

## Matthew 27:62-66

### Introduction

At first, this whole account of making the tomb secure actually seems very strange. It doesn't seem to "fit." Matthew has never really bothered with "apologetics" (logical and rational arguments to prove that he's telling the truth). And yet at first it might seem like this story is all about "*proving*" the resurrection (or at least "proving" that the body of Jesus wasn't stolen)! But that's exactly what feels so strange. Matthew's main point is always theological and practical – it's always about the truth of God and what that truth **means** for our lives. At the most, apologetics is only an "accidental" side-product of Matthew's main point.

So what about *here*. Is the main point of this story really a "proving" of the resurrection? Of course, unbelieving scholars are very quick to answer "yes" and then they mock Matthew's "proof" as something not only invented by him, but also completely unconvincing. One asks sarcastically: "Does the resurrection need this kind of defense?" (Schnackenburg; quoted in Bruner). Another one says, "[This account] does not compel as history." (Davies and Allison; quoted in Bruner) And yet another says, "The historicity of this passage... cannot be salvaged." (Luz; quoted in Bruner). For once, it appears that Matthew has stooped to defending God's truth with the use of a very feeble, human argument – and the world immediately jumps all over Matthew, accusing him of inventing the story. We agree that this would seem very strange. But has Matthew really turned so suddenly to apologetics and arguments right here at the very end of his Gospel? Or is the point of this passage the same as every other one that has come before – to reveal to us the glory of God and what it means for us as we daily live out our Christian faith? What do you think?

The Bible is not nearly so concerned with apologetics, and with "proving" as we are (if it is concerned at all). The Bible is only concerned with the **proclamation** of God's truth, which is assumed to be *its own best proof and evidence*, and to contain *within itself* the power to change hearts and minds. This is why the Bible begins not with argument, but with **proclamation**: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." This is not to say that our faith cannot claim excellent historical and rational evidence. It can (Evidence that Demands a Verdict)! But we must not degrade God's Word by making it to depend for its believability on "outside" evidence (evidence is never sufficient enough to *demand* a verdict). Rather, the self-proving and self-evidencing **Word of God** is always sufficient to demand *not* any human "verdict," but rather humble **repentance and surrender**. The title "Evidence that Demands a Verdict," though *sincerely* intended, is still *most* unfortunate.

So what about Matthew? What about this passage? What's the main point? Argument or proclamation? Apologetics, or life-changing truth? Well, if Matthew's point was to prove that the body of Jesus wasn't stolen, then why does he include the counter argument in 28:13?

- ✓ Matthew 28:12-13 — And when they had assembled with the elders and taken counsel, they gave a sufficient sum of money to the soldiers and said, "Tell people, '*His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.*'"

And this is exactly the story, Matthew tells us, that was spread among the Jews even to the time he was writing his Gospel thirty years later (28:15). Apparently, the story of the sleeping guards would have been easy enough to believe if all we're concerned about is historical evidence! *And* especially if Matthew has invented this story to prove that Jesus' body was not stolen by the disciples, then why doesn't Matthew have the guard posted on Friday evening instead of Saturday morning (cf. Carson)? Instead, he leaves an entire twelve hours in which the tomb was unguarded (27:62; though Hagner points out that when the guard arrived, they probably would have checked to make sure the body was still there)!

Now on one level, we can assume that *Matthew* includes this passage (it's *not* included in Mark, Luke, or John) because as one writing to Jews (among whom the story of grave robbery was being circulated), it wouldn't make sense to leave it out. We can also agree that this *is* independent historical support for the fact of the resurrection. But Matthew's ultimate point is *not* to offer evidence or proof for the resurrection. So then we have to ask: What is the *life-changing* truth that Matthew would proclaim to us in this *historical* event?

**I. Matthew 27:62** — The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate.

“The next day... after the day of Preparation,” is Saturday (Friday was the day of preparation for the Sabbath). And now once again, we find the religious leaders of Israel “gathered together” (Greek: synago). In the last three chapters of Matthew, this word (gathered) appears six times, and every time it describes people gathered together *against* Jesus.

✓ Matthew 26:3–4 — Then the chief priests and the elders of the people ***gathered*** [synago] in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, and ***plotted*** together in order to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him.

This clearly reminds us of David's words in Psalm chapter two:

✓ Psalm 2:1–2 — The nations rage and the peoples ***plot***... The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers ***take counsel together [LXX: gather together; synago]***, against the LORD and against His [Christ].

So after Matthew 26:3-4 when we come to each of the following verses, we can't help but read them against the backdrop of Psalm chapter two.

- ✓ Matthew 26:57 — Then those who had seized Jesus led him to Caiaphas the high priest, where the scribes and the elders had ***gathered***.
- ✓ Matthew 27:17 — So when [the people] had ***gathered***, Pilate said to them, “Whom do you want me to release for you: Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?”
- ✓ Matthew 27:27 — Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they ***gathered*** the whole battalion before him.

