

LESSONS ON PREDESTINATION #66
"Christ's Resurrection: The Empty Tomb"
(Scriptures from NKJV)

Matthew 28:1-8:

Now after the Sabbath, as the first day of the week began to dawn, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to see the tomb. And behold, there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat on it. His countenance was like lightning, and his clothing as white as snow. And the guards shook for fear of him, and became like dead men. But the angel answered and said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for He is risen, as He said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay. And go quickly and tell His disciples that He is risen from the dead, and indeed He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see Him. Behold, I have told you." So they went out quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to bring His disciples word.

INTRODUCTION: In the last two lessons, we covered the length of time which the body of Jesus spent in the tomb. The Minority View holds that Christ was crucified and buried on Wednesday and rose again on Sunday literally fulfilling a seventy-two hour period of time. The Majority View holds that Christ was crucified and buried on Friday and rose again on Sunday by metaphorically fulfilling the three day and nights as understood by the Jews. Friday being one day, Saturday being the second day, and Sunday being the third day. A portion of a day counting for a whole day.

We now come to examine the empty tomb of Jesus and its implications.

There were three great themes which Paul addressed in his sermon on Mar's Hill in Athens - the creation of the world, the resurrection of Christ, and a righteous judgment to come. Out of these three, only one may be ascribed to belong to the realm of history. While the creation is an actual event, man was not there to observe it, and what we call recorded history had not yet begun. The future judgment will one day become history, but must now be assigned to prophecy as no man has seen it occur. It is only Christ's resurrection from the dead that strictly belongs to the realm of history.

While the modern skeptics may reject the resurrection of Jesus from the dead on the grounds that miracles do not occur, there are at least two bodies of evidence involving the history of the person named Jesus. One, He was an historical person who actually lived. Two, His tomb is empty. These are undeniable to any rational mind which faces the facts of history.

I. JESUS OF NAZARETH BELONGS TO THE REALM OF HISTORY.

1. His birth and early life. We know that He lived between 5 or 6 B.C. up to 30 or 32 A.D. We know He was born in Bethlehem which was a real town. We know where He spent most of His life. It was in Nazareth, in northern Galilee where He worked as a carpenter.

We know the names of several historical persons of His day from records apart from the New Testament. They include such persons as Herod the Great, his son, Herod Agrippa, Pontius Pilate, Tiberias Caesar, Felix and Festus, whose names are found in many of the secular writings of the first century. Every historian of the ancient world, which includes the first century of our era, is compelled to say something about Jesus of Nazareth. Every encyclopedia published in the western world must record the record that a man named Jesus actually lived. The very dates we use, designated by the letters A.D. and B.C. give testimony to the fact that Jesus Christ once lived on this earth. You cannot name any event of Ancient Babylon, Greece, or Rome and try to tell others it happened, without bearing testimony to the fact that Jesus lived. Every newspaper, every court document, every letter, every monument that lists a date, all add their testimony to the reality of an historic person named Jesus. You can't walk through a cemetery and read the dates on the headstones without testifying to the reality of Jesus Christ. This person, Jesus of Nazareth, lived here on earth among men at a definite time, in a definite place, among historical characters, speaking as a man to men, and going about doing good.

2. His Physical Death. When we come to the historical record of His death, the New Testament records are filled with details. We know more about the details prior to the hours and hour of His death than any other person in the ancient world. We know what He said to His disciples throughout the final week of His life. We know He instituted what became known as the Lord's Supper the night prior to His death. We know of the agony of His sufferings in Gethsemane, and how He was betrayed by a kiss from one of His disciples. We know of the six trials which He underwent within the last eight hours of His life - three before the Jewish authorities, three before the Roman authorities, (two before Pilate and one before Herod). We know what men said to Him, what they said against Him, and what He said to them.

We know how the soldiers abused Him, and what He said to them. We know the name of an obscure person who carried His cross to Golgotha. We know of two men who were crucified on either side of Him. We know the words He spoke while He hung on the cross and the insults to which He was exposed while there. We know what the soldiers did at the foot of the cross, what the women felt as they watched Him hang there. We know what the repentant thief said to Him and the darkness which enveloped Him. We know how

the veil of the temple was rent and an earthquake shook the city. In all this data, there is nothing mythical, or even theological. It is all solid definite historical fact. The criteria by which we determine the historical death of Julius Caesar is the same criteria by which we determine the death of Jesus Christ. It comes from human observation which is handed down in written records. We have more evidence that a man named Jesus lived and died than we have that George Washington crossed the Delaware River.

