

Chapter 115: “That He was Buried...”

Matthew 27:55–66

Since the moment Jesus first appeared in the Gospel of Matthew, the Lord has walked with perfect poise and control in every situation. Even when all the powers of hell and Satan himself raged against him, Jesus confidently endured whatever was required of him. Only in the garden of Gethsemane do we see him in crisis, and then we immediately see him submit his fears to his Father, growing in confidence for the task appointed to him. Now that Jesus’ work is done after his death on the cross, there is no work for him left to do. He becomes a passive player, as his body must be removed from the cross, buried in a tomb, and guarded by Roman soldiers. Even in our Lord’s death, the details around him conform to God’s perfect plan. Here, we see the tremendous truth that *Jesus was buried in accordance with the Scriptures*.

The Faithfulness of Faith (Matt. 27:55–61)

After the catastrophic moment of Jesus’ death, with all the ensuing upheaval in the temple’s torn curtain, in the earthquake that opened the tombs, and in surprising conversion of a Gentile centurion, Matthew turns his attention to the reactions of other people around Jesus. He begins with a vignette of women who have displayed constant attention to Jesus: “There were also many women there, looking on from a distance, who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to him, among whom were Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph and the mother of the sons of Zebedee” (vv. 55–56). Although we have encountered “the mother of the sons of Zebedee” before (Matt. 20:20), this is the first point at which Matthew informs us of the presence of these women who had followed Jesus all the way from Galilee to minister to him. As we discussed in the study on that passage, a comparison of the names of women here in Matthew, in Mark 15:40, and in John 19:25, it is likely (although not indisputable) that the name of the “mother of the sons of Zebedee” is Salome, and “Mary the mother of James and Joseph” is Jesus’ mother, making Salome Jesus’ aunt.¹

In part, Matthew contrasts the “extraordinary attachment” of these women to Jesus in contrast

¹ “If we make two assumptions—(1) that John’s second entry is distinguished from his third (i.e., they are not in apposition) and (2) that John’s list of four includes the list of three in Matthew and Mark—then certain things become probable. First, the mother of Zebedee’s sons was called Salome, unless a different woman is here introduced. Second, if Mary the mother of James and Joseph (or Joses) is Jesus’ mother (cf. 13:55), then Jesus’ mother and Mary Magdalene appear on all three lists. That would make Salome Jesus’ mother’s sister—his aunt on his mother’s side. Others suppose that Mary the wife of Clopas is the mother of James and Joses, who are not Jesus’ half brothers. Yet the result still equates Salome and Jesus’ aunt on his mother’s side. Although none of this is certain, it would help explain 20:20.” (Carson, “Matthew,” 652.)

with the cowardice of the disciples, who fled from him in the garden of Gethsemane.² More than that, however, Matthew includes this as a “special note of recognition” for their faithfulness and role as “witnesses of [Jesus’] crucifixion and death,” just as they will also soon serve as the first witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus.³ As Lenski notes, these women looked on “from a distance” only because of the soldiers who guarded the immediate space surrounding Jesus and because of the volatile crowd (including chief priests, scribes, elders, and passersby) who had gathered to watch the “spectacle” (Matt. 27:36, 39, 41, 47–49).⁴ They came as close as they could. In this first scene, therefore, we have a brief glimpse of women whose faithfulness to Jesus was unwavering. Two of them (Mary Magdalene and the “other Mary,” who is possibly Jesus’ mother) will follow Jesus to his burial (v. 61), and then will be the first arrive at the tomb after the Sabbath on Sunday morning (Matt. 28:1).

Next, Matthew turns to the reaction of Joseph of Arimathea: “When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who also was a disciple of Jesus” (v. 57). Importantly, the “evening” here is likely what we would call “late afternoon,” which began around 3:00pm (the time of Jesus’ death, at the “ninth hour”; Matt. 27:46) and lasted until nightfall at 6:00pm.⁵ Notably, 3:00pm was the time when the Passover lamb was sacrificed and the time of the “evening sacrifice” (“twilight” [lit., “between the evenings”]; Ex. 12:6; 29:39). The importance of this point relates to the keeping of the Sabbath, as well as the festival of Passover. John tells us even more explicitly that Pilate himself was concerned to ensure that Jesus’ body would not hang on the cross at the start of Sabbath, which began at nightfall: “Since it was the day of Preparation, and so that the bodies would not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), the Jews asked Pilate that their legs might be broken and that they might be taken away” (John 19:31). Jesus’ legs were not broken since he was already dead at this point (John 19:33), which gave Joseph time to ask Pilate for Jesus’ body for burial.

