

HE WAS BURIED

MATTHEW 27:57-66

INTRODUCTION

As we approach Resurrection Day (or Easter), a time when Christians celebrate the risen Jesus who conquers the grave and provides hope to all the world, it can be easy to gloss over the dark, yet meaningful death and burial of Jesus.

The sting of death is awful. Burying a loved one is a tragic and painful experience. It feels unnatural, it feels like we shouldn't have to feel it. And, at some level that's true. Death was not part of God's original creation, but because of one man's rebellion God allowed endless toil and death to enter our world.

By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” — Genesis 3:19 (ESV)

Death is the physical absence of life. For those who experience it, their physical bodies die and are laid in a tomb. For loved ones, it can suck the joy out of life. But there's hope. The death of Jesus is not a normal death. And, the death of Jesus is significant in many ways, and our passage today points us to a coming hope, a hope that changes the meaning of death.

THE PASSAGE

When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who also was a disciple of Jesus. He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen shroud and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had cut in the rock. And he rolled a great stone to the entrance of the tomb and went away. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb.

The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate and said, “Sir, we remember how that impostor said, while he was still alive, ‘After three days I will rise.’ Therefore order the tomb to be made secure until the third day, lest his disciples go and steal him away and tell the people, ‘He has risen from the dead,’ and the last fraud will be worse than the first.” Pilate said to them, “You have a guard of soldiers. Go, make it as secure as you can.” So they went and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone and setting a guard.

— Matthew 27:57-66

THE CONTEXT

Our passage opens in the evening, as the sun is setting, and the day is coming to a close. What a day it has been. As Matthew retells the story, the Hebrew day started back in chapter 26:20, "*When it was evening...*", because Jews counted their days starting with sunset. At that point, the disciples gathered with Jesus to eat the Passover meal, and begin the tradition of the Lord's Table that we still hold today. It was a moment of celebration and remembrance of God's faithfulness. The Jewish people were looking back to their time in Egypt and how God freed them from the ruthless and cruel slavery under Pharaoh (Exodus 1-15). These days were intended to be a time of joy and celebration over what God had done.

A STORY UNRAVELING

However, the story isn't so clean and tidy. It's not filled with triumph as the disciples were expecting. In fact, the story actually seems to start unraveling quite drastically. The Messiah was expected to come and usher in a new kingdom, transforming the situation for Jews. Instead, we see what appears to be a mess unfolding before our eyes. In the time of one day we have seen the following events...

- Judas was exposed as a traitor (26:20-25)
- Jesus predicts Peter's denial (26:30-35)
- disciples fall asleep multiple times as Jesus prays (26:36-46)
- Jesus is arrested under cover of darkness by a hostile mob (26:47-56)
- the high priest, scribes and elders give Jesus a sketchy "trial" (26:57-67)
- Peter fulfills Jesus' prediction by denying him three times (26:69-75)
- the chief priests and the elders hand Jesus over to the Roman ruler Pilate, to be punished by death (27:1-2)
- Judas, the traitor hangs himself (27:3-10)
- the crowds choose to release a known criminal over Jesus the innocent lamb (27:15-26)
- Jesus is beaten and mocked (27:27-31)
- Jesus is hung on a cross, one of the most brutal Roman death sentences (27:32-44)
- And, finally, Jesus, the promised one, the Messiah, dies, ending his life here on earth (27:45-56)

It's a dark time in Matthew's gospel. All hope seems lost. And, things don't seem to be getting any better.

HIS DISCIPLES SHOW CARE

In this time of mourning (when there should be Jewish celebration), the Messiah is hanging dead on a cross, the disciples are missing from the story, but a new character enters the story. A previously unmentioned disciple appears on the scene.

THE NEW HOPE

When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who also was a disciple of Jesus. — Matthew 27:57 (ESV)

Evening has come. As Matthew retells this story, we are roughly 24 hours after Jesus ate the Passover meal with his disciples in that upper room (Matthew 26:17-29). We have gone from the breaking of the bread that symbolizing his broken body, to his body actually broken; from the cup of wine symbolizing his blood of the new covenant, to his blood actually being spilled on our behalf for the forgiveness of sins. In just 24 hours, much has happened. Great sadness and grief has come upon the disciples.