3. The Meaning of the Term "Resurrection" Determines the Meaning of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The word resurrection itself means a rising from the dead, a coming forth from the dead, a return from the dead, and assumes that physical death has occurred. There can be no such thing as a resurrection until something has died. When we speak of the resurrection of someone who has died, we can only mean the resurrection of that person's body. There will never be and never can be the "resurrection" of a spirit, for the simple reason that a spirit can never suffer death. The soul or spirit of Jesus did not die. He said, **"Father, 'into Your hands I commit My spirit.'" (Luke 23:46).**

If death affects the body, and the body is not raised, death is the conqueror. If Christ can be said to have conquered death, then His own body must have been delivered from death's power. In no other way can we account for the empty tomb and the appearances of Christ after His resurrection. While liberals may love to speak of the spirit of Jesus living still, while denying His bodily resurrection, the New Testament writers never understood it in that manner. There is no other meaning of the term than that which refers to the physical body. At least let us be accurate in our use of our terms, however we may explain the evidence for the ideas of which they speak.

4. Jesus Predicted His Own Resurrection. Out of all the amazing things which Jesus ever said, was His frequent assertions that not only was He going to go up to Jerusalem to die at the hands of the religious leaders of Israel, but that on the third day after His death, He would rise again. This is Predestination in its most vivid form. Early in His ministry, immediately after the cleansing of the temple in John 2:19-22, He said to the Jews of Jerusalem, **"'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.'** **Then the Jews said, 'It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?' But He was speaking of the temple of His body. Therefore, when He had risen from the dead, His disciples remembered that He had said this to them; and they believed the Scripture and the word which Jesus had said."**

During the second period of His Galilean ministry, after the healing of the demoniac, He again declared His resurrection in Matthew 12:38-40, ***"Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered, saying, 'Teacher, we want to see a sign from You.' But He answered and said to them, 'An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.'"***

Immediately following Peter's great confession in Caesarea Philippi, He described in Matthew 16:21, ***"From that time Jesus began to show to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day."***

Immediately after His appearance to Peter, James and John on The Mount of Transfiguration, we are told in Matthew 17:9, ***"Now as they came down from the mountain, Jesus commanded them, saying, 'Tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man is risen from the dead.'"*** Then in Matthew 17:22, 23, we are told, ***"Now while they were staying in Galilee, Jesus said to them, 'The Son of Man is about to be betrayed into the hands of men, and they will kill Him, and the third day He will be raised up.' And they were exceedingly sorrowful."***

Just a short time before His Passion week, He emphatically said to His twelve disciples in Matthew 20:18,19, ***"Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and to the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death, and deliver Him to the Gentiles to mock and to scourge and to crucify. And the third day He will rise again."***

And finally at the close of the Lord's Supper, He would confidently say in Matthew 26:31, 32, ***"Then Jesus said to them, 'All of you will be made to stumble because of Me this night, for it is written: I will strike the Shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered. But after I have been raised, I will go before you to Galilee.'"***

If you or I should say to a group of friends that at a certain time, in a certain place, and in a certain manner, we would die, and three days later we would rise from the dead, our friends would for our own safety, take us away and put us in a mental institution until our minds became clear again. This would be proper, for only a mentally incompetent person would go around talking about rising from the dead on the third day, unless they knew this was going to occur and no one in the history of the world has ever known that

about himself except one, Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Here is a teacher of religion who calmly professes to stake His ability and credibility on His claim that if He be put to death, He will rise again from the dead on the third day. Never was there such a person before or since who has made such a proposal. If Jesus cannot back up His claims, He is a lunatic and unworthy to be followed. Yet no person in the history of mankind has influenced the lives of more people than Jesus of Nazareth.

5. The Records Which Affirm That the Body of Jesus was Buried in the Tomb of Joseph of Arimathea.

We know more about the burial of Jesus Christ than we know of the burial of any other person in ancient history. We know who took His body down from the cross; we know something of how the body was wrapped in spices and burial clothes; we know where the very tomb was located, in a garden near to the place where He was crucified outside the city walls. We know the name of the person who owned the tomb, namely, Joseph of Arimathea. We know that immediately after His entombment, a stone was rolled against the tomb, that this stone was sealed, and by the wish of the Jews, Roman guards were set by the tomb to prevent the body from being stolen.

