

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver Street
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001
www.fcfonline.org

HARD HEARTS, POWERFUL GOD

Matthew 27:57-28:20

By

Steven J. Cole

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Easter Sunday

Hard Hearts, Powerful God
Matthew 27:57-28:20

Sometimes those who do not believe in God will say, "Just show me a miracle and I will believe." The story is told of the noted atheist, Robert Ingersoll, who delivered one of his speeches attacking the Christian faith. When he was done, he pulled his watch from his pocket and said, "According to the Bible, God has struck men to death for blasphemy. I will blaspheme Him and give Him five minutes to strike me dead and damn my soul."

Many in the crowd gasped at his audacious statement. Then there was silence as one minute went by. By two minutes, the crowd was growing anxious. At three minutes, a woman fainted. At four minutes, Ingersoll had a sneer on his face. At five minutes, he snapped his watch shut, put it in his pocket, and said, "You see, there is no God, or He would have taken me at my word."

The story was later told to Joseph Parker, a British pastor, who said, "And did the American gentleman think that he could exhaust the patience of God in five minutes?" (Adapted from Paul Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7,700 Illustrations* [Assurance Publishers, 1979], # 334.)

But what if God had struck Ingersoll with a heart attack that stunned, but didn't kill him? Do you think that he would have abandoned his atheism and believed in Jesus Christ? I think not. Because at the root of unbelief is the hatred of God and the love of one's own sin. All the evidence in the world isn't enough to persuade those who love their sin to give it up and submit to God.

We see this with the Jewish leaders in Jesus' day. When they wickedly put Him on the cross, it wasn't enough to do that despicable deed. In addition, they taunted Him (Matt. 27:42), "He saved others; He cannot save Himself. He is the King of Israel; let Him now come down from the cross, and we will believe in Him."

But, would they have believed in Him if He had at that moment miraculously freed Himself from the nails and come down from the cross? The answer is given in Matthew 28:11-15; when

they heard the testimony of the guards about the earthquake, the angel, and the empty tomb. They did not fall down in fear and say, "We were so wrong! Now we believe!" Rather, they paid the guards to spread a false story, so that no one would come to believe the truth of the resurrection. All the evidence in the world is not sufficient to change the minds of the unbelieving. The problem goes far deeper. Matthew's account of the burial and resurrection of Jesus teaches us four lessons:

1. The fallen human heart is far harder than we imagine.

I heard about a prominent Christian leader who said that if you give him 15 minutes with anyone, he could get that person to make a decision for Christ. Other than being rather arrogant, that statement reveals a woeful misunderstanding of the hardness of the human heart! If you think that salvation is simply a matter of giving people the evidence or presenting a winsome four-point outline of the gospel and urging the person to make a decision to invite Jesus into his heart, you do not understand what you're up against.

Paul describes the hardened hearts of sinners this way (Eph. 4:18-19): "being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart; and they, having become callous, have given themselves over to sensuality for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness." Our text shows us that...

A. The fallen human heart is so hard as to reject and crucify the sinless Savior.

Although Jesus went about doing good and healing the sick and teaching people the ways of God, He was a threat to the power and position of the Jewish leaders. And so they arrested Jesus, trumped up obviously false charges against Him, spit on Him, beat Him in the face, and mocked Him. They were not even satisfied when Pilate scourged Him, which was a hideously torturous punishment that left a man's back shred into ribbons of flesh. Because the Jews did not have the right of capital punishment (or they would have stoned Him), they insisted that Pilate condemn Him to die a horrible, cruel death on the cross.

They had plenty of evidence that Jesus was their Messiah. He performed many miracles, including opening the eyes of the man

born blind and raising Lazarus from the dead (John 9, 11). He powerfully taught from the Scriptures that they claimed to revere. He invited them to examine the Scriptures, to see that they testified of Him. But they refused because their hardened hearts loved darkness rather than light.

Now, they add to their sins by calling Him a deceiver (27:63). Wanting to prevent anyone from believing in Christ, they ask Pilate to secure the tomb so that the disciples would not steal the body and then proclaim a resurrection. Matthew is using irony to show that they were the deceived ones! They, who had seen Lazarus after Jesus had called him to life from the tomb, thought that they could stop the mighty power of God to raise Jesus from the dead by placing a guard and a seal on the tomb! What a picture of the spiritual hardness of sinful hearts!