As the sun sets, dipping out of view, a man named Joseph appears on the scene. Now, other Gospels give us more detail on Joseph, but Matthew chooses to focus on a few key attributes. Joseph a wealthy man from a town not far from Jerusalem, and he was was no stranger to Jesus. In fact, Matthew identifies this man as a disciple of Jesus. It's by no accident that Joseph arrives on the scene, because he serves as an instrument to testify that Jesus was indeed the Messiah by helping to fulfill works of prophecy by Isaiah.

He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. — Matthew 27: 58a (ESV)

Joseph goes before Pilate and requests that Pilate (the Roman ruler) give him the dead, lifeless body of Jesus. Notice that the request does not come to the Jewish leaders, but to Pilate, the one who also went along with the death of Jesus. Joseph isn't asking for the body of a criminal, insurrectionist, or some evil person. Rather, Joseph requests the body of an innocent person, the one he was devoted to following: his Lord.

THE FULFILLMENT

Then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen shroud and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had cut in the rock. And he rolled a great stone to the entrance of the tomb and went away. — Matthew 27:58b–60 (ESV)

Without any apparent issue, Pilate grants his request. Perhaps, the words of his wife are still ringing in his hear, "Don't have anything to do with this righteous man." (Matthew 27:19) Either way, God is working through Pilate and through this tragedy. By Pilate's authority, Joseph takes custody of Jesus' body and prepares it for burial. Joseph proceeds to preserve Jesus' body to be buried in a tomb by wrapping the body in a pure linen burial cloth. Jesus lifeless body is now prepared for burial. The work is done. And with this very typical burial custom, Jesus is placed into the tomb donated by this caring disciple from Arimathea.

Verse 60 reads this way in the New Living Translation, "*Joseph placed it in his own new tomb, which had been carved out of the rock.*" It seems clear both from the ESV and the NLT that Joseph gives up his own tomb to his Lord as a place of final rest. A few commentators suggest that this would have been a costly donation.¹ Buying a tomb (a new tomb) in Jerusalem, would have been a very expensive purchase, which would confirm Matthew's description of Joseph in verse 57 as a rich man. Joseph provides this new tomb, for a new kind of man, who just died a new kind of death.

At this point, Matthew's gospel is showing us two key things in these few verses. First, this kind of burial was unexpected for those suffering a criminals death. The custom of the day was to throw the dead

¹ Green, Michael, *The Message of Matthew* and France, Richard T., *The New Bible Commentary*

bodies of capital punishment like this into a ditch. No care or concern was taken with criminals, because, well, they're criminals. Joseph's attention to his Lord, his master, doesn't end with his death, but continues through his burial. It's clear that he loved his Lord and was willing to sacrifice greatly for him. The second key thing that Matthew's is showing us is the fulfillment of Isaiah 53:9:

*He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he opened not his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he opened not his mouth.
By oppression and judgment he was taken away;
and as for his generation, who considered
that he was cut off out of the land of the living,
stricken for the transgression of my people?
**And they made his grave with the wicked
and with a rich man in his death,**
although he had done no violence,
and there was no deceit in his mouth.
— Isaiah 53:7–9 (ESV) (Emphasis added)*

As Isaiah wrote about the Messiah to come, God revealed that somehow the promised one would die like a wicked person, yet receive some sort of unexpected blessing in his death. Something that wouldn't fit with a criminals death. And here we see God using Joseph to provide that very thing.

Joseph proceeds to close the tomb with a large rock. The outside world is closing off, leaving Jesus body alone in the darkness to fall under the influence of the curse and decay, returning to dust. And with that, Joseph departs the scene just as quickly as he had entered.

THE WITNESSES

Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb. — Matthew 27:61 (ESV)

But what do we make of the two Mary's? Well, if there was any doubt of whether Jesus truly was buried, these two women, along with Joseph can testify to it's accuracy. Jesus was indeed dead. Jesus was honestly buried in a tomb. These are the witnesses of Jesus' body being laid in a tomb, prepared, closed, and left.