France observes that “Only Matthew mentions that Joseph was ‘rich,’ perhaps to echo Isa 53:9 (Hebrew, not LXX), ‘they made his grave...with a rich man.’”⁶ There are at least two important points from observing that Joseph was rich. First, Joseph’s wealth explains why this “disciple of Jesus” (v. 57) had followed Jesus “secretly for fear of the Jews” (John 19:38), since he stood to lose both standing as a “member of the council” (Luke 23:50) and wealth if the Jews knew that he believed

² Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:328.

³ Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 855.

⁴ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 1134.

⁵ “As had been indicated, Jesus died at three o’clock in the afternoon. According to the ancient Hebrew way of speaking there were ‘two evenings’ (cf. Exod. 12:6 in the original). The first ‘evening’ which we would call ‘afternoon’ began at 3 P.M., the second at 6 P.M. Something of this is probably reflected in the phrase ‘When evening fell,’ for we cannot imagine that Joseph of Arimathea, a Jew, would have approached Pilate on Friday, 6 P.M., asking for the body of Jesus when the sabbath was beginning. Much sooner than this he must have started to make preparations. It was against the law to leave a dead body on a tree overnight (Deut. 21:23). This would have been all the more reprehensible if by doing so, the body would be hanging on a tree or cross on the sabbath. Moreover, this was the sabbath of the Passover week. Great, indeed, was that sabbath (John 19:31)!” (Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 979.)

⁶ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1089.

Jesus.⁷ For this reason, Joseph had to “take courage” (Mark 15:43) to go to Pilate and ask for Jesus’ body, since doing so revealed his faith in the Messiah. Matthew does not mention these considerations explicitly, but by identifying Joseph as “rich,” Matthew hints at the potential costs Joseph would have faced for his actions. This burial may also have come at a cost for Joseph, who may have been ceremonially defiled by handling the body of a dead person on the eve of the high Sabbath of a Passover feast.⁸ Joseph could not have known, though, that Jesus’ body would never see corruption (Acts 2:27), so that Joseph would have remained clean through this event.

Second, Joseph’s wealth also explains why Joseph would have been prepared to give Jesus “his own new tomb, which he had cut in the rock” (v. 60). Although from Arimathea, Joseph could afford to purchase and prepare a tomb for his own eventual burial in the holy city of Jerusalem. Since Joseph was still alive, no one had yet been buried in the tomb, a point that France notes “is significant for apologetics, in that it makes it more difficult to explain the women’s discovery [after his resurrection] as due to mistaken identity: there was only one body in the tomb.”⁹

Even more importantly, the honor of this burial in a wealthy man’s tomb marks a transition from the conclusion of Jesus’ estate of humiliation that anticipates the beginning of Jesus’ estate of exaltation, which begins at his resurrection. While Jesus remains buried, death retains its hold on him; however, while Jesus was not *born* in a high place (but rather in a stable), he is nevertheless *buried* in a tomb fit for a rich man. Calvin reflects well on this point:

The burial of Christ is now added, as an intermediate transition from the ignominy of the cross to the glory of the resurrection. True, indeed, God determined, for another reason, that Christ should be buried, that it might be more fully attested that he suffered real death on our account. But yet it ought to be regarded as the principal design, that in this manner the cursing, which he had endured for a short time, began to be removed; for his body was not thrown into a ditch in the ordinary way, but honorably laid in a *hewn sepulcher*. Although at that time the weakness of the flesh was still visible, and the divine power of the Spirit was not clearly seen before his resurrection; yet God determined by this, as a sort of preparation, to shadow out what he was shortly afterwards to do, that he might exalt gloriously above the heavens his Son, the conqueror of death.¹⁰

Lenski adds, “A new tomb, where no decay or odor of death had as yet entered, this was a fitting place for the body of Jesus which no corruption or decomposition dared to touch (Acts 2:27). Here his holy body could have sweet rest after all its dreadful, painful work had been done.”¹¹

After Joseph made his request, “Then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. And Joseph took the

⁷ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 980.

