

The Burial of Jesus - The Glorious Gospel!

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[0 : 00] 27 from verse 57 to verse 66 where we see the glorious gospel in the burial of Jesus.

So what? So what that Jesus died and was buried? Of what relevance is it for us to know that the followers of Jesus buried him in a garden tomb which the Roman authorities secured with a great seal?

Does it really make any difference to 21st century metro Christians like us to know these things? So what? Many people turn their backs on the Christian gospel because they just don't think it's relevant.

It might have been once but in our technologically advanced age superstitious talk of garden tombs and Roman seals well therefore the feeble-minded and the simple. So again we ask so what?

In what ways is Matthew 27, 57 through 66 relevant to us as 21st century metro Christians? Well the answer to the question of relevance is that it means all things to us in all ways and at all times.

[1 : 36] To stick our heads in the sand and pretend that the truth doesn't matter shows that perhaps we aren't as intellectually advanced as we think we are.

The great Roman philosopher Cicero once said those who do not know history will forever remain children. Those who do not know history will forever remain children.

So Matthew's account of the burial of Jesus means all things to us in all ways and at all times. If it means nothing to you at all you have to ask yourself exactly what being a Christian means and whether in any meaningful way you are living as a Christian.

Likewise if this burial means nothing to you I can virtually guarantee that you are not engaging in any meaningful evangelism nor playing your life, your part in the life of the church.

By contrast, regaining the relevance of the burial of Jesus will fill you with confidence in the face of opposition.

[2 : 46] It will give you answers in the face of questions and it will fill you with devotion in the face of apathy. So what?

Let me suggest three levels at which Matthew 27, 57 through 66 is relevant to all of us who are here today either online or in person.

First, it meets Christian fears. Second, it answers Christian questions. And third, it grows Christian devotion.

First of all, it meets Christian fears. It meets Christian fears. In the world of the day, Rome was the superpower and there was no other.

The political and economic life of a quarter of the world's population was governed according to the whims of the Roman emperor. Most everywhere you went was dominated by the golden eagle of the Roman legions.

[3 : 59] There could be no doubt that Rome was in control. In the Judea of Jesus' day and in the context of Matthew 27, it had ultimately been Roman authority which had condemned Jesus and had put him to death.

Roman soldiers had nailed him to the cross. They had played dice for his clothes and they had guarded his execution. Now, as you know, the gospel of Matthew was written to first century Jewish Christians who were still living in the Roman Empire at the very peak of its power.

Christians were often the targets of imperial persecution, especially during and after the turbulent reign of Emperor Nero. The legions still held power. The golden eagle still adorned the gates of Europe's cities.

Christians lived in fear because they would not bow down to Caesar and his eagles as gods, but only Jesus.

Well, today the Roman Empire lives mostly in the history books. But as Christians, we live under the reign of other superpowers. In Southeast Asia, we witness a new wave of persecution toward Christians.

[5 : 26] Here in the post-Christian West, we live under the growing power of a secularism where Christians are increasingly afraid to speak up about moral issues. So is meeting our fears relevant?

Well, of course it is. If it was for those Jewish Christians who were primary recipients of the gospel, it is for us too. It is for Christians in today's Southeast Asia.

Christians in today's Arab world. Christians afraid of speaking up in today's Scotland. The gospel meets our fears as Christians head on and gives us resources to overcome them.

And therefore, this passage in Matthew is a foundational passage because it gives us access into two areas in which we might not automatically think.

First, imperial doubt and then imperial power. Imperial doubt, first of all. The body of the crucifixion victim did not belong to his family.

[6 : 32] In fact, in the case of most crucifixions, in order to serve as a warning, the body of the victim was left hanging on the cross as it rotted.

The birds would peck at the flesh. Carnivorous insects would strip the body to the bone. This is how Rome dispenses judgment.

Not satisfied with the death of the criminal. It humiliates them and strips them of any dignity they may have had even in death. Why then did Pilate give permission to Joseph of Arimathea to take down the body of Jesus from the cross and give him a dignified burial?

Why did Pilate give permission for the followers of Jesus to anoint his body with spices and to wrap him in grave clothes? This was not abnormal on the part of the Roman governor.

This was illegal on the part of the Roman governor. It goes against Roman law, which demands that the victims of crucifixion be afforded no burial at all, but they rot where they hang.

[7 : 40] Why did he give such permission? It was because he knew that Jesus was the innocent victim of Roman, of Jewish power games. Pilate, you see, didn't know what to make of Jesus.

When it came to Jesus, there was imperial doubt. The great paradox of knowing that Jesus was innocent, but also recognizing that Jesus had to die in order to maintain public order.

And you know, our society really isn't much different. We're looking into the psychology of our society right now. It struggles with doubt concerning the Christian church. On one hand, it roundly condemns us for living in the dark ages.