These few brief verses begin to show us the beginning of the sign of Jonah that Jesus predicted. In Matthew 12:40, the Pharisees ask Jesus for a sign to show that he was truly the Messiah, the promised savior from God. Jesus says that the only sign they will see is that he would be in the heart of the earth for 3 days and 3 nights. And the Pharisees have been listening. They have been watching, because the next day they spring into action.

HIS ENEMIES SHOW CONTEMPT

In verse 62, we are confronted with a very different request with very different motives. While Joseph was showing faithfulness and concern to his Messiah, the Pharisees show contempt and fear as enemies.

THE RENEWED HATE

The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate... — Matthew 27:62 (ESV)

The sun has set, a new day has begun on the Jewish calendar. Jesus has been buried in the tomb. It seems as though we are now into Saturday. From what we know, the day of preparation seems to have been Friday, when the Jews would have prepared everything they needed for their day of rest on Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath day. As the new day dawns, we're not greeted with the repentance of the chief priests and Pharisees. No, they rather gather to greet Pilate. They gather on their day of rest, before Pilate, to continue their work of opposing Jesus.

THE HATEFUL REQUEST

...and said, "Sir, we remember how that impostor said, while he was still alive, 'After three days I will rise.' Therefore order the tomb to be made secure until the third day, lest his disciples go and steal him away and tell the people, 'He has risen from the dead,' and the last fraud will be worse than the first. — Matthew 27:63–64 (ESV)

In the next verse, we see what the Pharisees are up to. They have heard the claims of Jesus when he was alive. And, they understood what they meant. Unlike the disciples who didn't seem to get it again and again, the Pharisees and chief priests heard and understood Jesus claim that he would die and come back to life after three days. Their hate for Jesus has blinded them to the possibility that he might actually be the son of God, the very person that he claimed to be.

They request that Pilate secure the tomb so that no one can fake his predicted resurrection. The Pharisees (and Pilate) knew the impact that this could have on the nation. If word got out that Jesus had risen, people from all over would begin putting their faith and trust in Jesus, rather than the religious and government rulers currently over them. They knew that it could start a revolution. And, that's the last thing that self-interested leaders want to see. In the Pharisees mind, it was bad enough that Jesus claimed to be God while he was alive...but it would be far worse if people began to believe he had conquered death by rising again. This would elevate Jesus much higher than a teacher, or claimed son of God. It would be the proof that people needed that he truly was the Messiah. So, their goal was to ensure that his prediction couldn't come true, and keep his body in the tomb for longer than 3 days.

THE FULFILLMENT

Pilate said to them, "You have a guard of soldiers. Go, make it as secure as you can." So they went and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone and setting a guard. — Matthew 27:65–66 (ESV)

Pilate's reply is interesting. Some translations interpret Pilate as saying "Take a guard..." (NLT, NET), and others interpret it as "You have a guard..." (CSB, NASB). It could be that Pilate is saying, "take some of my soldiers", or he could be saying "use your own soldiers". Either way, it's interesting that Pilate says, to make the tomb as secure as they could. I think Matthew is implying the futility of the Pharisees to control the situation. First, the Pharisees want help killing Jesus, now they need help keeping him dead.

This is an interesting point that Matthew is showing us. Pilate is the common authority throughout these last few events, not the Pharisees. The Pharisees needed Pilate to put Jesus on trial and execute him. Joseph needed Pilate's permission to obtain the body (not the Pharisees), and now the Pharisees need his permission to protect the grave of Jesus. It's clear that the chief priests and Pharisees are no longer the legitimate power they once were. Perhaps this is Matthew's way of showing that they are fading away into darkness, only to be replaced by Jesus the true high priest.

THE WITNESSES

Well, the religious leaders go and make the tomb 'secure'. They do something to seal the tomb and prevent it's ability to be opened. They also set a guard over the tomb, to watch, and prevent any intruders from stealing his body away in the darkest parts of the night. Little do they realize that these guards will become another set of witnesses to the story of Jesus. They will have a front-row seat to his resurrection.

REFLECT AND RESPOND

Well, this certainly seems to be the low point in our story. Things are grim. The Messiah is dead. He is buried by Joseph to provide some shred of honor, yet guarded by the worst of Jesus' enemies.

