
Lesson 54

With the Rich in His Death

The Scripture Lesson

Matthew 27:55-61

The crowds that had come to view the spectacle on Calvary must have left shortly after 3:00. The women, however, and a few of the other friends of Jesus stayed on. They could scarcely believe that things could ever end this way. But now that Jesus really *was* dead, they became concerned about His burial. Very soon the Roman soldiers would remove the three bodies from the crosses and drag them away to be buried together in a pit dug for them. Jesus would be treated as no more than a common criminal. But God will see to it that that does not happen. Isaiah had long before prophesied that the Christ would be buried “with the rich in his death.”

There was at the cross a rich man. His name was Joseph. He was a man from Arimathea, and he was a member of the Sanhedrin. Most of the other leaders hated Jesus, but this man believed that Jesus was the Messiah. Now that Jesus is dead, Joseph believes still that Jesus’ word was true, and that He will yet somehow be the Redeemer of Israel.

Nicodemus was there too. He also was a member of the Sanhedrin and a rich man, and one who was a secret believer in Jesus. After seeing everything that happened at Golgotha on this

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day, the two men, Joseph and Nicodemus, decide that, no matter how others might mock them, they will give Jesus an honorable burial.

They needed the permission of the governor. So Joseph set out at once for the judgment hall of Pilate. Pilate was surprised. He was surprised, first of all, because he had thought that all of the leaders of the Jews *hated* Jesus; and now he learns that Joseph is a *follower* of Him. Pilate was surprised, too, that Jesus was already dead. To make sure that he was not giving up the body of a man who was still alive, Pilate asked the centurion if Jesus was really dead. Assured by the centurion that it was so, Pilate gave Joseph permission to do as he asked.

On the way back to the cross, Joseph probably bought the linen clothes that would be needed to wrap the body. And Nicodemus returned with no less than 100 pounds of expensive spices with which to anoint the body. Together they took the body down from the cross, wrapped it quickly in a clean cloth, and carried it to a garden that was near the place where Jesus was crucified. The garden belonged to Joseph, and in it was a new tomb, cut into the side of a rocky hill. Into this tomb Joseph and Nicodemus carried the body of Jesus. Once inside they carefully wound the linen clothes around the body of Jesus, sprinkling

the spices between each layer. The last step was to wrap the head in a separate cloth and then lay the body in the place prepared for it in the side of the tomb. At last they left the sepulcher, shutting its entrance with a huge stone.

By that time, everyone else had left the area — everyone, that is, except for Mary Magdalene and another Mary. These two continued to watch from a little distance. It was Friday evening by this time. The following day was the Sabbath. Already these women planned to be back in this garden at the crack of dawn on Sunday in order to anoint the body themselves, as one last token of love to their Master who lay dead in the grave.

The Sealing of the Grave

Matthew 27:62-66

The Passover was partly a *harvest feast*. At the time of the Passover, the barley stood in the fields ready to be harvested. In God's picture language, a field of grain stands for God's people, and the harvesting of it stands for the *resurrection*, when all of them will be gathered into heaven — just as the grain is cut and gathered into storehouses.

At the time of the Passover, leaders of the Jews would go out into the fields and mark a spot from which would be cut the first barley of the harvest. On the next day, they would cut the grain from that marked spot, and then make it into flour. On the third day, that flour (the *first fruits* of the harvest) would be presented to the Lord in the temple to thank Him for giving them the crops that were now ready to be harvested. And all of that was a picture of the *resurrection*.

Thus every year the Jews would look ahead to the resurrection of *Jesus*. For *Jesus* was the firstfruits of the resurrection harvest. *His* resurrection would be the first, and all of His people would be raised *because He arose*.

Now, at the very time that men were marking the spot in the field from which they would take the firstfruits, *Jesus* was being buried in Joseph's tomb. On the third day the firstfruits of the *barley harvest* would be presented to the Lord in the temple. Also on the third day the firstfruits of the

resurrection harvest would be presented to God in the resurrection of *Jesus*. The Jews, you see, were therefore busy with the *picture*. And the truth is that they did not *want* its fulfillment in *Jesus*. They wanted to keep *Jesus in the grave*.

