

Vain Attempts To Keep Christ In The Grave

Matthew 27:62-66

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There may be many unbelievers today who take every opportunity to discredit the resurrection of Jesus Christ, but I would hasten to add, they do so to no avail. For as we shall see, the objections of skeptics have no historical credibility.

But long before contemporary skeptics appeared on the scene, there were the religious skeptics of Israel. If ever there was a group of people who did not want a resurrected Christ, it was the Jewish Sanhedrin in Israel. Everything they had accomplished in wickedly conspiring with the Romans to put the sinless Son of God to death would be for nothing if Christ was gloriously raised from the dead. These ruthless leaders had everything to lose from a resurrected Messiah (at least from their vantage point). A resurrected Christ would be their worst nightmare. For it would demonstrate that He was who He claimed to be: the eternal Son of God. Thus, it became the mission of the Jewish Sanhedrin (after the burial of Christ) to make sure He remained in the tomb. However, their mission was a mission impossible. In the events leading up to the resurrection of Jesus Christ, it is important that we carefully consider the steps taken by the religious leaders of Israel in seeking to prevent Christ's resurrection. For the steps these unbelieving skeptics took in order to keep Christ buried were actually steps used by God to provide even a greater proof that the Lord Jesus was certainly raised from the dead.

Oh, dear ones, how we must likewise understand by faith that the most determined efforts on the part of God's enemies to suppress the truth of Jesus Christ today will only bring God greater glory tomorrow, when He raises His truth out of the dust to be embraced by all of mankind around

the world. And this, God will do as certainly as He raised the Lord Jesus Christ from the dead. Remember, dear ones, it is our God who laughs in heaven at all of the vain attempts of the ungodly to unseat His anointed Son from His throne of rule over the nations (according to Psalm 2). Let not your hearts be troubled at the apparent victory of the wicked today. For their victory today only spells their certain defeat tomorrow with even a greater demonstration of God's power and glory.

Let us consider today how the futile plans of these wicked rulers actually became the means to provide even greater evidence for the resurrection of Christ. The main points from our text this Lord's Day are the following: (1) The Prophecy Of Christ's Resurrection Haunts The Jewish Sanhedrin (Matthew 27:62-63); (2) The Vain Attempt To Keep Christ In The Grave Proposed By The Jewish Sanhedrin (Matthew 27:64); (3) The Vain Attempt To Keep Christ in the Grave Approved By Pilate (Matthew 27:65-66).

I. The Prophecy Of Christ's Resurrection Haunts The Jewish Sanhedrin (Matthew 27:62-63).

A. As we consider our text, the Lord has already been crucified, his body has been prepared for burial with various spices and wrapped with linen strips. We then read in Matthew 27:59-61 what occurred later on Friday evening. No doubt these dear women returned to their homes Friday evening after observing where Jesus was buried.

B. We now come to our text when on the following day we read in Matthew 27:62: "Now the next day, that followed the day of the preparation, the chief priests and Pharisees came together unto Pilate." What day was it that the chief priests and Pharisees came together to meet with Pilate? It was the Sabbath Day. For the Day of Preparation was

the day to prepare for the Sabbath. Thus, Christ was crucified on the Day of Preparation (or Friday). But observe that these Jewish leaders call for a meeting with Pilate on the Sabbath (or Saturday), and as we shall see this meeting has nothing to do with deeds of mercy, necessity, or piety. These very leaders that were so quick to condemn Christ for healing the sick on the Sabbath during His ministry (which in fact is a lawful deed of mercy) condemn themselves and aggravate their Sabbath breaking by conspiring together to meet with the civil magistrate in order to keep Christ in the tomb and out of their hair. Here again the hypocrisy of these Church leaders is made so clear.

1. Dear ones, do we practice such double standards of hypocrisy by condemning others for activities we ourselves practice? Do we condemn the destructive gossip of others when we are their focus, but justify our own destructive gossip when others are our focus? Do we rightly condemn marital sex outside of marriage, but watch movies and listen to music for entertainment which do not condemn it in the heroes on the screen? Do we condemn idolatry, but cherish our own idols before the One True Living God in our hearts (idols such as our family/ friends, our degrees/accomplishments, our money/possessions, our movies stars/music stars/sports stars etc.)?

