



St. Paul Evangelical Community Church (SPECC)

Worship Address : Cerritos High School Auditorium
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July 12, 2009

Theme: The Importance of Jesus' Burial

Text: Matthew 27:47-66

As we approach the end of Matthew's Gospel, we will study two sections of Scripture that deal with Jesus' burial. In a way, the burial of Jesus may seem like an anti-climax. How can it compete for example, with darkness in the middle of the afternoon; with the abandonment of the Son of God by the Father; with the fact that Jesus chose the moment at which He would die; or with the earthquake and resurrection of many righteous saints? Compared to these awesome events, Jesus' burial may seem like nothing more than a formality. However the Scriptures and the Reformers tell us that the burial of Jesus is one of the essential core truths of the Gospel. According to Paul, the burial of Jesus is as important as his death and resurrection. We will examine two sections of Scripture that deal with Jesus' burial. The first section deals with the involvement of believers in His burial. The second section deals with the involvement of unbelievers in Jesus' burial.

The first thing that we learn about Jesus' burial is that it was done by a rich man, whose name was Joseph of Arimathea. Matthew intentionally tells us that Joseph was rich because he wants us to know that even as he was being buried, Jesus fulfilled prophecy. In that great chapter about the Suffering Servant of Yahweh, we read, "He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death..." The second thing that Matthew tells us about Joseph was that he was also a disciple of Jesus. The NIV translates, "...who had himself become a disciple." The phrase, "had...become a disciple," translates a passive verb. We could translate that phrase this way, "...who had himself been made a disciple by Jesus [or, to Jesus]." This translation emphasizes that it is God's activity that makes a person a disciple of Jesus. We do not make ourselves into His disciples. Only God can make us disciples of Jesus. In John's Gospel, Jesus says, "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day." By putting it this way, Matthew stresses God's sovereign power rather than Joseph's character. Paul wrote that we are saved by grace through faith, and that even our faith is a gift from God.

All four Gospels tell us that Joseph buried the body of Jesus. John's Gospel tells us that Joseph was a secret disciple of Jesus because he feared the Jewish religious leadership. Mark has this to say about Joseph: "Joseph of Arimathea, an honorable counselor, who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God, having summoned up his courage, went in unto Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus." Placed together, John's Gospel and Mark's Gospel tell us something important about Joseph. John tells us that Joseph was a secret disciple because he feared the Jews. Mark's Gospel tells us why. Joseph was probably a prominent member of the Great Sanhedrin of Jerusalem. If he had gone public with his faith, he would have risked losing his position on the Sanhedrin. During Jesus' lifetime,



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that was not a risk that Joseph was willing to take. But for some reason, when Jesus died, Joseph summoned up his courage and went public with his faith in Jesus of Nazareth. God calls us to go public with our faith as well. We don't stand to lose as much as Joseph did. However, Jesus does not call for "undercover" disciples.

Joseph appears suddenly in the Gospel history. He disappears just as suddenly. Matthew simply says that when Joseph had finished his work of burying Jesus, "...he went away." We never hear from him again. As far as the Gospel record is concerned, it was as though Joseph's whole life was a preparation for this one act of love done for the Messiah. We could call him, "the man who did one thing." Apart from this one deed, Joseph lived out his life in total obscurity. We know nothing else about him. Our lives are somewhat like that. Most believers will not make it into the pages of history at all. We will live and die in obscurity with our good deeds known only to God and perhaps to a handful of his people. Our integrity of character therefore, is measured by our faithfulness to God who may be the only one who sees our good works.

The final characters in this first section are two women—Mary Magdalene and another Mary whom Matthew does not identify. Matthew tells us that they were sitting opposite the tomb. Their presence there preserves the historical factuality of the Gospel account. Some skeptics and liberal scholars have suggested that the women found an empty tomb because they went to the wrong tomb on Resurrection Sunday. Finding it empty, they proclaimed the resurrection of Jesus on the basis of a mistaken identity. But Matthew tells us that two women were present at the tomb when Jesus was buried. They knew which one it was. On Resurrection Sunday, they went to the right tomb and found it empty. The good news of the resurrection was not based upon a mistake.

The second section which relates to Jesus' burial records how unbelievers responded to Jesus' burial. The chief priests and Pharisees are aware that Jesus claimed that he would rise again after three days. So they went to Pontius Pilate to ask him to make the tomb secure so that Jesus' disciples would not be able to come and steal the body and then tell people that he had been raised from the dead. Pilate granted their request by giving them permission. So they took a Roman guard and sealed the tomb with a Roman seal. The seal was a Roman security device which was probably made up of a chord which was attached both to the stone and to the rock face of the tomb. Wax was then poured on the chord and imprinted with Roman seals so that if anyone tampered with the seal, it would be immediately detected. Not only did they seal the tomb, they stationed a Roman guard outside of it. The Jewish authorities took great pains to try to prevent the spreading of a hoax concerning a claimed resurrection of Jesus. What they actually did however, was to provide another witness to the fact of the empty tomb and the resurrection of Jesus. As we shall see next week, the guards themselves testified to the Jewish authorities that the tomb was empty. Instead of believing, they tried to cover up the truth; but their attempts were powerless to do so.