

Matthew 27:57-60

I. Matthew 27:57 — When it was evening...

The last time we heard this phrase was in Matthew 26:20.

✓ Matthew 26:20 — When it was evening, he reclined at table with the twelve.

That was only yesterday evening, less than twenty-four hours before. That was when Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, giving to His disciples the bread and the cup, which is His body and blood. After the supper that night, Jesus went out to the Mount of Olives and prayed in agony and torment in the Garden of Gethsemane, submitting Himself to His Father's will. Finally, when the hour must have been very late, Jesus went forth and voluntarily surrendered to those who had come to arrest Him under cover of darkness. Throughout the rest of that night, Jesus stood before His accusers in the courtyard of Caiaphas, the high priest. After many false witnesses had come forward, He was finally condemned to be deserving of death – but only because He willingly opened His mouth to bear faithful testimony to the truth. Finally, the sun began to rise again. It was probably around six o'clock in the morning when Jesus was bound and led away to Pilate the governor. After the crowds had demanded the release of Barabbas and clamored for the death of Jesus, Pilate had Jesus scourged and delivered Him over to be crucified. It was now around nine o'clock in the morning. By the time Jesus was actually hung on the cross to suffer the curse of the law in our place, it was probably somewhere between 10:00 and 10:30 in the morning. At 12:00, darkness came over all the land, lasting for three long hours. At the end of these three hours (about three o'clock in the afternoon), Jesus cried out, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" And then Matthew says that Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit. Jesus, the innocent sufferer, satisfied the holy wrath of God so that we, the sinners, might stand before God *forgiven* and *blameless*. Just last night, Jesus was reclining at a table and giving His disciples the bread and the cup – His body and His blood. And now, as another evening comes on, His lifeless and bloodied body hangs limp from a wooded post.

Carson writes very bluntly that "The Roman custom was to let bodies of crucified criminals hang in full view until they rotted away." France says that "the bodies of those who had died by crucifixion were often... left on crosses to disintegrate or thrown on the ground to be disposed of by scavengers and natural decay." But the Jewish Scriptures said this:

✓ Deuteronomy 21:22-23 — "If a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God. You shall not defile your land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance.

It was in light of this Jewish law and since the Sabbath was about to begin at sundown that the Jews asked Pilate to have the legs of the criminals broken. They wanted to hasten their death so they could get the burial done before sunset (John 19:31). But since these men had been executed as criminals, they would also be given a *criminal's* burial. At the very best, they would all be laid together in a common grave (France). The only exception to this rule was if a family member or

friend could get permission from the Roman authorities to provide a more honorable burial. But who was there to provide for the burial of Jesus? The faithful women would not have had the strength or the means to take His body down from the cross and then carry it to a burial site. And since they were all from Galilee, they wouldn't have had any burial site to take it to in the first place. The disciples have all fled, and it's unlikely they would have been allowed any access to Jesus' body in the first place (not if the chief priests and elders had any say in the matter; cf. 27:62-66). Since there's obviously no one to give Jesus a decent burial, the outcome also seems very obvious. Jesus has been crucified as a criminal, and now He'll be buried as a criminal. He'll be very unceremoniously dumped in a graveyard filled with other crucified victims. "When it was evening..."

II. Matthew 27:57 — When it was evening there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who also was a disciple of Jesus.

In all four of the Gospels, we hear of this Joseph only one time and only in this place. He just appears very suddenly "out of the blue." If we had only Matthew, all we'd know about Joseph is that he was a rich man from the town of Arimathea. When we include the other gospels, we learn that he was a respected member of the Jewish council who had not consented to their decision and action, and who was himself looking for the kingdom of God (Luke 23:50-51; cf. Mark 15:43). We learn that he was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews (John 19:38). Beyond these things, we really know nothing about Joseph. He just suddenly appears "out of the blue" on the very day that Jesus was crucified. "When it was evening," Matthew says, "there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who also was a disciple of Jesus."

III. Matthew 27:58 — He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate ordered it to be given to him.

Now what we ought to be at this point is in complete and total shock. What could possibly be more unexpected or more unlikely to happen? Maybe the reason we've never heard of Joseph before is partly because he's been a *secret* disciple. But that only makes this even more amazing. It's precisely at this moment that the eleven disciples have all fled away *into* secrecy and hiding — after following Jesus publicly for three years (cf. Morris). So *why*, at this same moment, would *Joseph* come *out* of hiding and publicly proclaim himself a disciple of Jesus? Jesus is dead. Joseph must assume that now he'll have to look for the Messiah and His kingdom *somewhere else*. So why now? How is it that *now* he suddenly overcomes his fear of the Jews — when humanly speaking, he has everything to lose (same as before) and *now*, in light of Jesus' death, *nothing* to gain. *Jesus is truly dead*. His body is a lifeless corpse. Joseph finally proclaims himself a disciple of Jesus only in order to bury the dead body of Jesus.