2. Dear Christian, it is no hypocrisy to hate and despise sin. It is, however, hypocrisy when we despise it when practiced by others, but somehow justify it when it is practiced by ourselves. Christ tells us to remove first the beam from our own eye before removing the speck from our brother's eye or our sister's eye. All such hypocrisy will lead to a deadness of the soul (because hypocrisy is really playing religious games with God). Our faith in Christ and communion with Christ will become cold and indifferent. We'll find ourselves simply going through the motions of listening to the preaching of God's Word and worshipping God. It is easy to see the hypocrisy of the chief priests and Pharisees. Is it as easy to see our own hypocrisy? May we have the eyes to see and the

faith to flee to Christ in humility for His forgiveness of all our hypocrisy in applying such double standards.

C. We now hear what haunted the chief priests and Pharisees on this Sabbath Day—the day following the murderous crucifixion of Jesus Christ. What haunted them are Christ’s words that after three days He would rise again from the dead (Matthew 27:63). Isn’t it interesting how these religious leaders who conspired with the Romans to crucify Christ remembered this prophecy of Christ’s resurrection, but His own disciples who followed Him for three years did not remember it?

1. The disciples struggled earlier in the ministry of Christ with His death and resurrection. You will remember that after Christ was gloriously transfigured and transformed bodily before the eyes of Peter, James, and John that upon coming down from the mountain, the Lord Jesus told them not to say anything about His transfiguration UNTIL HE WAS RISEN FROM THE DEAD (Matthew 17:9). Mark 9:10 tells us that after Christ had spoken these words that “they [Peter, James, and John—GLP] kept questioning one with another what the rising from the dead should mean.” I would suggest that the disciples had so pinned their hopes upon a reigning Messiah that they neither fully understood a dying Messiah nor a resurrected Messiah. They probably reasoned something like this as they talked among themselves, “What is the Lord talking about? How can He be raised from the dead? He would first have to die. But He is the Son of God and the Messianic King, how can He die and then be raised from the dead?” Dear ones, the death and resurrection of Christ did not fit into the theological and chronological scheme they had come to believe concerning the Messiah. Here is a warning to us all. Let us not be so guided by the mere opinions of men that we cannot hear the Spirit of God speaking to us in His Holy Word. Our Confessions, Catechisms, and Covenants are glorious benefits to us, but they are only a profitable aid to our faith and understanding because they are agreeable to the supreme

standard of Scripture. We must not impose our own mere understanding upon the words of Christ, but permit the words of Christ to inform our own understanding lest we be misled like the Disciples of Christ.

2. On the other hand, the chief priests and Pharisees recalled this prophecy of Christ's resurrection out of fear: fear that an empty tomb would spell Christ's victory and their defeat. They had deceived themselves in their own darkened minds into believing that Christ was clearly an imposter (one who could not rescue Himself from the cross when they teased and mocked Him to come down from it and so one who certainly could not raise Himself from the dead). But they remembered the prophecy of Christ (perhaps from Matthew 12:40). Here is a further warning to us all. Dear ones, it is not enough for us to know the mere words of Scripture, our Catechism, or the Psalms. We may be able to quote verse after verse that we have been taught or memorized. The devil himself can perfectly quote the Scripture, but he neither embraces it by faith alone nor does he desire out of love to obey it. It was mere fear that brought the words of Christ to the minds of these unbelieving religious leaders of the Jews, rather than faith and love. Beloved, let us today not only hear and remember the actual words of Christ as they are read and preached, but let us embrace them by faith and in love as being the very word of Christ which leads to everlasting life, forgiveness of sin, comfort in trial and affliction, and certainty of hope in the glories Christ has prepared for all those who trust Him and love Him forevermore.

3. The expressions "after three days" (as found here in Matthew 27:63) or "three days and three nights" (as found in Matthew 12:40) do not mean that Christ had to remain in the tomb for a period of three 24 hour days before being raised from the dead (if that were the case Christ would have to have died on Wednesday instead of on Friday). It is important to realize how the Jews computed time. Any part of a day was reckoned as a full day so that since Christ was crucified and buried on

Friday, remained in the tomb for Saturday and the early morning hours of Sunday, it can legitimately be said that He was raised “after three days” or that He was dead for “three days and three nights.” Consider just a couple examples (of which there are many more): 2 Chronicles 10:5,12 (“after three days”) and Esther 4:16>Esther 5:1 (“three days and three nights”). Christ was crucified on Friday (and not Wednesday) because the Scripture teaches that the day of His crucifixion was on the Day of Preparation, “that is the day before the Sabbath” (according to Mark 15:42).