On the other hand, it happily commends us for the charity work we do. On one hand, it roundly condemns us for the moral stances that we take.

On the other hand, it happily commends us for the positive contributions we make to communities all over Scotland. Our society both condemns and commends.

[8 : 51] The permission given by Pilate to bury the body of Jesus in a dignified manner shows that although we live in the 21st century and not the 1st century, nothing much has changed for us as Christians.

That those who lead our nations are still confused about us. They may hate the gospel we preach, but they praise the lives we lead.

They may mock the gospel we believe, but they admire our work ethic, our lawfulness, our charitable contributions to society.

What was relevant for 1st century Jewish Christians is still relevant to us today. So what means all things, all ways and all times to us.

But also, there's imperial power at stake here. There's imperial power. The Romans knew how to build things. The prevalence of Roman ruins goes to prove the point.

[10 : 03] From Roman bathhouses in Strathclyde Country Park to Hadrian's Wall, Roman engineers knew all about construction.

So having rolled the stone into the entrance to Jesus' tomb, Roman soldiers, on request of the Jewish leaders, sealed the stone in place, I would conjecture, using quick drying lime mortar.

And like a seal is placed on candle wax, a Roman seal was embossed on the surface of the mortar. And so when someone looked inside that tomb, the first thing they would see would be the emblem of Roman imperial power, the seal of the imperial eagles.

The point is this. What's keeping Jesus in that tomb is not merely the stone rolled over the entrance,

but the ingenuity, the technical know-how of the Roman Empire's engineers.

The Jewish rulers knew that Jesus had predicted that he would rise on the third day. So they used Roman ingenuity and Roman power as an obstacle to his resurrection.

[11 : 22] In other words, Roman might stood between a dead Jesus and a living Jesus. In the same way, Roman power stood as the arbiter of life and death over millions of Christians in the Roman Empire.

Thumbs up and the Christian lives. Thumbs down and the lion eats him. The early Christians feared the power of Rome. It's terrifying ingenuity, military, security.

It's not really that different today, is it, for Christians in Southeast Asia, in the Arab world? Is it really that different for us today as Christians in Scotland?

Where the passing of hate crime legislation poorly interpreted, and I add those words, poorly interpreted, could lead to the proclamation of the uniqueness of Christian salvation through Jesus Christ becoming an offence under Scottish law.

No wonder many of us are fearful of where all this is headed. However, the question we must all ask is this. Will a Roman seal prevent Jesus' resurrection?

[12 : 42] Will the dictates of Asian governments destroy the church of the living God? Will poorly constructed government legislation condemn the Scottish church to ultimate obscurity?

Of course not. Do not let your fears run away with you, but temper them with the knowledge that although the Romans did everything they could to keep Jesus in that tomb, they too were overwhelmed by the resurrection power of God.

In other words, let the burial of Jesus in the first century meet your fears of the 21st. Times really haven't changed that much, and our secular leaders still don't know what to make of us.

There is nothing new under the sun. The promises of Scripture are still as relevant to us today in days of coronavirus pandemic as they ever have been.

And more important still, the infinite power of the infinite God stands ever ready to defend his church.

[13 : 51] After all, it's Jesus himself who said, I'm building my church. The gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

No, they shall not, not even a great Roman seal. Meeting Christian fears. The second thing this passage does is it answers Christian questions.

It answers Christian questions. Many of these first century Jewish Christians to whom Matthew is writing this gospel, you can be sure that the burial of Jesus had relevance.

Because after all, they are suffering for their faith, not only at the hands of the Roman authorities, but also at the hands of their fellow Jewish countrymen. The Jewish communities in which these Christians lived were often furiously hostile to the thought of a crucified and buried Messiah.

You can see the first signs of such hostility in the way in which the Jewish religious leaders plead with Pilate to make the tomb even more secure. Well, some 35 to 40 years later when Matthew's writing this gospel, Jewish leaders are still continuing to pour scorn on the resurrection of Jesus.

[15 : 13] They cannot allow themselves to believe in a Jesus who died and rose again. By contrast, the Jewish Christians held to the resurrection of Jesus as central.

As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15, if Christ has not been raised from the dead, then we are to be pitied above all men. These early Christians needed to be able to answer the questions their non-Christian countrymen were asking and overcome doubts concerning the resurrection of Jesus.

The early Jewish Christians faced two questions at the hands of their countrymen. First of all, the early disciples of Jesus went to the wrong tomb. That's why they didn't find the body of Jesus.

And secondly, Jesus, he did not rise from the dead. Rather, his body was stolen. These two objections raised toward the resurrection are both answered in Matthew 27, 57 through 66 and the account of the burial of Jesus.