- B. The fallen human heart is so hard as to suppress the clear evidence regarding Jesus Christ.

As I said, all of Jesus' ministry bore witness to the fact that He was the promised Messiah. Even the events surrounding His death fulfilled specific Old Testament prophecies. Psalm 22 describes a death by crucifixion, even though that form of execution would not be invented until centuries later. Jesus cited that psalm in His cry (27:46), "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" Even if they hadn't yet made the connection, that should have driven them back to reread that psalm and connect it with Jesus. The darkened sky, the torn veil in the temple, the earthquake, the reports of resurrected people appearing all around Jerusalem, and even the testimony of the pagan soldiers (27:45-54), all bore witness to who Jesus truly was.

Then Joseph of Arimathea, a rich man, buried Jesus in his own tomb (27:57-60). That should have caused any Jew that knew the Old Testament to go back to Isaiah 53, which describes in amazing prophetic detail the death of Messiah as the sacrificial lamb. It reads (53:9), "His grave was assigned with wicked men, yet He was with a rich man in His death...." Seeing Jesus crucified between two criminals, and yet buried in the rich man's tomb, the Jewish leaders, who knew Isaiah 53, should have repented and believed in Jesus. Yet when the guards reported the empty tomb, they responded by bribing them to cover up the facts!

- C. The fallen human heart is so hard as to accept readily the flimsy excuses that dismiss the resurrection of Jesus.

The Jewish leaders don't even stop to think about the implications of what the guards are reporting. Instead, they immediately go into damage control mode, concocting a silly story that the disciples had come and stolen the body while the guards were sleeping (28:13)! If the guards were sleeping, how would they know what had happened? Besides, grave robbery was a serious crime, punishable even by death. Would the depressed disciples be bold enough to break the seal, move the heavy stone, and attempt a serious crime under the noses of these supposedly sleeping guards? Would not their efforts have awakened at least one guard? And then would they, knowing that the resurrection was a hoax, have proclaimed that Jesus is risen, even at the risk of being beaten, imprisoned, and possibly killed?

Actually, the Jewish leaders' attempt to suppress the evidence inadvertently provided us with further evidence that the resurrection is true! Their story is so full of holes that it is laughable! They couldn't deny the plain evidence of the empty tomb. But, they weren't really looking for evidence to believe. They were fabricating excuses to continue in their unbelief. They knew that if Jesus was really risen, then they had to repent of their sins and they would lose their position of prestige and power over the Jewish people.

The soldiers also were willing to brush aside the things that they had seen with their own eyes and to spread lies because they got paid off to do so. What sinners won't do for a little bit of money! The soldiers had felt the earthquake, they had seen the heavy stone moved, they saw the angel, whose appearance was like lightning, and they saw the empty tomb, but they denied it all for a bribe! That reveals to us the true reason that people reject Christ:

- D. The real reason that people reject Jesus Christ is not a lack of evidence, but rather that they do not want to submit their lives to Him as Lord.

Sir Edward Clarke wrote (in John Stott, *Basic Christianity* [IVP, 1971], p. 47; cited by John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary, Matthew 24-28* [Moody Press], p. 314):

As a lawyer I have made a prolonged study of the evidences for the events of the first Easter Day. To me the evidence is conclusive, and over and over again in the High Court I have secured the verdict on evidence not nearly so compelling. Inference follows on evidence, and a truthful witness is always artless and disdains effect. The Gospel evidence for the resurrection is of this class, and as a lawyer I accept it unreservedly as the testimony of truthful men to fact they were able to substantiate.

Cliff Knechtle writes of a conversation that he had with a university student who claimed that the Bible was packed with mythology, even though he admitted that he had never read it. Knechtle challenged him to read both the Book of Isaiah, which contains prophecies concerning Christ, and Matthew, which records the fulfillment of those predictions.

Knechtle thought that he'd never see him again, but the next day, he approached Knechtle and said, "I read Isaiah and Matthew. It was interesting literature. I think it speaks the truth."

"That's great!" said Knechtle. "Are you ready to trust Christ for eternal life?"

