

The Guard's Report

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[0 : 00] Please turn back with me to the passage we read in Matthew chapter 28, from verse 11 through verse 15.

This is a magnificent chapter of Scripture, but I want to begin with a question. What is the most unbelievable feature of this chapter? What is the most unbelievable feature of this chapter? It's not the appearance of an angel, nor surely even the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. After all, many angels had appeared during the ministry of Jesus, and the resurrection of Jesus had been foretold.

I want to suggest that the most unbelievable, but in many ways the most human feature of Matthew 28, is the irrational unbelief of the religious leaders.

No matter what evidence they possessed to the contrary, they would not allow themselves to believe that Jesus had risen from the dead.

[1 : 11] They would not, no, they could not allow themselves to believe what they heard from first-hand witnesses of the resurrection. In 2 Corinthians 4, verse 4, the apostle Paul says of them, In their case, the God of this world has blinded the minds of unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

Perhaps when he wrote those words in 2 Corinthians 4, Paul had this episode in Matthew 28, 11 through 15 in mind. Because how in the light of all the evidence they are being presented with, can the religious leaders possibly remain in that state of unbelief?

Rather than accept the evidence presented to them and confess that they were wrong, they decided to concoct a devilish deceit. That rather than being risen from the dead, his body was stolen instead.

Unless we think that somehow such unbelief belongs only in the first century and in the pages of the Bible, realize this, there are many in our own day who know the truth about Jesus.

They do. And yet they will not and cannot allow themselves to believe it. And so they concoct their own forms of devilish deceit to explain it away.

[2 : 48] In fact, many is perhaps an understatement. Most, by far the most, if we're being honest. We meet them every day. And some of them we love very deeply.

Well, from these verses this morning, highlighted by the response of these religious leaders to the guards report, I want us to notice three features of unbelief.

Unbelief is unseen. It's unreasonable. And it's unceasing. It's unseen. It's unreasonable. And it's unceasing.

It's almost like Matthew, the gospel writer, is reaching across the centuries to us. And he's grabbing us by the lapels and he's shaking us, saying, I wish I could make you realize just how unseen, how unreasonable, and how unceasing your belief can be, unbelief can be.

I wish I could make you believe in the gospel of the risen Lord Jesus Christ and put your faith and trust in him.

[3 : 59] First of all, then, unbelief is unseen. Unseen. Our passage begins with the words, while they were going, while they were going.

Well, who was going and where were they going? According to the previous verses, the who, who were going, were the woman who had been at the empty tomb of Jesus that morning, had heard the words of the angel that Jesus had risen, and then had met the risen Jesus on the way.

And the where, to where they were going, was to the disciples, to tell them that Jesus had risen from the dead, and to go to Galilee, for there they would see him.

So from these first few words, while they were going, as they were going, you really have a summary of everything that's gone before, the announcement of the resurrection, and the mission

of these women to tell Christ's people that he has risen from the dead.

These women are on their way to proclaim the resurrection of Jesus. They're the first preachers of the risenness of Christ.

[5 : 14] The first in a long line, which reaches down to the present day and has changed the complexion of the whole world. Cultures and societies have been changed by the message of the gospel.

Thousands of millions have heard their successors preaching and being changed. Whereas before they lived under the feet of death, the resurrection of Christ has given them light in the darkness. Whereas before they were filled with guilt, the resurrection of Christ has been to them forgiveness from all their sin. So these women, as they were going, while they were going, are beginning a mission which is still picking up pace and accelerating today.

The same message they proclaimed is being proclaimed from a million pulpits over the world today. Yes, even in countries which formerly were closed to the gospel.

But at the same time, the gospel is being preached. And many millions are responding in faith and trust, as they are today.

[6 : 30] And belief is also spreading. The hardened hearts of a human race who will not, cannot by nature, allow themselves to accept the truth of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

And so at the very same time, the very same time, the women were going to the disciples to tell the disciples that Jesus had been raised from the dead.

Some of the guards who had been present at the tomb of Jesus went into the city to tell the chief priests what had happened. And the chief priests were conspiring with the elders of the people to spin a devilish deceit that Jesus had not been raised from the dead, but rather his body had been stolen.

So at the very same time, the gospel is making ready to be proclaimed. Evil men are making up stories to blind the people into disbelief.

As you read these verses, you get the impression that all these proceedings, the guards report, the chief priests conspiracies, the bribes, the political payoffs, that they're being done in secret.