Let's look at them both. First, the wrong tomb objection. The objection of the wrong tomb. There is only one constant throughout the narrative of Jesus' crucifixion, burial, and resurrection.

[16 : 43] resurrection. The woman who had been in attendance. They had stood at the distance while Jesus had been nailed to the cross. For the nine hours he hung there, they watched and they listened to him.

Now in verse 61, having watched Jesus being taken down from the cross, wrapped in grave clothes and carried to the garden, we read, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there sitting opposite the tomb.

So here you have these women. They have witnessed the death of Jesus. They have witnessed now the burial of Jesus and as we'll see in a few weeks time, they witnessed the resurrection of Jesus.

In light of these women being there, it is inconceivable that the early disciples went to the wrong tomb. In Jewish law, the testimony of two witnesses was sufficient to establish a truth.

Now you have these women as witnesses of his burial. Besides which, the tomb belonged to Joseph of Arimathea of whom we shall speak a little in our last point.

[17 : 53] Joseph was still alive in the period of the early church and if anyone could have proved that the disciples went to the wrong tomb, it was him because it was his tomb in which the body of Jesus was placed.

No, you see. To the question of the wrong tomb, the early Christians could point to the evidence of witnesses. Well, what of the accusation that Jesus' body was stolen, that he didn't rise from the dead, it just was stolen?

Well, over the centuries, many have insisted that rather than Jesus having been raised from the dead, the early disciples stole his body from the tomb and merely claimed that he had been raised from the dead.

That's an argument you will still hear used today. But again, this burial narrative answers these questions. This was an issue for which the Jewish religious leaders had made an allowance. That's why in verse 64 we read that they had approached Pilate and said, order that tomb to be made secure until the third day lest his disciples go and steal his body away and tell the people he has risen from the dead.

[19 : 09] When Pilate ordered that a great Roman seal be placed at the entrance to the tomb and then when a guard was placed at the tomb as we're told in verse 66, he is rendering the question of grave robbing impossible.

Not only was it extremely difficult, to move the stone at the entrance to the tomb, it became even more difficult still to break the mortar cementing the stone into the entrance and to add a complication to do so beneath the eyes of the watching guard would have been impossible.

Use Occam's razor, folks. To the question of grave robbing, the early Christians could point to the evidence of the seal and the guard. And the point is this, Matthew has so written his narrative of the burial of Jesus to establish the factuality, the historicity and the truthfulness of the resurrection.

The resurrection of Jesus is the foundation stone of all we believe as Christians. Without it, our faith falls flat. With it, our faith rises strong.

the resurrection of Jesus became the hallmark of authentic apostolic preaching and the benchmark of the gospel. No matter what our secular society might tell us, go back here to Matthew 27, 57 through 66 and pray this passage deep into your heart and tell yourself, what I believe, it's no fantasy.

[20 : 50] What I believe is based on solid reason and historic fact. It's not just worth believing this. It is worth suffering for this.

It is even worth dying for this. Paul Samuelson won the 1970 Nobel Prize in economics.

He once famously said, when the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do, sir?

When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do, sir? If you are not yet a committed Christian, can I ask you to explore these foundations of the Christian faith and especially this one, the burial of Jesus as a precursor to his resurrection.

As the facts in your mind change, perhaps you too can follow that Nobel Prize winner's logic and change your mind about Jesus also.

[21 : 55] Moving somewhat from skepticism to belief and yes, even from doubt to faith. the last thing I want us to look at from this passage is growing Christian devotion.

Growing Christian devotion. If the burial of Christ met Christian fears and answered Christian questions, then also it grew Christian devotion.

what does it mean to live as a first century Jewish Christian in an aggressively anti-Christian environment? It means a lot of things, but it means at least this, a growing devotion to Jesus Christ and his gospel.

Because if that faith of these first century Jewish Christians is in any way any fairy, the Christian church will fold under the pressure it faces.

Joseph of Arimathea, this much neglected and much maligned follower of Jesus Christ together with these women present us with an example of the kind of growing faith the burial of Jesus allows us to have in our own anti-Christian environment which admittedly is far less dangerous than it was for the early Christians, but is growing daily in its hostility to us as the evangelical Christian church. [23 : 30] And there are three brief aspects of this example these early believers, Joseph of Arimathea and these women showed which are the tardiest necessity for us today as they were back then.

Very briefly, risk, generosity and patience. Risk, first of all. Make no mistake.

For all that Joseph of Arimathea was a secret disciple of Jesus, he well and truly took his life into his hands by going to Pilate and asking for Jesus' body. Because in the most public way possible, he has nailed his colors to the mast.

A well-respected member of the Sanhedrin, he stood to lose everything, even his life, on account of his devotion to Jesus. And these first century Jewish Christians to whom Matthew was writing were also taking a risk by following Jesus.