The student replied, "No way. I have a very active sex life. I know that Christ would want to change that. I don't want anyone to change that." (Cliff Knechtle, *Give Me An Answer* [IVP], pp. 88-89, told by Lee Strobel, *Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry and Mary* [Zondervan], p. 113.)

If you think that you have intellectual reasons for why you can doubt the truth of Jesus and His resurrection, you need to get honest with yourself and go deeper. Your real reason for rejecting Christ is that you don't want to give up your sin. Your heart is far harder than you ever could imagine!

But perhaps we who have believed in Christ are smugly thinking, "Yes, the hearts of unbelievers are really hard, aren't they!" But before we congratulate ourselves, we should notice:

2. Even the hearts of believers are harder than we imagine.
 - A. The fearful disciples are conspicuously absent from the first part of this narrative.

The glaring question that begs an answer in chapter 27 is, "Where were the disciples?" You have Joseph of Arimathea and (according to John 19:39) Nicodemus, both of whom were on the Council, but disagreed with the decision to put Jesus to death. Up to this point, they had been secret disciples. But, now they come out of hiding to give Jesus a proper burial. But, where were the rest of the disciples? They were in hiding out of fear for their lives.

Even though Jesus had repeatedly predicted His own death and resurrection, the hearts of the disciples were prevented from understanding what He meant. It just didn't fit with their idea of a Messiah. Even the faithful women who came to the tomb on that first resurrection Sunday didn't expect to find it empty.

Before we say to the disciples, "For shame, for shame!" we need to look at our own hearts. How often I have been foolish and "slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken" (Luke 24:25)! In spite of the clear evidence of Scripture, my hardened heart often struggles with doubt!

B. Some who saw the risen Jesus were still hesitant to believe.

Matthew 28:16-20 reports Jesus' appearance to His followers in Galilee. This is probably the appearance to more than 500 at one time, which Paul reports (1 Cor. 15:6). If this were a fabricated story whose purpose was to sell the readers on the resurrection, surely the author would have omitted the last part of Matthew 28:17: "but some were doubtful." The Greek word used may mean not that they denied the resurrection, but that they were hesitant to believe. It probably does not refer to the Eleven, who had already had several encounters with the risen Savior, including the famous incident with doubting Thomas. But, even so, the inclusion of that phrase makes the reader wonder, "Why would some be hesitant to believe?" D. A. Carson (*Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. by Frank Gaebelein [Zondervan, 1984], 8:594) explains that Matthew...

... may be using this historical reminiscence to stress the fact that Jesus' resurrection was not an anticipated episode that required only enthusiasm and gullibility to win adherents among Jesus' followers. Far from it, they still were hesitant; and their failure to understand his repeated predictions of his resurrec-

tion, compounded with their despair after his crucifixion, worked to maintain their hesitancy for some time before they came to full faith. Jesus' resurrection did not instantly transform men of little faith and faltering understanding into spiritual giants.

This should give those of us who have trusted in Christ encouragement and hope. Certainly, we should confess our doubts as sin and strive against them, in that they reveal the lingering hardness of our hearts. Yet at the same time, we can be encouraged that the Lord patiently bears with our weaknesses and spiritual struggles. As David proclaims (Ps. 103:13-14), "Just as a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him. For He Himself knows our frame, He is mindful that we are but dust."

Thus far we've focused on the hardness of the human heart. If we stopped there, we all would despair. But this account of Jesus' resurrection also shows us the mighty power of God:

3. The power of the living God is far greater than we imagine.

We see first that...

- A. God has the power to accomplish His sovereign purpose.

Even though all the powers of hell tried to keep Jesus in the tomb, they could not succeed. The Messiah had prayed prophetically (Ps. 16:10), "For You will not abandon my soul to Sheol; nor will You allow Your Holy One to undergo decay." Peter cited that psalm of David in his sermon on the Day of Pentecost, pointing out that David's tomb was still in their midst. Rather than writing of himself, David was looking ahead to the resurrection of Christ, to which all of the apostles were witnesses (Acts 2:25-32).