The leaders of the Jews knew that *Jesus* had said that He would rise again on the third day. They were worried that He might just do that. So they went to Pilate and asked him to put guards at the grave — just, they said, to be sure that the disciples could not steal the body of *Jesus* and then say that He had risen. The leaders were, of course, really not so much worried about *that* as they were about a possible *resurrection*. They wanted to keep *Jesus* from rising from the dead, for if He would arise, that would mean bad trouble for them. So they asked Pilate that “the sepulcher be made sure” (that is, kept tightly shut) till the third day. They were sure that, if He did not rise by the third day, then He would not arise at all.

Pilate, too, wished to have *Jesus* stay in the grave. Pilate, the leaders of the Jews, and really *all* of the wicked do not want *Jesus* to come out of His grave, for that means that He will judge them for their wickedness. If *Jesus* stays in the grave, they are safe; if He comes out, they are doomed. So Pilate sent soldiers with weapons to stand guard at the tomb. Foolishly they believe that they can stop the power of the resurrection with a few soldiers armed with swords. But this they will never be able to do. Instead of *preventing* the resurrection, they will be the first *witnesses* of the fact that the Lord rose, as He said, as the firstfruits of them that sleep.

Memory Work

Group A

Matthew 27:64 “Command therefore that the sepulcher be made sure until the third day, lest his disciples come by night, and steal him away, and say unto the people, He is risen from the dead: so the last error shall be worse than the first.”

Group B

Matthew 27:66 “So they went and made the sepulcher sure, sealing the stone, and setting a watch.”

ACTIVITIES

This paper has been prepared in the hope that it will be used by students of all ages. The activities are designed so that the oldest will be challenged, and the youngest will find some of it within reach. Parents should encourage their children to attempt only what they can handle without frustration. For some that will be much, for others little.

DO YOU AGREE?

If you do, write Yes; if you do not, write No.

- _____ 1. Unless they received different instructions, the Roman soldiers would simply have dumped the bodies of Jesus and the two malefactors in one grave and covered them up.
- _____ 2. The chief priests, however, decided to give Jesus a more honorable burial because He was a great prophet of Galilee.
- _____ 3. One of the members of the Sanhedrin went to Pilate to ask for the body of Jesus.
- _____ 4. Before giving this man authority to bury Jesus, Pilate first checked with the high priest to be sure that Jesus was really already dead.
- _____ 5. Nicodemus, another member of the Sanhedrin, was willing to share with Joseph the work and the cost of giving Jesus an honorable burial.
- _____ 6. Since earthly riches mean nothing to God, Jesus could just as well have been buried by two poor men.
- _____ 7. At the time of the Passover Feast, the Jews observed ceremonies that pointed ahead both to the death and to the resurrection of the Messiah.
- _____ 8. The ceremony that pointed to Jesus' resurrection was the bringing of the firstfruits of the barley harvest before the Lord in the temple.
- _____ 9. The chief priests, while *delighting* in the *picture* of the resurrection, wanted to *prevent* the *real* resurrection.
- _____ 10. Afraid that Jesus might rise as He said, the chief priests went to Pilate and asked him to help them make sure that Jesus could not get out of the grave.
- _____ 11. To make sure that Jesus' body would be too decayed to rise, the chief priests asked Pilate to make the sepulcher sure for three weeks.
- _____ 12. God used this folly of the Jews in the end to provide them with positive proof that Jesus did in fact arise.

QUESTIONS FOR YOUNGER READERS

1. How did the Roman soldiers probably plan to bury Jesus? What, however, had Isaiah long before prophesied about the burial of the Messiah?
2. What two men did God use to fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah?
3. Joseph and Nicodemus belonged to a very important group of men. What was that group? What would the other members of that group think of them for giving Jesus an honorable burial?
4. Who gave Joseph permission to bury Jesus' body? Why was the governor surprised?
5. Where did Joseph and Nicodemus bury Jesus? What was it that made that burial a *costly* act of love?
6. How did they close the sepulcher? What two people watched them do this?
7. What crop was ready for harvest at the time of the Passover? What was the field of grain a picture of? What was the harvesting of that crop a picture of?
8. The Jews were thus paying close attention to the Old Testament *picture* of the resurrection. What did they do that showed they did not want the *fulfillment* of that picture in Jesus?
9. Why did the leaders of the Jews ask Pilate for a guard at the tomb only till the third day?
10. Why do all wicked people want to keep Jesus in the grave?
11. Why was it foolish to put a guard by the tomb? Can you tell what must have been *God's* purpose in having a guard at the tomb?