We have four records of this burial, all of them in amazing agreement. They are the record of Matthew, a disciple of Jesus who was there when He was crucified; the record of Mark, which was believed to have been written within ten years of Jesus' ascension; the record of Luke, a companion of the Apostle Paul and a great historian; and the record of John, who was the last to leave the death scene of the cross.

Now, we have many historical records of events occurring in the Middle East during the era of the first century. These records have many things to say about such persons as Herod the Great, and his son, Herod Agrippa, Pontius Pilate, Caiaphas and others. These are found in the histories of the Romans and the writings of Josephus, the Jewish historian. But we do not have one single sentence about the burial of Jesus anywhere in the Greek, Roman, and Jewish literature of the first three centuries. It is only mentioned in the Gospel records. Thus we cannot know anything additional, or contrary to these records. If we believe the Gospels are valid historical documents, we then receive the evidence of Jesus' burial as true. If we do not believe the Gospels are valid historical documents, then we place the whole topic beyond the realm of historical discussion and can say nothing about the burial of Jesus because we know nothing about it. This leaves the skeptics with no evidence upon which to discuss the topic except that which is found in the Gospel records. Thus, their long list of theories which attempt to explain what happened to the body of

Jesus, are but based on speculative theories without any historical evidence.

After having now seen that the life, death, and burial of Jesus of Nazareth belongs to the realm of history, we are now faced with:

II. THE TESTIMONY OF THE EMPTY TOMB.

The New Testament records emphatically make clear that the tomb in which Jesus was buried, was on the Sunday morning of the same week, found to be empty. No person, be they a believer or skeptic, who has ever written on the subject of Christ's resurrection, can avoid facing the problem of Joseph's empty tomb. The empty tomb is recognized by everyone, and no one dares to say that the body of Jesus is still residing in that tomb, however they might try to explain the fact of how the tomb became empty.

1. The Witnesses to the Fact That the Tomb was Empty.

The Gospel records reveal that no one, including Jesus' most devoted followers, expected that He would rise from the dead and the tomb would be empty. Jesus' death had demolished their faith and hope in Him. The women who went to the tomb, went to anoint a dead body, not a resurrected body. We have presented to us a four-fold testimony to the fact the tomb was empty and the body of Jesus was missing.

a. First, The testimony of the women: These women had watched the burial of Jesus from a distance. They saw His body placed in the very tomb in question. Upon coming back to the tomb, they found the stone had been rolled away and the body was gone. (Matthew 28:1-6)

b. Second, The testimony of Peter and John: The women rushed back to Jerusalem and told Peter and John what had occurred. These men were not mystics, who could be easily led astray, but were hard-nosed fishermen who demanded proof. They hurried away to the tomb to see if what the women said was true, while not believing that He had risen from the dead. They also found the tomb to be empty. (John 20:1-10).

c. Third, The testimony of the Roman guards: Upon the request of the Jewish leaders, Pilate had appointed Roman guards to seal the tomb and stand watch to prevent the disciples from stealing the body and claiming that Jesus had risen from the dead. (Matthew 27:62-66). These same guards reported to the Jewish leaders that on Sunday morning the tomb had become empty (Matthew 28:11-15).

d. Fourth: The testimony of the Jewish Sanhedrin: Upon being informed that the tomb was empty, the Jewish leaders bribed the guards to tell the story that while they slept, the disciples of Jesus came and stole the body of Jesus. This is still the Jewish explanation for the empty tomb (Matthew 28:11-15).

2. Attempts to Escape the Testimony of the Empty Tomb.

There have been several attempts made which seek to explain the empty tomb. The first of these is:

a. **The Jewish attempt.** The first attempt to explain the empty tomb is actually found in the Bible itself. It comes from none other than the Jewish authorities themselves. It is found in Matthew 28:11-15. ***"Now while they were going, behold, some of the guard came into the city and reported to the chief priests all the things that had happened. When they had assembled with the elders and consulted together, they gave a large sum of money to the soldiers, saying, 'Tell them, His disciples came at night and stole Him away while we slept. And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will appease him and make you secure.' So they took the money and did as they were instructed; and this saying is commonly reported among the Jews until this day."***

It should first be noted that the Jewish leaders never questioned the report of the guards. They did not go out to see if the tomb was empty because they knew it was empty. The guards would never have returned with such a story unless they were assured that something had happened to the body of Jesus. The story, which the Jewish authorities told the guards to repeat, was a story to explain how the tomb became empty.