⁸ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:331–32. Some speculate that Joseph may have employed servants to avoid direct contact with Jesus’ dead body, but that does not seem to fit the direct, tender care for Jesus’ body that Matthew describes here.

⁹ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1091.

¹⁰ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:330–31.

¹¹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 1139.

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” (vv. 58b–60). Although the quick approach of Sabbath at nightfall (along with the requirement to bury a man hanged on a tree “the same day”; Deut. 21:23) necessitated haste, Joseph buried Jesus’ body with care and dignity, even going so far as to protect the body of Jesus by rolling a great stone over the entrance. “Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb” (v. 61), knowing that they could do nothing to continue preparing Jesus’ body for burial until after the Sabbath.¹² Out of love for Jesus and honor for the Lord’s law (both related to the burial of those cursed by God by being hanged on a tree, as well as the law of the Sabbath), Jesus is buried before nightfall in accordance with the Scriptures.

The Legalism of Legalists (Matt. 27:62–66)

The final section of this passage related to Jesus’ burial stands in shocking contrast to the earlier section of faith and faithfulness. Here, by contrast, we see legalism and legalists in ways that are quite surprising, given all that we have seen so far in the Gospel of Matthew. First of all, we see a straightforward violation of the Sabbath as the chief priests and Pharisees seek to deny the resurrection of Jesus before it happens: “The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate...” (v. 62). Matthew puts particular emphasis on what happens “the next day,” even by backing up to say, “that is, after the day of Preparation.” This emphasis puts significant attention that we are talking about the Sabbath, even though he does not use the term “Sabbath.” Lenski points out, though, that “Matthew does not write “Sabbath,” for the day after the preparation is not just an ordinary Sabbath; he wants to convey more, namely the high Passover Sabbath. Only this Sabbath had a [day of preparation].”¹³

On the one hand, it is true that Matthew himself does not explicitly acknowledge the Sabbath violation here, and it is further true that the Jewish leaders were dealing (from their perspective) with both “extraordinary circumstances” and an “urgent” matter.¹⁴ Nevertheless, the Pharisees had criticized Jesus twice for lesser alleged violations of the Sabbath (Matt. 12:2, 14). Nolland writes, “Is Matthew quietly saying that, unlike Joseph, the chief priests and the Pharisees here had failed to do the preparing they deemed necessary and are here found doing it on the sabbath, in violation of at least its spirit and probably, in their own best lights, also its letter?”¹⁵ Whereas Joseph had made his request before the Sabbath began at nightfall, these Pharisees and chief priests made their request on the next day, in the middle of the Sabbath.

Lenski also may be correct in pointing out the discrepancy of their unwillingness to come into Pilate’s residence the day before to avoid being defiled and disqualified from eating the Passover (John 18:28) in comparison to their willingness to be defiled on the Sabbath day by entering into Pilate’s headquarters to make this request, if this is indeed what the language “gathered before [or, ‘to’] Pilate” suggests: “Now these Jews have no scruples about entering the residence of the Gentile

¹² Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 729.

¹³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 1141.

¹⁴ As argued by Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 862.

¹⁵ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1236.

governor....Even this high day does not deter them. On Friday, when they had a Jewish crowd about them, they pretended that they dared not enter the Gentile Prætorium. We see how they played fast and loose with their own religious regulations. Men who had stooped to murder would certainly be capable of lesser transgressions.”¹⁶

The contrast continues when these leaders appear before Pilate: they say, “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” (vv. 63–64). The word translated here as “Sir” is *Κύριε* (*Kyrie*), which can mean “Lord,” but also often is used as a simple sign of respect to a superior: “Sir.”¹⁷ Again, Nolland notes the soft discrepancy in what these religious leaders do:

Except in a few parables, where the ‘Lord’ of the parable functions metaphorically as an image of Jesus and/or God, the address *κύριε* (‘Lord/master’) has been reserved exclusively for Jesus elsewhere in the Gospel. Against this background, the use of *κύριε* here on the lips of the chief priests and the Pharisees, and addressed to pilate, has an impact not unlike that of Jn. 19:15, where the chief priests say, ‘We have no king but Caesar’.¹⁸

Whereas the Pharisees had sought to trap Jesus by asking him whether Jews should acknowledge the authority of “Caesar” by paying taxes (Matt. 22:15–17), they now freely confess a governor under the authority of Caesar as “Lord.” Furthermore, their request to Pilate (“Therefore *order*...”) uses the same word that had described how Pilate had “ordered” that Jesus’ body be given to Joseph (v. 58). Whereas Joseph seeks an order from Pilate as a “disciple” of Jesus, these religious leaders seek an order from the one they call “Lord.”