COMPLETING SENTENCES

1. The leaders of the Jews, satisfied that Jesus was dead, were content now to leave to the soldiers the matter of disposing of Jesus' body. It was quite all right to them if the body of Jesus would be dumped in a pit along with the bodies of the two malefactors, and then just covered up. Old Testament prophecy, however, declared that such would not be the case. In the beautiful 53rd chapter of Isaiah, the prophet foresaw the burial of the Messiah "with the _____ in his death" (Is. 53:9). In His dying, the Christ would indeed be "numbered with the _____" (Is. 53:12); but the truth is that He "had done no _____, neither was any _____ in his mouth" (Is. 53:9). His burial therefore would be testimony to His innocence.

2. Late Friday afternoon, on Golgotha, there appeared to be no hope that that prophecy could be fulfilled. Of the friends of Jesus present at that time, Matthew mentions only the many _____ who had followed Jesus from Galilee, _____ unto Him. And they were here "beholding _____ off" (Matt. 27:55). What else could they do? The soldiers were in charge; and, without an order from the governor himself, they would refuse to deal with Jesus in any other than the prescribed manner.

3. Again, however, it becomes plain that, not *men*, but *God* determines the details of Christ's suffering and death. And He uses whom He pleases to accomplish His will. In this case "help" came from a most unlikely source — from a member of the *Sanhedrin*. A man named Joseph, a _____ (that is, a Sanhedrist), and a _____ man who had not _____ to the counsel and deed of the wicked Sanhedrin, but himself waited for the _____ of God — this man went unto _____ and begged the body of Jesus (Luke 23:50-52).

4. A most remarkable faith is this. The leaders of the Jews had already decided that if any man did _____ that Jesus was the _____, he would be put out of the _____ (John 9:22). Joseph

therefore, though he was in fact a _____ of Jesus, kept his faith a secret for _____ of the Jews (John 19:38). One would hardly think that Joseph, who was thus afraid to confess Jesus when He was still *alive*, would now be bold to confess Jesus when He was *dead*. Why would he be willing now to identify himself with a *lost cause*? Most remarkable faith! An early proof of the power of the cross! For Joseph was given to believe that redemption would yet be realized in the crucified One. And this _____ man of the city of _____ (Matt. 27:57) God uses to fulfill the prophecy concerning the burial of the Messiah.

5. Joseph determined to take care of the burial himself. After probably informing the Roman centurion of his intention, Joseph hurried off to the Praetorium, went in _____ unto Pilate and _____ the body of Jesus. Pilate must have been dumbfounded to hear such a plea from a member of the *Sanhedrin*, which had earlier demanded that Jesus be crucified. Pilate also _____ to hear that Jesus had already died. Before granting Joseph's request, therefore, Pilate called unto him the _____ to confirm that Jesus was really dead. Only then did Pilate authorize Joseph to see to Jesus' burial (Mark 15:43-45).

6. Perhaps on the way back from the Praetorium, Joseph stopped and bought fine _____ (Mark 15:46). The fact that he purchased only the linen may indicate that, even before going to Pilate, Joseph had made arrangements with another sympathetic Sanhedrist to divide the work. For we find that, when Joseph returned to Golgotha, there came also _____, who at first had come to Jesus by _____, and he brought the other part of what was needed for the embalming of Jesus' body. That was the expensive spices. And Jesus tells us that Nicodemus brought no less than a _____ pound weight of a mixture of _____ and aloes (John 19:39). That must have cost these two men dearly. What a remarkable fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy that He would make His grave with the rich in His death.

7. After the body of Jesus was removed from the cross, Joseph quickly _____ it in a clean linen cloth and then laid it in his _____ new tomb, which he had hewn out in the _____ (Matt. 27:59, 60). It was probably inside the cave-like tomb that they embalmed the body, winding it in linen _____ with the _____, as the manner of the Jews is to _____ (John 19:40).