On the human side, Mark can say that Joseph "took courage and went to Pilate" (Mark 15:43). But does this fully explain the sudden appearance of Joseph? And what does it really *mean*?

IV. Matthew 27:59-60 — And Joseph took the 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.

The story only gets more astonishing as we go along. Joseph would have had servants who helped to unfasten Jesus' body from the cross. After His body had been taken down, Matthew tells us (along with all of the Gospel writers) that Joseph wrapped it in a clean linen shroud. The point here is that the body of Jesus was buried not only properly (France), but with special care, and reverence, and honor (cf. Calvin). John tells us that the wrapping of His body in the shroud was accompanied by the anointing of His body with spices (John 19:40). "And indeed," says Calvin, "there could be no doubt that *a rich man*, when he gave up his *sepulcher* to our Lord, made provision also, in other respects, for suitable magnificence and splendor."

Matthew tells us that this was a *new* tomb, which means that no one had yet been laid in it (Luke 23:53; John 19:41). It was a tomb cut in the rock, which means it was a tomb only afforded by the wealthy. And it was a tomb provided with a "*great stone*" to close off the entrance, which means that it must have been a tomb of special size and magnificence. It was in *this* tomb that the body of Jesus was buried. And so we know at the very least that the burial of Jesus' body was as far from a criminal's burial as any burial could possibly be. The very thought that a crucified victim should be buried in this tomb should cause us to be astonished and to wonder. And then, just as quickly and suddenly as Joseph appeared, so now he disappears, and we never hear of him again. Matthew puts it very simply – almost abruptly.

V. Matthew 27:59–60 — He rolled a great stone to the entrance of the tomb *and went away*.

I agree with Bruner: "There is something dramatic about Joseph's sudden appearance under the [lime] lights of history and his just as sudden disappearance. It is as though Joseph's whole life was a preparation for this one day's work."^{*}

Conclusion

So how are we to explain the sudden appearance of Joseph, when humanly speaking it was the very *last* thing we would have expected? How are we to explain this burial of Jesus, when humanly speaking it would have seemed totally impossible? Here *again*, God is displaying and revealing to us His secret and wonderful providence. If we can't see this, then we'll never be able to see the main point.

Joseph's secret discipleship was a serious failing on his part. But very likely, it was the fact that his discipleship was *secret* which allowed him (as a prominent leader of the Jews) to ask for, and receive the body of Jesus (cf. Bruner). This doesn't excuse his failure, but it shows that God uses *even our failures* to accomplish His good purposes. We must never presume on the secret providence of God (as though it could ever be an excuse for disobedience), and yet may we *always* rejoice in it – as a wonderful comfort and assurance.

So on the one hand, it seems that God used Joseph's secrecy as a disciple of Jesus to prepare him for this very day. But then *how*, on the very day when others were being filled with fear, did Joseph actually overcome his fear? Calvin answers simply: "There can be no doubt that this singular courage arose from a secret movement of the Spirit... Let us know then that, when the

* "This simple verb reads as though we are to think of Joseph's action as being the Lord's providence to provide the proper burial for his Son." (Lenski)

Son of God was buried by the hand of Joseph, it was the work of God... The less [likely] it was that such an office of kindness should be performed towards Christ, the more clearly did it appear that the whole of this transaction was regulated by the purpose and hand of God.”

So what we should be seeing in these verses is not so much the actions of Joseph, but the actions of **God** – not first of all what Joseph is doing, but first of all what **God** is doing. Lenski says it very boldly: “God took care of his Son’s dead body.” God Himself was providing for the burial of Jesus, not in a common grave for criminals, not even in a simple family burial plot, but rather in the highest quality tomb of the rich and wealthy. Matthew is the only one who refers to Joseph as “a rich man,” and so he especially draws our attention to Isaiah’s prophecy:

- ✓ Isaiah 53:9 (NASB[†]) — His grave was assigned with wicked men, yet He was with **a rich man** in His death, because He had done no violence, nor was there any deceit in His mouth.

The burial of Jesus was in some sense a vindication of Jesus. It was a testimony to His innocence. And so it was also a *pointer* to things to come. Calvin writes: “God determined by this [burial], 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.”