II. The Vain Attempt To Keep Christ In The Grave Proposed By The Jewish Sanhedrin (Matthew 27:64).

A. Having brought to the attention of Pilate their fear of an empty tomb, they now proceed to explain to him what they propose to do in order to keep Christ’s body in that tomb and why they fear the empty tomb.

1. The chief priests and Pharisees first propose that Pilate make the tomb secure until the third day, when the time for the prophecy of Christ’s resurrection would have lapsed (Matthew 27:64a). To make the tomb secure likely meant the very steps that were subsequently taken in verse 66 of the same chapter: that is, a provision of soldiers and a seal affixed to the tomb as a death warrant to any that would even think of disturbing the large stone that had been placed by Joseph of Arimathea at the opening to the tomb. Did these religious leaders actually believe that soldiers and a seal could prevent the resurrection of Christ? It was not in order to prevent the resurrection of Christ that these steps were proposed to Pilate, for these men did not seriously believe the words of Christ that He would be raised from the dead. They simply feared an empty tomb.

2. In the remainder of Matthew 27:64 we find the reason for this proposal. They feared there might be an empty tomb due to the Disciples of Christ appearing under the cover of darkness and removing the body of Christ and then declaring to all the people of Israel that Christ was raised from the dead just as He prophesied would happen. The chief priests and the Pharisees feared that should this happen, such an error of a “pretended” resurrection would be even worse than the error of a “pretended” Messiah. These religious leaders certainly understood the implications of the resurrection of Christ (even if they only believed it to be a “pretended” resurrection). A resurrection (in fulfillment of the prophecy of Christ) would completely validate the claims of Christ that He was the Messiah and the Son of God, that all that He said was absolutely true, that His miracles were the mighty power of God, that He died not for Himself, but for guilty sinners who trusted in Him, in order to secure their salvation, and that He had overcome death and all the powers of darkness. Thus, these Church leaders told Pilate that everything possible should be done to prevent Christ’s disciples from foisting such a deception and lie upon the people.

B. Let it here be noted that the empty tomb of Christ is the greatest fear of those who want to live their lives without Christ. For that empty tomb declares that Christ is not dead, but is alive and will one day be their judge before whom they will stand. The fear of the empty tomb drives people to make up ridiculous stories of their own vain imagination (which we’ll consider to some extent in coming weeks) as to why the tomb was empty. The fear of the empty tomb drives people to live their lives drowning themselves in their own pleasures as if Christ were still dead and buried within the dark confines of that tomb. For if they truly believed in a resurrected Christ, they would have to face up to the truth that they cannot live their lives for their own pleasure without everlasting peril to their own souls. Those who fear the empty tomb will be like these

unbelieving religious leaders thinking of ways to keep Christ in that tomb. Is that true of you today? Does the empty tomb frighten you? Would you rather ignore the empty tomb and immerse yourself in the work and pleasures of this life, so that you do not have to face the empty tomb at the present time, because the reality of that empty tomb condemns you as one who is trying to run and hide from Christ?

C. Let me also tell you that the empty tomb is the greatest joy to those who trust in Christ alone for their eternal salvation. For that empty tomb speaks of a resurrected Christ who died for their sin and gives absolute proof that all of the holy wrath of God against their sin was satisfied and borne away by Christ. That empty tomb brings the greatest comfort to those who lay hold of Christ and His perfect righteousness as their own righteousness against the condemnation of the devil and their own condemning conscience. That empty tomb brings the greatest hope that all of the suffering and trials endured in this life will one day fade away into a glorious resurrection of these bodies where there will be no more sin or temptation to sin, no more pain, sickness, or death, no more weeping, grief, or sorrow, but only perfect joy and delight as we commune with Christ, learn of Christ, and serve Christ with hearts filled with love forever and ever. That is what the empty tomb means to the Christian. Dear Christian, are you enjoying the benefits from the empty tomb? Have you forgotten or become too busy to delight yourself in blessedness of Christ's resurrection? Let us fall before Christ today and confess such sins in order that we might be renewed in our faith to not only believe in His resurrection, but to daily rejoice in His resurrection and all the glories that are ours as result of His resurrection.