[7 : 47] Unseen by the people. The normal people. The normal people of Jerusalem would never know that this story about Jesus' body being stolen actually had been hatched in a smoke-filled politburo room in the Sanhedrin's building in Jerusalem.

That what they were actually being told was a fictional construct, a figment of the imagination of the chief priests and the elders who, for their own reasons, even though they knew the truth, chose to believe a lie.

And the point is this. Unbelief, its origins, its spread, and its motives are most often unseen.

While there may be in some places great success in evangelism, there may also be an increased hardening among many to the gospel. Because where faith grows, so does stubborn unbelief.

And that unbelief most often hides under the surface and very rarely rears its head. While the gospel is being proclaimed in public, in private, people are consciously choosing to reject the fact and to believe the fiction.

[9 : 10] For unseen reasons and in unseen ways, people harden themselves against the gospel, against what they know in their heart of hearts is true.

Now, in our day and age, the public demonstration of unbelief is perhaps more obvious than it was previously. But I would venture to venture to suggest that there is no more or no less unbelief today than there was 100 years ago.

Perhaps some of us look back to those days when churches were full on a Sunday. But do we really know for sure that there was any less unbelief then than there is now?

Because the thing is, unbelief is unseen. And whereas in the service of things, it might look as though the gospel is making progress in a person's life, scratch a little deeper and you will find unbelief.

While they were going. The guards were reporting. The chief priests were plotting. If there is such a thing as unbelief in our congregation, and I'm sure there is, it will be unseen.

[10 : 29] It will be in private. It's hiding under the surface. It rarely shows its head. But just so that you know, although it might be hidden to everyone else in Glasgow City Free Church, God knows about it.

He knows because he caused it to be recorded about these religious leaders in Jerusalem in Jesus' day. And he knows about your unbelief also.

God knows. That's not an excuse to run away from him. Rather, it's a reason to get your unbelief sorted out once and for all.

To put your issues on the table. To talk them through with God in prayer or with someone else. To open your mind, your eyes, and your heart to the truth of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Unbelief thrives in secret darkness. Bring it out. Expose it to the light of the gospel. Unbelief is unseen.

[11 : 41] Unbelief, secondly, is unreasonable. It's unreasonable. This is what makes the unbelief of these religious leaders so unbelievable.

It's that it's unreasonable. They were listening firsthand to witnesses of the resurrection. Some of the guards who had been present at the tomb.

These guards who had trembled and shaken in their shoes. The sight of the angel. So these religious leaders heard about the earthquake.

They heard about the trembling of the ground. The stone being rolled away and the glorious angel sitting upon it. They heard these words from firsthand witnesses who had nothing to gain.

In fact, for these guards to admit what they had done would normally have led to their execution.

There was nothing in it for these guards to lie about concerning what they had heard and seen.

[12 : 43] So these religious leaders, they knew the truth that Jesus had risen from the grave. They knew it.

And yet they still chose to devise their own devilish deceit that somehow, in the light of all the additional security and the impossibility of the situation, the disciples had managed somehow to steal away the body of Jesus.

In other words, these chief priests and leaders are sinning against the light. They knew the truth, but they turned their backs on it.

It's not as if they were ignorant. They knew for a fact that Jesus had risen from the dead. As sure as did Mary and the other women who were making their way to tell the disciples that Jesus had risen from the dead, so these religious leaders were also sure that Jesus was risen from the dead.

But they devised a lie to cover the truth, and then they paid off the guards. These religious men, they're good with their money.

[13 : 59] They used it to bribe Judas, and now they used it to bribe the guards into spreading a lie. You know, I never cease to be amazed at the risks people will take and the danger people will expose themselves to just in order to get more money.

And so these religious men devised the lie because they want to keep their grip on power. The guards spread the lie because they want to fill their pockets with money.

So you can see, on one hand, when I say that unbelief is unreasonable, I'm making a false statement because these religious leaders did have reasons for their stubborn unbelief.

Namely, that they wanted to stay in power. The guards had reasons for their deceitful lies. Namely, they wanted to be rich.

They had their own reasons for unbelief. But what makes unbelief so unreasonable is that it has nothing to do with the facts of the case and the truth at stake.

[15 : 06] Namely, that on the third day, as evidenced by many witnesses, Jesus had risen from the dead. No matter what the truth is, they are not willing, are not able to accept and believe it for themselves.