But aren’t we missing something here? Aren’t we getting carried away? This *is still a burial*. And wasn’t the burial of Jesus another part of His *humiliation* – another step in His downward descent for sinners? Think about it. Why should Jesus have been buried at all? Why not just resurrect Him immediately? Certainly His burial was to prove that He had really **died** – that He had really gone down to the place of the dead. His death was as real and true as the death of any loved one we have ever lost. His dead and lifeless body looked exactly the same as any other person that we have ever seen on a death bed – because He was truly and really **dead**. His burial was just as true, and real as the burial of any one of our own family or loved ones – because He was truly and really **dead**. In the first sermon preached at Pentecost, Peter proclaimed:

- ✓ Acts 2:31 — [David] foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not [left in[‡]] Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption.

In other words, it was the resurrection of Jesus that brought him up from Hades. As Paul says:

- ✓ Romans 10:6–7 — The righteousness based on faith says, “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’” (that is, to bring Christ down) “or ‘Who will **descend into the abyss**?’” (that is, to bring Christ up from the **dead**).

Hades is very simply the place of the dead – wherever those dead might be. The point is not heaven or hell, but rather the simple state of being dead (Bavinck). And so for all the time that Jesus’ body was in the tomb, He was truly and really dead, having descended into Hades – into the same state of being dead as every Old Testament saint who died before Him and all who would henceforth die after Him.

[†] For the NASB translation (cf. NET; NKJV) see the exegesis of Keil-Delitzsch and Lange (contra Oswalt).

[‡] Cf. HCSB; NKJV; NLT; NCV; YLT

The burial of Jesus' body was the final and lowest step in His humiliation. And his burial and descent into Hades is a wonderful comfort to us as believers because it shows us that He *experienced* death just as truly and really as any one of us ever will. Truly, we have a *comfort* in death as we look backwards that the Old Testament saints could never have looking forward. When we bury a loved one, we remember that Jesus Himself was also buried. And it was "*by means of [His burial]* that Jesus *sanctified* the grave for all his followers" (Hendriksen). We don't need to fear the grave because Jesus Himself has gone there before us, just as truly and really as any one of us ever will. He truly died. He truly and really continued in the state of death. So then, where our own Lord and Savior has gone, we need not be afraid to go – remembering, too, that to be absent from the body [to be dead] is to be present with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:6-8).

The burial of Jesus' body was the final and lowest step in His humiliation. And yet once again, it was even *in His humiliation* that God was shadowing forth and proclaiming His *exaltation*. Otherwise, why shouldn't Jesus have been buried in a common grave for criminals? Otherwise, why should God have provided so wonderfully and providentially for Jesus to be buried in the tomb of a rich man? In all of these things, we begin to see that the burial of Jesus was not just the last step in His humiliation – it was also the last step *before resurrection*. We can't forget that. His burial was the *preparation* for His exaltation. The burial of Jesus was like the planting of a seed. A seed may lie dead and dormant for a time, but eventually it springs to life. Paul writes:

✓ 1 Corinthians 15:36 — What you sow does not come to life unless it dies.

And Jesus Himself said:

✓ John 12:24 — Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.

In all the wonderful, providential circumstances surrounding the burial of Jesus, we begin already to see that though He is truly and really dead, His burial is really the planting of a seed. His *burial* is now *itself* a sign and seal of the day when He comes forth from the ground in resurrection life.

For all of us who have believed in Jesus, our burial is patterned after His burial – not only spiritually (Rom. 6:4; Col. 2:12) but also physically (1 Cor. 15:20). When we bury our loved ones who die in the Lord, we're planting a seed. And in planting the seed, we are shadowing forth even in death the Gospel hope of resurrection. When we ourselves are one day lowered into the grave, we too are simply a seed being planted. We too will be shadowing forth even in our death the Gospel hope of resurrection. In the burial of Jesus, He took the grave and forever gave it new meaning. As Berkhof writes: "*The burial of Jesus*... remove[s] the terrors of the grave for [all His] redeemed." "Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 15:57). We need to remember this especially as God graciously helps us to feel our own mortality. We will all one day die. So let us live every day not in a practical denial of the grave, but rather in the fearlessness of those who know what the grave has come to *mean* – because of the burial of Jesus two thousand years ago. Maybe now we can understand better why

Paul includes the burial of Jesus' body as an essential part of the **Gospel** proclamation (cf. Carson):

- ✓ 1 Corinthians 15:3–4 (cf. Acts 13:29) — For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, *that he was buried*, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.

In light of all these things, I want to close by reading again our text from Matthew:

- ✓ Matthew 27:57–60 — When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who also was a disciple of Jesus. He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. And Joseph took the 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.