

Prayers

To God

Open your Bible at some abstract place and read. How does what you read connect with the salvation plan of God that will be fulfilled in Christ? You may not immediately see a connection, but the Holy Spirit will be able to do this because He makes sense of God's Word to our hearts.

For Self

Speak to me within the silence of this holy Sabbath, dear Jesus; a day when no one really knows what You were doing and a day when silence speaks its loudest! Your work, Lord God, cannot now be stopped! Glory! The devil has been thrown down! Alleluia! The glory of eternity is now within our reach! Praise God! Thank You for the silence of this Sabbath screaming hope within my heart! AMEN

For others

Pray today for people who are lost, for refugees, for those who are divorced, for teenagers thrown out of home, for the elderly abandoned by their relatives, and others as the Lord brings them to your mind.

Meditation

What is this Saturday?

A Sabbath rest between two days;

When 'nothing shall be done'

And God who made all things declared a rest;

A pause ...

Within the middle of His saving work!

Between Good Friday and great Easter!

How waiting tries the patience!

Surely Christ must long for Easter morn,

When Resurrection's power is finally let loose,

And grace is all revealed in glory!

Forgive us as we ponder all;

Dear God, Your Son has died!

And we blurt out ... 'sorry for Your loss'

When all the suffering, all the pain,

Was felt in history real ... for me!

You let it happen, God Almighty.

You let it save me! Jesus my Christ!

When all of me was stripped away by all of You!

Bible Passage

Matthew 27:55-66

⁵⁵ There were many women there, looking on from a distance. They had followed Jesus from Galilee to care for His needs, ⁵⁶ and among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.

⁵⁷ When it was evening, a rich man from Arimathea came, named Joseph, who was himself a disciple of Jesus. ⁵⁸ He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus, and Pilate ordered it to be given to him. ⁵⁹ Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth ⁶⁰ and placed it in his own new tomb, which he had cut in the rock. He then rolled a large stone across the door of the tomb and left. ⁶¹ Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb.

⁶² The next day, the one after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate ⁶³ and said,

'Sir, we remember what that impostor said while he was still alive,

"After three days I will rise again."

⁶⁴ They asked Pilate to give orders that the tomb be secured until the third day, fearing that his disciples would come and steal him, and tell the people that He had been raised from the dead! They thought this last deception would be worse than the first! ⁶⁵ So Pilate said to them,

'You have your own guard of soldiers; go and make it as secure as you wish.'

⁶⁶ So they and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone and mounting a guard.

Review

Jesus has died. Yesterday we read about the flurry of activity that took place immediately after Jesus' death, (27:51-54) as God broke open tombs and rent apart the curtain in the Temple. Now, before reading about the anticipated resurrection, Matthew reports to us some very important facts and incidents, all of which would prove to have an important bearing on the resurrection and the future of the church! Matthew first records the names of the women who followed Jesus (27:55-56), then reports the arrangements for the burial of Jesus' body (27:57-61), and lastly, informs us of the beginnings of a dispute about what happened to Jesus' body after His death (27:62-66).

The importance of women witnesses

Anyone who was a witness to the death of Jesus was an important person, as far as the early church was concerned. It is not surprising therefore that Matthew records the names of the women who were there; we already know that most of the disciples had fled, so for witnesses, the church had to depend on the women. Matthew says that they were '*many*' of them, and they were '*looking on from a distance*' (27:55); then he lists the names of some of the more important women. (More can be discovered by comparing the names here with those mentioned in Mark 15:42-47, Luke 23:50-56, and John 19:38-42).

The women

First, Matthew mentions Mary Magdalene (27:61), a woman whose identity has been debated since the early days of the church, and we should note that despite contrary popular opinion, there is no hint of her being married to Jesus! Second, Mary the mother of the sons of Zebedee (27:56) is identifiable by Matthew as a witness, and Mark adds in his Gospel that she is also known as Salome (Mark 15:40).

The next strange feature of the list is that alongside Mary Magdalene is Mary the mother of James and Joseph. These are all common names, which give us no real clue as to who this Mary was. However, later on in the story line, Matthew mentions someone else called '*the other Mary*' (27:61), but we just do not really know who she is! We can guess that she was this same Mary mentioned earlier (the mother of James and Joseph) but this is only a guess. It is unlikely however to be the Mary of 'Mary and Martha' who lived in Bethany (near Jerusalem), because Matthew has already said that these women all came from Galilee!

Lastly, Matthew does not mention Jesus' mother as being present, although we know from John's Gospel that she was (John 19:25). It may be that Matthew and those to whom he wrote already regarded Jesus' mother as a witness to Jesus' life and death, so it was not thought necessary to include her in this list; it is a reasonable theory.

Joseph of Arimathea and the burial of Jesus

There is much mystery surrounding Joseph of Arimathea, because little is known of him, or where 'Arimathea' was! Mark adds that Joseph was a rich member of the Sanhedrin (Mark 15:43), the council that condemned Jesus to death (26:3)! Matthew presents Joseph simply as a rich disciple of Jesus, and ignores any connection with the Sanhedrin.

Joseph knew how to organise things, and he was influential enough to go straight to Pilate (27:58) to ask for Jesus' body. This was an unusual request given that soldiers had their own routine for disposing of bodies. However, Roman methods were dishonourable to Jews, and Joseph's actions meant that Jesus had a proper and honourable burial near Jerusalem, where only the rich were privileged to be buried! (see 1 Kings 15:8,24 etc). Two of the women were witnesses to the burial (27:61).