But that risk is of the very nature of devotion to Jesus. Listen, all of you. are you willing to take the risk of being laughed at and isolated, of being belittled and ignored simply because you call yourself a Christian?

[24 : 47] None of us have to deal with the kind of suffering Christians in many other parts of the world do today. And yet, they endured it cheerfully while trying to persuade some Western Christians to go public with their faith is harder than pulling teeth.

Be a risk taker like Joseph of Arimathea. Take your stand with Jesus at home. It would work. Yes, even here in the church. Risk.

Second, generosity. Generosity. We should not underestimate the personal cost to Joseph of Arimathea of the burial of Jesus. Not only did he risk his livelihood, reputation, and life by publicly requesting Jesus' body, but with incredible generosity, he gave Jesus his own family too.

Perhaps also the grave clothes in which they wrapped him. In Joseph's day, these were highly expensive indeed. His generosity went beyond that of many of his day.

Though he was a rich man, yet he gave his riches to Jesus. In times of hardship for the Christian church, rather like what those Christians to whom Matthew was writing first were enduring, it's all too easy to look after ourselves and say, well, I'm alright, Jack.

[26 : 07] Meanwhile, poorer Christians starve. And missionaries are hindered from preaching the gospel in new cities and towns because they can't get funding.

If ever there was a time for Christian generosity, it is in times of turbulence for the church. If Jesus gave his life for us, then surely we can give our resources to him.

This is part of a growing devotion to him, not just in our risk-taking, but in our gift-giving. And then lastly, patience.

Patience. You know, what amazes me about all the risks Joseph took and the generosity he showed is that to all intents and purposes, the messianic mission of Jesus had ended in failure. Jesus had been executed for all that they had thought that Jesus would be the warrior king of a new Israel and would lead the nation to freedom from the Romans.

[27 : 13] It's now all over. The messianic kingdom of Jesus, it lies in ruins. And yet, Joseph of Arimathea invests in failure. He risks his all on a horse already beaten and he generously offers his tomb for a fallen cause.

And as we read in verse 61, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there sitting opposite the tomb. even though the resurrection came as much of a shock to them as it did to everybody else, they didn't know what was going to happen.

They just accepted that the whole story hadn't been told. That the book of Jesus' mission wasn't ended. But there would be a twist in the story.

And they're there, these women, they're patiently waiting opposite the tomb. There were, after all, three days between the crucifixion of Jesus and his resurrection.

Patiently waiting upon God to finish his story is an important part of a growing devotion to Jesus. The story of your life is not complete.

[28 : 32] The book is not ended. What you are today by the power of the resurrection is not what you shall always be.

Failures shall be transformed into successes. And your doubts into certainties. the gospel changes everything. It is the final twist in the story, the resurrection of Jesus.

But nothing can happen, you see, first, without the burial. The point is this, be patient with God and be patient with yourselves.

The story of your life is not yet complete. Don't stick your head in the sand. The burial of Jesus is as relevant today as it's always been.

well, so what, you see? So everything in every way at every time. The message of the burial of Jesus is as contemporary today as it was to these first century Christians to whom Matthew first wrote his letter.

[29 : 38] Who knows what the future holds for the Christian church in Scotland? Who knows what it holds for our church? Who knows what it holds for us as individuals? Who knows what it holds for you?

I can't tell. But the gospel of Jesus Christ founded in the burial of Jesus is hope in darkness, is life and death, and is certainty in doubt.

What's so bad about that? Let's pray these truths into our hearts. Let's pray. Father, we thank you for this amazing passage from your word, and we see instantly how it meets Christian fears, because whereas we are confronted by the great power of a coronavirus pandemic, and are tempted to shake in our shoes, yet just as the great ingenuity and power of the Roman Empire could not stop Jesus rising from the dead, so this coronavirus pandemic cannot thwart your purposes in this world.

You reign victorious. Give us grace then to meet our fears. We also think of the questions that we have, questions which have caused many among us perhaps to loosen our grip on the truth of the gospel, to give in to despair or apathy.

Father, we thank you that this passage gives us confidence in the truth of the gospel, that what we believe is no fantasy, no fiction. It is based on historical truth and reason.

[31 : 21] Overcome our doubts with the truth of the gospel, we pray. And then, oh Lord, it answers our issues of devotion. Again, some of us in our fellowship have grown less devoted over this time of coronavirus pandemic.

We've struggled to see the relevance of the gospel and we've struggled to keep up our daily devotions and we've struggled, struggled, struggled, struggled. Lord, we thank you that we can express our relationship to you in taking a risk for you, in being generous toward you, in being patient with you and ourselves.

And Father, we just thank you for this passage of scripture. We are, to use a modern expression, blown away by the glory of the gospel. In Jesus' name we pray these things.

Amen.