audience the surprise of Mary’s presence among the women who, though unseen, were always there, the impact of the murder is amplified. In the silence following messiah’s animal death cry, we are left to explicitly imagine Mary’s cry. The silence makes her imagined cry louder, I think. Decades ago, a writer of imaginative fiction (I think it was Norman Spinrad) explored the sharper impact of horror movies that suggested violence rather than wallowing in it. I remember that the writer explored a scene in which a character left the safety of a locked house, stepped outside to confront an unseen monster. There was a violent thud against the door, and a small amount of blood oozed over the threshold into the house and into the audience’s imagination. The impact was far greater than if we had actually seen the monster and been bathed in blood. The scene at the

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murder of messiah flows in the same stream. The storyteller shows us the death and lets us hear the death cry, and only after that do we meet the mother who has always been there.

And finally, when the *go’el* is murdered, the tension of the story is tightened to the breaking point. There is no relief, no “Today you shall be with me in paradise” or similar softening of the death scene. Messiah screams like an animal and dies. The Temple curtain is torn, and the darkness of the scene is made absolute.

But the storyteller then reveals that the women were always there. Which means that despite Rome’s best efforts, family and community persist. A friend who is Lakota taught me an important saying that he learned in his traditional community: We are never defeated until the hearts of the women are on the ground. Mark’s storyteller seems to know a similar saying.

And among the women we somehow missed is the mother of Jesus. Any attentive audience would have imagined that she left the story when Jesus insulted her. She did not. Which means that, on my experimental reading, the teachers from whom Jesus learned how to be a *go’el*, a responsible member of his community, those essential teachers are still there, now as always. And they come back when the Sabbath has passed to reclaim messiah as Mary’s son. I find myself imagining the scene that led to these few women going to the tomb so early in the morning. It would have been Mary’s responsibility as mother to tend to her son’s corpse. I imagine Mary looking with some trepidation at Salome and the other Mary, not sure she can ask others to run the risk that she will run, alone or in company. I imagine Mary Magdalene, hearing the silent question, saying, “Of course we’ll come along. What did you think we’d do?”

And with that they headed to the tomb and to the end of the story. In Mark's story, it is the heretofore unseen women who never quit showing up. Family is family. Community is community. Deacons make that true no matter what. So does a *go'el*. The women go to the tomb. That is what family does. Messiah has given his life as a family member in an effort to leave no one behind. Now the women, including (most significantly, I think) his mother, makes sure messiah is not left behind. Family heals what was broken, now as for Ruth's story.

When my father's paratrooper buddies told me stories about combat, stories I could not understand even though I nodded to keep them telling me the truth, they always deflected attempts to call them heroes. "We weren't heroes," they always said, "we were just doing our duty. The heroes are the ones who died." Of course I disagreed with them, though I did so silently because I knew that I did not understand what they were talking about. It still seems to me that all of them were extraordinary ordinary people who came home to their families and tried to restore the world they had seen die.

I forget who it was said it, but in the aftermath of Operation Metro Surge in Minneapolis someone pointed out that the masked agents were doomed to fail because they could never match the courage of 70-year-old women in their Subaru Crosstreks who followed armed agents in an effort to protect people they had claimed as members of their families, even if they couldn't speak their language or understand their culture.

I think Jesus' mom would have driven a light blue Crosstrek. I think Jesus would have been astounded by his mom. I am sure he was. And so, he learned to act as a *go'el*, gave his life doing that, in fact, as have so many others.

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