The tomb was cut out of rock, and Joseph offered this tomb having had it prepared for himself. Under Jewish law it was unacceptable for a body to be left hanging on a tree overnight (Deut 21:23 '*his corpse must not remain all night on a tree; you will bury him that same day*'). Further, Joseph's covering of Jesus with a linen shroud was the proper 'male' thing to do; covering Jesus' nakedness. Joseph himself is described rolling a 'large stone' over the tomb's entrance, presumably cut for the purpose. It was also probably set to be rolled into position by one man, but once in position it would have taken many more to move it.

Waiting for Resurrection

For those who had witnessed the death of Jesus, the following day must have been one of suspense. Nothing could be done, and the women were not able even to go and anoint the body of Jesus. The world stopped. God said He would rest on the seventh day after he made the world (Gen 2:1-3), and called on all creation to follow His example. Now, in a reverse of Creation, the Sabbath rest took place before God could start the new work that would change the world forever; the work of Resurrection!

Reports of trouble ...

In general, the Sabbath begins when the sun goes down, so from then, no work is allowed. The Jewish world collapses into the formal 'rest' which is part of their identity and calls God's people. But Matthew now reports the beginning of the scandal that would one day engulf the early church; the suggestion that Jesus' rising was a trick and He is an imposter (27:62-66).

Matthew lays the blame for this accusation firmly at the feet of the Jewish authorities, and says clearly that Pilate wanted little to do with their plans and scheme. He told the chief priests and Pharisees to use the military muscle available to them (the Temple guards assigned to them under Roman agreement), to guard the tomb. They would have to deal with their mess!

The guard at the Tomb (27:62-66)

So the Jewish authorities set a guard on Jesus' tomb. They did not want Jesus' body to be spirited away so His prophecies of resurrection after three days could claim to be fulfilled! Of course, they did not know the real plight of the dispirited disciples; leaderless because of Peter's failure.

The question of the guard at the tomb is one that has intrigued many people for centuries, because it has a bearing on what people think about the bodily resurrection of Jesus. When Matthew wrote, he may well have done so in order to quash rumours of foul play. To help understand this, I quote from Davis and Alison's commentary on Matthew, giving an imaginary conversation between Matthew and a Jew, sceptic about Jesus death and resurrection. It represents the background for why Matthew wrote as he did. I hope you find it helpful.

Matthew: Jesus rose from the dead and His tomb was empty (28:6)

Opponent: Maybe Jesus never died

Matthew: Look, he was surely dead before the Romans released him (27:36)

Opponent: But there could have been a mix up of tombs.

Matthew: I don't think so, some women saw where Jesus was buried (27:61)

Opponent: The disciples stole the body, to claim Jesus was right about resurrection!

Matthew: No, the disciples fled, they were not around when he died (26:56)

Opponent: Then someone else stole the body.

Matthew: A large stone seal was set over the tomb, and soldiers kept watch (27:62-66)

Opponent: You know what soldiers are - they fell asleep!

Matthew: But that's what they were paid to say! (28:12-15)

Application

The women witnesses

It is hard to say what we can take from this text by way of application. Certainly, we should note the significance of the women in this story. We cannot overestimate the importance of their role as witnesses to the death and resurrection of Jesus. It was essential that the early church accept that these two basic events were real and credible, and the fact that they accepted the evidence of women is remarkable. The burial of Jesus is also important because it speaks of things being done properly by those who had the resources to do so. The story of the whispering and connivance of the chief priests and Pharisees is a reminder to us that the work of God will always have its opponents, and together with Matthew, we should know what they are doing.

Believing in the bodily resurrection of our Lord

It may be that God has spoken to you through this passage in a number of ways, but I suggest that we can take from this passage some thoughts about the provision of God for all circumstances. It is very easy to read the story of the death and resurrection of our Lord and forget details such as those we have read about today. If we are really to believe in the bodily resurrection of our Lord, which is a key part of traditional Christian faith, then this part of the story is as important as the rest.

Arguments about the resurrection

Lastly, people who wish to undermine traditional Christian belief focus on these verses to try and tie a Christian in knots concerning the facts of the resurrection. People have been doing this for centuries. It is important for a Christian disciple firstly to know that the enemy has been trying to refute God's saving work through the bodily resurrection of our Lord for centuries. Secondly, they should get to know the facts of scripture thoroughly so that they can handle the genuine questions people raise about what happened to Jesus at His death and Resurrection. This is all central to our faith, and we should know how to handle what scripture says about it.

Questions for groups

- 1. How important to the story of the Gospel are the women who appear at important and critical moments? What do you make of their presence at this point in Jesus' story?*
- 2. Why was it necessary for Jesus to be buried in a 'proper' tomb? What does the story of Joseph of Arimathea add to the story of Jesus' death and resurrection?*
- 3. Think and pray about how Matthew describes the death of Jesus, and let your spirit dwell on the reality of what happened. This is the most powerful and significant event in history*

Final Prayer

God of grace and God of glory, prepare our hearts for the great day that is ahead. Let us not be impatient in our waiting or too lazy in our expectation, but happy to be led by You towards the great resurrection rejoicing that awaits us! Thanks be to God. AMEN