Always, the people are gathered together *against Jesus* – whether they be a Jewish crowd, the chief priests and elders, or a battalion of Roman soldiers. But then the last appearance of this

word will be in Matthew twenty-eight, and just like the first appearance in Matthew twenty-six, we see the chief priests and elders not just “gathered together,” but also plotting and “taking counsel” together against the Lord and against His Christ:

- ✓ Matthew 28:11–13 — Some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests all that had taken place. And when they had [*gathered together; synago*] with the elders and *taken counsel*, they gave a sufficient sum of money to the soldiers and said, “Tell people, ‘His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.’”

So now if we read Matthew 27:62 in light of all this, we should immediately understand the real significance of what’s happening. “The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees *gathered [together; synago]* before Pilate” – “against the Lord and against His Christ.”

**II. Matthew 27:62–64** — The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate and said, “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.”

My first thought is, “When will these people ever rest?” They’ve succeeded in having Jesus crucified, and now He’s both dead *and* buried. You’d think that would be enough. But the chief priests and the Pharisees are tireless in their plotting. They’re very shrewd people. They think of every possible scenario.

They said to Pilate: “Sir, we remember how that impostor said, while he was still alive, ‘After three days I will rise.’” How is it that the Pharisees seem to have a better memory than the disciples? The disciples could not comprehend the idea of a resurrected Messiah because they couldn’t comprehend the idea of a Messiah who would suffer and die. It was precisely because they truly believed Jesus was the Messiah that they couldn’t hear or understand His teaching about His own resurrection. And so when Jesus was actually put to death on a Roman cross, the disciples were certainly no closer to understanding – or remembering. But the chief priest and the Pharisees have never believed in Jesus in the first place, and that’s why their memories are so much better than the disciples’. They can very easily remember when an *imposter* (a fake and a fraud) says He will rise from the dead. So now they’re just paranoid. To us, they almost appear to be desperate. There’s something almost *funny and humorous* in the fact that when it comes to the resurrection their memory is so much better than the disciples’. But in their minds, they’re just being very careful and very shrewd. *They* remember what Jesus said, and so they make this request:

“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.” Not only do the chief priests and elders of the people have a better memory than the disciples, but they also have a “better” estimation of the disciples than the disciples deserved. Where are the disciples now? They’re probably already cowering behind locked doors (John

20:19). They've never given the slightest indication that they'd have the desire, much less the nerve to actually steal Jesus' body out of His grave. Once again, the chief priests and Pharisees might appear to us to be kind of desperate and paranoid. Once again, their "fear" of the disciples could almost seem *funny and humorous*. But in their minds they're very literally putting the final nail in the coffin. Even with Jesus dead and buried, they're still gathered together to plot and scheme against the Lord and against His Christ. They will make absolutely sure that the name and memory of this Jesus is stamped out forever. So should we be angry? Should we be worried and fearful? Or should we just be laughing?

The chief priests and Pharisees are worried, they say, lest after Jesus' disciples have stolen His body they *might(?)* tell the people, "He has risen from the dead." But as it turns out, what ends up being the very heart and soul of the message that the disciples loudly proclaim to all the people?

- ✓ Acts 2:23–24 — This Jesus... you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised him up.
- ✓ Acts 2:32 — This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses.
- ✓ Acts 3:15 — You killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses.
- ✓ Acts 4:10 — By the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by him this man is standing before you well.
- ✓ Acts 5:30 — The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree.
- ✓ Acts 10:39–40 — They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him on the third day.
- ✓ Acts 13:29–30 — When they had carried out all that was written of him, they took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb. But God raised him from the dead.

The chief priests and Pharisees are worried, they say, lest "the last fraud will be worse than the first." But isn't that exactly what happens? At least by *their* definition, the last fraud will be infinitely worse than the first.

- ✓ Acts 2:41 — So those who received [Peter's] word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.
- ✓ Acts 2:47 — And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.
- ✓ Acts 5:14 — And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women.
- ✓ Acts 11:24 — And a great many people were added to the Lord.
- ✓ Acts 15:41 — [Paul] went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.
- ✓ Acts 16:5 — So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily.

And now what is the message proclaimed every single Lord's Day in churches all around the globe? "He has *risen* from the dead!" It's almost as though the chief priests and Pharisees were actually speaking the prophetic words of God Himself. And yet as they spoke these words, they were actually plotting and scheming to make sure that they would never, ever, ever come to pass.

Matthew's point is not to provide some evidence or proof for the fact that the resurrection happened. The resurrection he simply assumes on the basis of the authority and truth of God's Word. Matthew's point is to highlight the divine irony that the very thing these men plotted and schemed to avoid has actually come fully to pass (cf. Hagner). And so with this in mind, now we read with genuine laughter the last two verses of Matthew's account.