And rather than spread the truth that Jesus really had risen, they chose to suppress it and rather to spread the lie that his body had been stolen instead.

And so again, I say what Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 4 verse 4 is an illustration of the hardness of their hearts. In their case, the God of this age has blinded their minds to keep them from seeing the light of the glory of the gospel of Christ, who is the image of God.

Even though they knew the truth, for their own reasons, they chose to believe and to spread a lie. The reason they rejected the resurrection of Jesus was not intellectual, nor was it cognitive. It was moral. And it was for their own gain.

[16 : 19] Now, I hope we all understand this because what I'm saying here and what Matthew is portraying here will have the biggest impact upon your prayers for evangelism and mission.

The reason people reject the gospel isn't because it is illogical, untrue or unreasonable. The gospel makes sense.

The gospel wholly satisfies the human intellect. The reason people reject the gospel is because there are other things in their lives which are more important to them. Other things they do not want to lose.

The guards became rich through their lying. Their religious leaders clung on to power through their lying. Many people in our own day reject the gospel because they don't want to live by its ethical code.

Well, they may say they reject it on intellectual grounds, but the reality is somewhat different. They don't want to change their thinking and their lives.

[17 : 28] They don't want to get rid of that illicit relationship or to sacrifice that career or to give up that sinful lifestyle. They are therefore neither willing nor able to believe the truth of Jesus Christ.

I have never yet met one Christian who, having fallen away from the faith, can honestly tell me that it was because they were no longer intellectually convinced.

No, all these Christians I have met who have fallen away from the faith have done so for other reasons. Perhaps they started a relationship they knew was wrong and because they couldn't square it with the gospel, they rejected the gospel in favour of the relationship.

Or perhaps they made an idol out of their career. They couldn't square it with their Christian profession, so they got rid of Christianity in favour of the career. For some Christian men I've known, they started an affair.

They couldn't square it with being Christian husbands. But rather than repent and return to their wives, they chose their lovers over their Christianity. Or for others, they've been hurt so badly by a church that rather than recommit themselves to the gospel, they walk away.

[18 : 54] This kind of rejection is unreasonable. It's an insistence upon the irrational and the illogical. According to one Christian apologist, the resurrection of Jesus is the best attested fact in all of human history.

It's not foolish to believe this truth. In fact, the opposite is the case. It's foolish not to believe this truth. Christianity has at its basis the resurrection of Jesus from the dead on the third day.

If the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is true, according to that apologist, it's the best attested fact in all of human history. Then the foundations upon which we believe and profess to be Christians are strong, firm and real.

Let me ask an honest question of those of us who have not yet accepted Jesus Christ as Lord. Is the ultimate reason why you continue to reject him purely intellectual? Is it? Really? Or can you find other motives at play?

[20 : 15] You've got a history with Christians you don't like. Moral issues, perhaps. Career issues, perhaps.

Relationship issues, perhaps. Lifestyle issues, perhaps. Reputation issues, perhaps. Control issues, perhaps. A combination of them all. Or perhaps you just don't want to lose face by admitting that for all this time you've been wrong.

Let me urge you to be honest with yourself and before God today. Let me urge you. And for those of us who are already Christians, let me give you this counsel.

In all your prayers for mission, remember that the number one issue upon which people reject the gospel is not intellectual but moral. Consider that in your prayers for mission and missionaries.

When we speak to those who are not yet Christians about the gospel, we're not engaging in a fair fight because their unbelief is unseen and unreasonable. And that's why we need to pray that God would do a prior work of transformation in their hearts to make them willing to hear the truth about the resurrection.

[21 : 28] That God would remove from their eyes the veil which has blinded them to the glory of Christ. That God would make the gospel more valuable and precious to them than all their relationships.

Than their reputation. Than their past hurts. Than their money. Unbelief is unseen.

Unbelief is unreasonable. Unbelief is unceasing. It's unceasing.

You will know, I've told you this many times, Matthew is writing this gospel to first century Jewish Christians who are under great pressure from their Jewish countrymen to renounce their faith in Jesus Christ and to return to Judaism.

And so at every stage of this book, Matthew has had them in mind in the material he has chosen to include and the way he has chosen to include it.

[22 : 32] Everything he has done is with a view to proving that Jesus is the Christ and that these first century Jewish Christians should persevere in the faith.

To be a follower of Jesus is to be an authentic descendant of Abraham and Moses. They have not abandoned their Jewish heritage by believing in Jesus.