The second thing is that the guards were paid to report a lie. This fabricated lie came from the same leaders who had paid false witnesses whose testimonies had been used to put Jesus to death. Bribery is always a crime and a mark of corruption with the attempt to suppress the truth.

The third thing to be noticed in the story is that the guards were told to say that the disciples stole the body of Jesus while they were asleep. How could the guards know what happened to the body of Jesus if they were asleep? Suppose I called the police and told them that my neighbor had stolen my car during the night. When the police come to investigate, they ask if I actually saw the crime committed. I reply, "Well no, because I was asleep!" My testimony becomes worthless in that being asleep I would not know who stole my car.

The fourth thing to be noticed is that the theory that the disciples stole the body is unbelievable for at least three reasons:

One: The disciples were in no mood to go out and face Roman guards, overcome them and steal the body. They would have been killed, and they were afraid for their lives.

Two: The disciples had no reason for taking the body which had been given an honorable burial. To remove the body would be to desecrate the grave. This they would never do unless they wanted to deceive the public. For all their shortcomings, there is one thing the disciples were not, and that was liars. They had set under a teacher who had set forth the highest standards of any religious teacher in the world, and there was no reason they would cast all that off and enter into such a vile conspiracy as that.

Three: The disciples would not go forth preaching the resurrection of Christ if they knew where they had put His body. For their preaching they would soon be beaten, imprisoned, and put to death. Humans will not expose themselves to suffering and death for something which they know to be untrue. When Peter was preaching on the resurrection of Christ in his sermon on Pentecost, he believed what he was preaching!

The whole fabricated story by the Jewish leaders, about the body being stolen by the disciples, shows how their explanation is utterly bankrupt. In fact, they did not really believe it themselves. If they did, why did they not immediately arrest the disciples and make them give up the body? They never attempted to substantiate the charge! This explanation, on the part of the Jewish leaders, is no longer used by modern skeptics who deny the resurrection.

b. **Miscellaneous Attempts.** Just as Rome was not built in a day, so it is impossible to cover in one sermon all the issues involving the empty tomb. Time will now only allow the main remaining theories to be listed and provide a summary of our message. All of these theories are based on speculations which cannot be substantiated by any historical records. They include:

One: Joseph of Arimathea moved the body to another tomb.

Two: The women went to the wrong tomb.

Three: Jesus never actually died, but revived and walked out of the tomb alive - Swoon Theory.

Four: His body was never placed in a tomb, but was thrown in a pit along with other criminals who had been crucified.

III. SUMMARY:

Those who reject the supernatural resurrection of Jesus Christ, do so, not on historical grounds of evidence, but on the basis that the miraculous does not exist, therefore the whole story can be rejected as total fiction. They ascribe that anyone who believes in the bodily resurrection of Christ is both ignorant and unscientific. While they may pride themselves in their scientific knowledge, they reveal their total disregard for how historical evidence is to be handled. They remain baffled as to how to explain the empty tomb on historical grounds. They insist the story must be kept in the realm of myth or else assign a vague spiritual meaning to it.

While the meaning of the resurrection is a theological matter, the fact of the resurrection is a historical matter. The nature of the resurrection body of Jesus may be a mystery, but the fact that the body disappeared from the tomb is a matter to be decided upon by historical evidence. The tomb had a definite location. The man who owned the tomb lived in the first half of the first century. The tomb was made out of rock on a hillside near Jerusalem. The guards were not mystical beings, but hardened Roman soldiers. The Sanhedrin was a real body of men meeting frequently in Jerusalem. The disciples were real men who lived in the realm of reality and demanded proof before things were to be believed.

The critics of the resurrection have a bigger problem than believers have. They have an historical problem which will not go away and hide. It is that of an empty tomb which must be faced in the light of history. **"He is not here; for He is risen, as He said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay."** (Matthew 28:6).