**III. Matthew 27:65–66** — Pilate said to them, “You have a guard of soldiers. Go, make it as secure as you can.” So they went and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone and setting a guard.

Is it possible to imagine Matthew writing this without a smile on his face, and a righteous laughter in his heart? The key word here appears to be the word “secure.” First we have the chief priests and Pharisees making their request of Pilate: “Therefore order the tomb to be made *secure* until the third day.” Then we hear Pilate responding: “You have a guard of soldiers. Go, make it as *secure* as you can.” And finally Matthew can't help but add his own editorial conclusion: “So they went and made the tomb *secure* by sealing the stone and setting a guard.”

And as we smile and even laugh at the obvious irony and futility of it all, what's the point? How do we see the *glory of God* in this story, and what does it *mean for us*?

### **Conclusion**

Well, Matthew and all of us are not the only ones laughing. Truly, we only laugh because God was laughing first. The Psalmist writes:

- ✓ Psalm 2:1–6 — Why do the nations rage and the peoples *plot in vain*? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers *take counsel together*, against the LORD and against his Anointed, saying, “Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us.” *He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision*. Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying, “As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill [resurrection and ascension!].”

One commentator, after reflecting on our passage in Matthew could only put it like this: “The laughter of God roars through the [text]” (Gnilka; quoted in Hagner). Carson exults: “With the dawn all the efforts to eliminate Jesus Messiah from the stage of redemptive history are held up for heavenly derision (Ps 2:4) in the irresistible triumph of the Resurrection.” And Lenski puts it like this: “Quietly Jesus rested in his tomb. Presently he would arise. In vain are all the foolish proceedings of his enemies” – and I would add that *it has always and ever been so*.

- ✓ Job 5:12–13 — He frustrates the devices of the crafty, so that their hands achieve no success. He catches the wise in their own craftiness, and the schemes of the wily are brought to a quick end.
- ✓ Psalm 33:10–11 — The LORD brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; he frustrates the plans of the peoples. The counsel of the LORD stands forever, the plans of his heart to all generations.

- ✓ Isaiah 8:9–10 — Be broken, you peoples, and be shattered; give ear, all you far countries; strap on your armor and be shattered; strap on your armor and be shattered. Take counsel together, but it will come to nothing; speak a word, but it will not stand, for God is with us.

In the end, we know that all of the “gathering together” and plotting and scheming of the chief priests and Pharisees was frustrated and overthrown. In the end we know that it was the counsel of the Lord that was established forever, and the plans of His heart that still endure to all generations. The “gathering together” and plotting and scheming of the chief priests and Pharisees certainly appears to us today to be completely feeble and utterly laughable.

But there was a day when it wouldn’t have seemed that way at all to the disciples. There was a day when they were filled only with dark despair at the apparent triumph of the enemies of God. But even as the disciples were filled with such a dark and horrible despair – even at that very moment – He who sits in the heavens was *laughing*. He was laughing and holding in derision all of the feeble plots and counsels of mortal men.

It wasn’t but only a few months after this that the disciples Peter and John were arrested for “proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead” (Acts 4:1-3). They were examined, and then threatened and released (Acts 4:5-22).

- ✓ Acts 4:23–31 — When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, “Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, ‘Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed’— for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.

Brothers and sisters, may we be given this same fearless *boldness and courage* in the face of all the “gathering together” and the plotting and scheming of a world around us that is hostile to Christ. Because even on the days that seem the darkest and the most discouraging, we can be sure that God is still laughing – and just knowing this should fill us with comfort and strength. Just knowing that God laughs can restrain us from ever acting out of fear, or exasperation, or anger, or despair. And how often do we need to be restrained! The next time you are beside yourself with frustration, or anger, or discouragement at the apparent triumph of those who plot against the cause of Christ, *remember that the one who sits in the heavens is laughing*. And one day He will speak to the wicked in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying, “As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill.” As Calvin puts it: “Whenever... wicked men shall labor to overturn everything by their calumnies [or by their plots and schemes], and shall launch

out into unmeasured slander, let us *wait* with composure and tranquility of mind until God bring light out of darkness.”

- ✓ Psalm 33:10–11 — The LORD brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; he frustrates the plans of the peoples. The counsel of the LORD stands forever, the plans of his heart to all generations.

To quote Lenski again: “Quietly Jesus rested in his tomb. Presently he [will] arise. ***In vain are all the foolish proceedings of his enemies***” – and ***it has always and ever been so***. If you’re a Christian today, will you be filled with peace and courage? And if you’re still resisting God today, will you finally repent and surrender? God is the sovereign Lord over all, and He is powerful not only to judge, but also to save.