The importance of these contrasts show us the difference between faith and faithfulness on the one hand, and legalists and legalism on the other. Whereas true faith seeks to live faithfully to the full range of God’s commandments, legalists may demand harsh adherence to the rules here, while willfully violating those same rules there. Portraying themselves as righteous in keeping the law, it is actually Jesus’ disciple who urgently seeks to bury Jesus before the Sabbath while the religious leaders willfully violate the Sabbath to undercut the possibility of Jesus’ disciples claiming that Jesus is risen by simply stealing his body. Attempts to live legalistically, according to the letter of the law, ultimately lead legalists toward blatant violation of the law. The same was true earlier when, after scrutinizing Jesus for what was “lawful” to do on the Sabbath, they “went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him”—that is, they plotted to murder him (Matt. 12:10, 14). On the other hand, it is (ironically) faith in Jesus that leads his faithful followers to keep the law in increasing fullness. The law cannot produce faith or true obedience; however, true faith produces obedience to the law.

The result of their Sabbath-breaking request to Pilate, though, is that they receive a guard of

¹⁶ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 1142.

¹⁷ “The address of Pilate as *κύριος* means ‘Sir’ or ‘Your Excellency’ rather than ‘Lord,’ although it is not impossible that the error of the Jewish authorities in not accepting Jesus as their *κύριος*, ‘Lord,’ is hinted at.” (Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 862.)

¹⁸ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1236.

soldiers from Pilate, and they seal the tomb: “The securing of the tomb would have involved the application to the stone of some kind of substance, perhaps a soft clay, impressed with the Roman imperial stamp. The seal would then be attached to the stone with a larger rope or cord.”¹⁹ Thus, they made the tomb absolutely secure from falsifying Jesus’ resurrection story. Yet, this maneuver will backfire as Leon Morris observes: “The precautions of his enemies would underline the truth of the resurrection.”²⁰ On this Sabbath day, while all his enemies are scrambling to keep Jesus down, our Lord enjoyed a perfect Sabbath of rest in the grave. Like Joseph, Jesus’ work was “finished” the previous day (John 19:30). As Lenski writes, “Quietly Jesus rested in his tomb. Presently he would arise. In vain are all the foolish proceedings of his enemies.”²¹

Discussion Questions

1. Who are the women who are witnesses to Jesus’ crucifixion (v. 55–56)? In comparison to Mark 15:40 and John 19:25, who do you think that “Mary the mother of James and Joseph” may be? How might the “mother of the sons of Zebedee” be related to Jesus? How does the courage and faithfulness of these women compare with the cowardice of the disciples who abandon their master in his hour of need?
2. What time was the “evening” of v. 57? That is, what time was the “evening sacrifice” offered and the Passover lamb slaughtered” (Ex. 12:6; 29:39)? How does this time align with the moment when Jesus himself died on the cross? How does Jesus’ death at 3:00pm, the time of the evening sacrifice, contribute to our understanding of his work? How does this clarify the timeline of the actions of Joseph of Arimathea to bury Jesus’ body before the Sabbath?
3. What day do the chief priests and Pharisees come to negotiate with Pilate (v. 62)? What do they call Pilate when they address him (v. 63)? How do these actions undercut their feigned righteousness through the rest of the Gospel of Matthew? What actions do they seek to take, and why? What does Pilate do to accommodate their request? How do these actions only serve to further confirm the historical reliability of the resurrection of Jesus?
4. Why do the chief priests and Pharisees scheme against Jesus throughout his life? Why does the death of Jesus finally give Joseph of Arimathea freedom to advocate for Jesus openly? How does Joseph’s faith lead to his faithfulness toward the law, including the law related to the Sabbath? Why does the legalism of the chief priests and Pharisees lead them to disobedience and sin? Are you living by faith—that is, living without scheming (Warren Wiersbe)?

¹⁹ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 425.

²⁰ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 732.

²¹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 1146.