Rather, they have embraced it. So keep going in the faith. Do not give up in the faith. But these early Christians did not merely face social pressures to reintegrate with the Jewish communities they left.

But intellectual pressure at the hands of Jewish apologists. Leaders in the Jewish community who were trying to persuade them that Jesus was not the Christ after all.

And one of the arguments these early Jewish apologists used against these Christians was that, in fact, Jesus did not rise from the dead on the third day. Rather, his body had been stolen by his disciples.

[23 : 41] Where did that argument come from? It found its origin here in the unseenness of the religious politburo of Jerusalem.

And in the unreasonableness of the devilish deception they bribed the guards to spread on their behalf. And that's why Matthew ends this section with the words, So they took the money and did as they were directed.

And this story has been spread among the Jews to this day. You see, these early Christians, to whom Matthew's writing, are still facing the consequences of that fateful council between the chief priests and the elders where they concocted this lie.

If you'd stopped a normal, ordinary Jewish bloke on the street and you asked him the question, Did Jesus of Nazareth rise from the dead as the Christians say he did?

He'd tell you because it had been told him by his religious leaders. Of course not. His disciples stole his body. The pat answer they gave was a sign that they had been brainwashed by their religious leaders.

[24 : 55] In the days of Justin Martyr, apologist of the early church in the second century, this story was still being spread by the Jewish authorities.

And so you can check this up online. Justin devotes one of his apologies to this very issue. And yet, here we are in 2021.

You stop a man in the street, either in Jerusalem or in Glasgow, and you ask him, Tell me, did Jesus of Nazareth rise from the dead as the Christians say he did?

And the chances are they'll reply by saying, Of course not. His disciples stole his body. Nearly 2,000 years have passed since Matthew wrote these words in Matthew 28, 11 through 15.

But nothing is new concerning the arguments levelled against the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Nothing. We have the swoon theory that Jesus didn't really die on the cross but only seemed to be dead, but was revived by the coolness of the tomb.

[26 : 04] We have the wrong tomb theory that the disciples went to the wrong tomb. And most prominently, we have the stolen body theory that the disciples stole the body of Jesus and took it somewhere secret where they buried it in private.

And over the course of 2,000 years, even though there is nothing new in terms of arguments levelled against the resurrection, the Christian church, carefully expounding the resurrection passages in scripture and applying both historical and philosophical rigour, has more than answered them all.

And yet the objections continue. The same old objections. Frank Morrison was an American investigative journalist of the mid-20th century, and he approached the resurrection of Jesus with all these objections in mind.

He was no friend of Christianity, had no sympathy for Christianity at all. He set out to write a book disproving the resurrection. But the more he investigated, the more logic he applied, the more reason he brought to bear upon the case, the more he changed his mind.

Morrison, who as a result went on to become a Christian, wrote one of the most influential books of the 20th century called *Who Moved the Stone*, where far from disproving the resurrection of Jesus, he gives compelling reasons for faith and belief.

[27 : 49] Read it for yourself, and I'm sure you'll find it entirely as convincing as I always have. So then, what is the most unbelievable feature in this passage?

It's not the appearance of the angel. It's not the physical resurrection of Jesus from the dead. It's the unbelief of those who know the truth, but refuse to believe the truth.

Surely we're not like that, though, eh? Presented with the truth, we will believe. Presented with the fact of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, we will not keep on rejecting him.

Rather, we will bow our knees before him, and worship, just as these godly women did. We'll place our faith and trust in him.

We'll commit to him our past, and our present, and our future. We'll give to him everything. We will, won't we?

[28 : 58] Let us pray. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, you know that for preacher and for people, it's very difficult to gauge the mood.

Sometimes back in, when we were gathering together, there'd be a hushed silence at the end of a sermon, and we'd all know that you were doing business with our souls. Difficult, difficult to gauge that today.

But we believe, oh Lord, that whether we're together, or whether we're apart, you are still doing business with our souls. Father, we pray that you would remove the veil of unbelief from the mind of our hearts, so that perhaps for the first time, we would see the light of the glory of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And for those of us who have been Christians perhaps for many years, but are struggling, because we've got cloudy, cloudy vision about this issue.

Lord, we ask that you would clarify our minds, that because Jesus has risen from the dead, everything he said is true, and that he is with us by his spirit today. We ask these things in Jesus' name.

[30 : 09] Amen.