That God permits the wicked to carry out their evil schemes, for which they are responsible, and yet He uses those very schemes to fulfill His sovereign purpose, is a demonstration of His great power. The most evil deed in the history of the human race was to kill the sinless Son of God on the cross. Yet, in doing this, they were not thwarting God's predetermined purpose, but rather, carrying it out and even fulfilling specific prophecies in doing so (Acts 2:23; 4:27-28). In this resurrection story, the evil scheme of the

Jewish leaders to spread a false rumor about the disciples' stealing Jesus' body backfires on them, as God uses it to provide greater evidence to any thoughtful reader that the resurrection is true.

In Ephesians, Paul argues that it is nothing less than this same mighty power of God that raised Jesus from the dead that raises sinners from spiritual death to eternal life (Eph. 1:19-20; 2:1-6). If God leaves you in your hardness of heart, there is not a glimmer of hope that by your own power you can open your blind eyes to see the truth about who Jesus is. But, His power is greater than our weakness. His grace is greater than all our sin. Don't look to anything in yourself. Rather, look to God, who raised Jesus from the dead, and cry out to Him to give life to your spiritually dead soul.

- B. The risen Jesus Christ claims to have all authority in heaven and on earth.

Jesus said (28:18), "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth." Either Jesus is a deluded megalomaniac or He spoke the truth. If He spoke the truth, then He has the authority to grant eternal life (as He claimed, John 5:24-26) or to cast into hell (John 5:27). I strongly urge you to cry out to Him to have mercy on your soul. Like the blind beggar (Mark 10:46-52), keep calling until you're sure that He has granted your request.

There is a third evidence of God's mighty power:

- C. The risen Jesus Christ claims that He will be with His obedient disciples always, even to the end of the age.

As they go, proclaiming the good news of His triumph over death and sin, Jesus promises (28:20), "I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Again, either He is a deluded megalomaniac, or He is God, because no mere man could make such an amazing claim! His resurrection backs up the truthfulness of His claim. His promise is a great comfort to every follower of Jesus. Even if they kill us, as they killed Him, we know that nothing can "separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:39). How should we respond?

- 4. We should be quick to believe, to worship, and to obey all that He has commanded.

Rather than making up excuses to remain in our sin or being hesitant to believe in spite of the evidence, we should be quick to believe. If you need to, pray with the man whose son needed healing, "I do believe; help my unbelief" (Mark 9:24).

We should be quick to join with the disciples in worshipping the risen Savior. It is significant that Jesus welcomed and did not rebuke the worship of the disciples. If Jesus were a mere man, even if He were a great prophet, surely He would have been horrified to have people falling down before Him in worship. Yet, clearly He receives and commends such worship (see John 20:27-29).

And, we should be quick to obey all that He has commanded us (Matt. 28:20), including His command to make disciples of all the nations. To seek first His kingdom and righteousness means that we will not spend our time and money as the rest of our self-centered American culture does. If Jesus is risen, then we must be radically obedient to His kingdom commands.

Conclusion

Because God's power is greater than our hard hearts,
we should be quick to believe, worship,
and obey the risen Savior.

The noted historian and Oxford professor Thomas Arnold wrote (cited by MacArthur, *ibid.*, p. 314; from Wilbur Smith, *Therefore Stand: Christian Apologetics* [Baker, 1965], pp. 425-426):

The evidence for our Lord's life and death and resurrection may be, and often has been, shown to be satisfactory; it is good according to the common rules for distinguishing good evidence from bad. Thousands and tens of thousands of persons have gone through it piece by piece as carefully as every judge summing upon a most important case. I myself have done it many times over, not to persuade others but to satisfy myself. I have been used for many years to study the histories of other times and to examine and weigh the evidence of those who have written about them, and I know of no one fact in the history of mankind which is proved by better and fuller evidence of every sort, to the understanding of a fair inquirer, than the great sign which God has given us that Christ died and rose again from the dead.

The evidence is not lacking! The question is, will you believe it, worship the risen Christ, and obey the commands that His rightful lordship place on your life?

Application Questions

1. If unbelief is rooted in the love of sin rather than in the lack of evidence, should we provide evidence when we witness?
2. How should we advise a person who seems to be struggling with sincere doubts?
3. Why is it helpful to understand the hardness of the human heart before you attempt to witness for Christ?
4. Why is the deity of Jesus Christ essential to His being the Savior? Why is any lesser view not only inadequate, but damnable?

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