III. The Vain Attempt To Keep Christ in the Grave Approved By Pilate (Matthew 27:65-66).

A. The representatives of the Jewish Sanhedrin had approached Pilate with a request to have Roman soldiers sent to the tomb of Christ in order to secure it. Did Pilate grant their request? It all depends on how one interprets the word of Pilate found in Matthew 27:65 (“Pilate said unto them, Ye have a watch”).

1. For if the verb (“have”) is translated in the INDICATIVE MOOD, it would mean that Pilate said in effect to these religious leaders, “You already have your Temple Police, use them to make the tomb secure.” If this is the proper understanding of the verb, Pilate did not grant their request, but told them to take care of it with their own police and leave him alone. Although this is a possible understanding of the verse, I would propose it does not make as much sense from the context as we shall see.

2. The other way in which to translate the verb is in the IMPERATIVE MOOD (as a command) which would have Pilate giving them the following command, “Have (or “Take”) some Roman soldiers and use them to make the tomb secure.” If this is the right way to understand the verb, Pilate did in fact grant their request for a Roman guard as they requested of him.

3. Because both of these views are possible, the context must help us decide which view is most probable. As we consider Matthew 28:11-15 where the guard returns to the Sanhedrin after being scared to death by the miraculous events associated with Christ’s resurrection, these men are obviously concerned for their lives if Pilate should hear that they deserted their posts and fled in fear. Why would they be so concerned about what Pilate thinks if they were Jewish Temple Police who were not under Pilate’s authority? The fact that they feared what Pilate would bring upon them by way of punishment (which might be even death) would most likely indicate that Pilate granted the request of the religious leaders and that this guard was a group of Roman soldiers, who were sent to guard the tomb with their own lives. These

were men of war who were sent to guard the tomb. Men who were no doubt well armed and prepared to prevent any attempts by anyone to move that huge stone from in front of the tomb and take the body of Christ from out of the tomb. The fact that these men were Roman soldiers becomes an insuperable objection to their falling asleep on the job (as was the lie circulated by the Jewish leaders) or running in fear from the disciples (most of whom were mere fishermen).

B. Finally, the tomb was sealed (as well as having a group of Roman soldiers to guard it). This seal was a string that was stretched across the tomb and secured on both sides with clay that had impressed into it Pilate's official imprimatur. If that enormous stone was moved in the least, the seal would be broken, and death would befall the guilty party.

1. Who would have ventured to move this stone? Certainly not the disciples. They were running scared and presently in hiding after the death of Christ (none of them even attended the preparation and burial of Christ).

2. Thus, once again we have here additional evidence to our faith that Christ was certainly raised from the dead. For God used the fear of the religious leaders to make the tomb as secure as possible, and yet that was not even sufficient to keep Christ in that deathly prison. He broke the chains of death and victoriously arose from the dead. And God used the attempts of the ungodly to keep Christ in the tomb as a greater evidence of His resurrection. This was a mission impossible on the part of the Jewish religious leaders and the Roman Governor, Pilate.

And dear ones, Christ died and was raised from the dead in order to make every attempt by the enemy to destroy your faith and your hope in Christ a mission impossible. For even if the righteous man falls into the dust seven times, seven times shall the Lord raise him up again from the

dust. That is why there is no sin in your life or mine that cannot be overcome—Christ was bodily raised from the dead. The empty tomb and the resurrected Christ are the reasons for our hope that Christ is who He said He is (the eternal Son of God who was made flesh and dwelt among us), and is the reason for our hope that His promises are ever true. If He kept His promise to be raised bodily from the grave, there is no promise He will not keep. If He kept the most difficult promise, He will surely keep the less difficult promises. Dear ones, the resurrected Christ upholds you and sustains you. You need not fear what man can do unto you. For you who trust in this resurrected Christ, His resurrection is your resurrection from sin and death. And it is this very resurrected Christ who will bodily come again on that final day to bodily raise those who trust in Him alone for their eternal salvation in order to bring to full realization their redemption (the redemption of their bodies), and it is this very resurrected Christ who will bodily come again to bodily raise those who have not trusted in Him for their eternal salvation (and who thus bear the guilt and condemnation for their own sin) in order to bring to full realization their final judgment (the condemnation of both body and soul in the hopeless lake of fire forever).

Dear ones, come to the resurrected Jesus Christ with your need. He will hear the pleas of those who come in faith and trust (to either provide the grace needed to endure the trial or to remove the trial altogether). He was resurrected to continue His ministry at God's right hand as a sympathetic High Priest and Advocate for all who will come to Him in faith.

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