So, what do we do with a story like this in Matthew's gospel? How does the burial of Jesus strengthen our faith? Should we be solemn and sad? Are we to weep and mourn the death of our savior? Are we to be encouraged by his death? Is it merely a historical retelling by Matthew? Are we to be enamored by all the historical details of the story so we can pile up more knowledge and be smarter Christians?

The question we should ask ourselves, is why Matthew has given this story to his audience, and what it means for us. How does it help us know and behold the good news of Jesus Christ? I want to spend our last moments unpacking a few truths embedded in these few verses.

BE ENCOURAGED

First, be encouraged. This story is truth. Jesus did not suffer some sort of fainting spell, or temporary lapse of consciousness. Jesus suffered one of the most agonizing and painful deaths a person could suffer. And he actually died. Flatline. A lifeless corpse. And, he was buried, placed in a tomb, guarded by professionals know how to keep watch. This actually happened. There are many witnesses. True story.

DISCIPLES VS ENEMIES

Second, we can recognize the contrast between the Pharisees and Joseph! Their actions here are driven by fear and hate. Joseph's actions were driven by love and devotion to his master. The Pharisees wanted to ensure they kept Jesus' dead in the grave. Joseph wanted to preserve what dignity and honor was left of his master. Matthew is showing us the difference between enemies of Jesus and disciples. Enemies will go through great lengths to sacrifice for themselves, and disciples will go to great lengths to sacrifice for the service of their master. All the while, they were both being used by God for his purposes.

As we move throughout our days do we have the mindset of a disciple? One of devotion and sacrifice for Jesus? Are we willing to give up ourselves for the honor of our King? Or, when enemies of Jesus work against us and the Gospel, can we trust and rest knowing that God's hand is still at work?

DEATH TO SIN

Third, Jesus' death and burial was on behalf of us, believers! This is a new kind of death, by truly righteous sacrifice. It changes the meaning of death...forever. As one author put it, "*There is no hell for those who are in Christ.*"² What a glorious statement that we should shout for joy in! Our savior has died on our behalf so we don't have to experience torment under the hopelessness of eternal wrath of God in hell. Jesus' death means the humanly impossible price has been paid and we can be free in him, because of our death with him.

Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous. Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. — Romans 5:18–21 (ESV)

For believers, this is a sweet, rich truth, that we should sing about and should marvel over. We should meditate on it. It should be the very fabric of our lives! Because, we are no longer under the penalty and rule of sin. No, no, we are under the inheritance and rule of Christ almighty! You were bought with a steep, great price (1 Corinthians 6:20; 7:23) and your new life is not your own. You are now free from the power of sin and devoted as a disciple to Jesus. You are his, alone. Live to his good pleasure and honor. Do all to the glory of God.

For those who haven't yet submitted to the work of Christ in their life...this is a plea to recognize your sin and your utter hopelessness! Repent! Turn from your hopeless ways of sin and come to Jesus the only way to be spared of the coming death and punishment. Jesus provided many sobering warnings throughout Matthew about the eternal destiny that awaits those who reject him (See Matthew 8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30). The destruction and punishment for your sin can either be paid by you forever in eternity, or once by Jesus on the cross. For me, I choose Jesus, knowing there's nothing I can do to be righteous in God's eyes. Knowing in Jesus there is fullness of joy (Psalm 16:11).

LOOKING FORWARD...

Our passage closes on a somber note. This is a dark time for the disciples of Jesus who should be enjoying a great celebration of God's deliverance. The Messiah has been killed, placed in a tomb, the tomb is sealed and guarded, and the twelve are missing from the scene. His body lay in darkness, the light of the world still gives us hope. Though our sin may weigh us down, trip us up, and discourage us. We can celebrate because it has no power over us. We do not have to obey its demands. We can choose to follow and serve our king and savior Jesus, who laid in a grave, prepared for a burial, guarded by soldiers...awaiting the morning light of day yet to come...

² Richard's, Guy M. "Did Jesus Descend Into Hell?", Tabletalk Magazine, 2019