8. John goes on to draw special attention to the fact that in this new _____ was never man yet _____ (John 19:41). A grave in which a dead body had lain was considered unclean. But no decay or decomposition had ever defiled this place. A fitting burial place it was, therefore, for the Holy One who, as the psalmist had declared, would not “see _____” (Ps. 16:10).

9. Mary _____ and the other Mary, meanwhile, were sitting over against the _____ (Matt. 27:61). They watched until the great stone was rolled to the _____ of the sepulcher (Matt. 27:60) and then departed, and prepared _____ and _____ (Luke 23:56) in order early on Sunday morning to anoint the body of Jesus. No one was thinking about a resurrection — except the leaders of the Jews.

10. Interestingly, at the very time when Jesus’ body was being put to rest in Joseph’s tomb, the leaders of the Jews were supervising a ceremony that pointed to His resurrection. This ceremony was prescribed many years before by God Himself. Israel was instructed to bring a sheaf of the _____ of the harvest unto the priest, who would _____ the sheaf before the Lord (Lev. 23:10, 11). Just as the first sheaf of the harvest was presented in the temple in the confidence that the rest of the harvest was sure to follow, so the resurrection of Jesus, “the _____ of them that slept” (I Cor. 15:20), is “a sure _____ of our blessed resurrection” (Heidelberg Catechism, LD 17). On Friday afternoon, according to custom, the

chief priests made a great show of marking the spot from which the first sheaf of the harvest would be taken. Neither they, nor the noisy throng that followed them, cared at all what was happening in that little garden near Calvary where a little group of mourners was also, in effect, marking the spot from which the real firstfruits of the resurrection harvest would be taken on the third day. Delighting in their role in the empty ritual, the chief priests were at the same time determined to prevent its fulfillment.

11. That’s right, the chief priests were not resting easy, now that Jesus was dead and buried. They remembered well the sign of the prophet _____, which Jesus had given the scribes and Pharisees: “... so shall the Son of man be _____ days and _____ nights in the heart of the _____” (Matt. 12:38-40). Jesus meant that His resurrection would be the proof of His Messiahship. And the Jews were afraid that Jesus might yet, on the third day, arise. They desired therefore to seal the tomb, and to post a guard, to make sure that Jesus not get out of the grave. Since their own temple police had no authority outside the temple grounds, they knew they had to appeal once more to Pilate. Unwilling, however, to admit the real reason for their desiring a watch, they go to Pilate and ask that he authorize a guard for the tomb, lest Jesus’ _____ come by night and _____ the body away, and then proclaim to the people that He is _____ from the dead. Notice, too, that they ask only that the sepulcher be made sure until the _____ day. “We remember,” they said to Pilate, “that that _____ said, while he was yet _____, After _____ days I will rise again” (Matt. 27:62-64). Convinced, they were, that if Jesus was wrong about the *time*, He would be wrong also about the *resurrection*. So, three days would do.

12. The chief priests also warn Pilate that, if Jesus’ disciples are able to spread a lie that their Master arose, the _____ error will be worse than the _____. What they mean is that a belief in a resurrection will be a greater threat to the peace of the country than was the former

belief of some that Jesus was the Messiah. Pilate very likely did not share that fear. But for reasons of his own he too wanted to keep Jesus in the grave. So he said, You have a _____; go your way, make the sepulcher as _____ as you can (Matt. 27:64, 65).

13. The chief priests therefore made the sepulcher sure, both by setting a _____ and, as a double precaution, _____ the stone (Matt. 27:66). Thus would they, in their foolish imagination, prevent the resurrection of Jesus. In the end, however, all their precautions served only to establish the truth of the resurrection — for their own guards would witness the signs that accompanied it.

QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT

1. In His death on the cross, Jesus was “numbered with the transgressors.” God, however, saw to it that in His burial Jesus was no longer numbered with transgressors. Why the difference? That is, why would it have been inappropriate for Jesus’ body to have been simply dumped, with the bodies of the malefactors, into a common hole and covered up with dirt? Do you see also why the manner of Jesus’ burial was important as far as the later proofs of His resurrection were concerned?

2. On Friday morning it would have been considered unbelievable that Jesus would later that day be buried with the rich. What unlikely means did God use to fulfill that prophecy?

3. John 19:38 tells us that Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but *secretly*, for fear of the Jews. Why would Joseph, who was afraid to profess openly his allegiance to Jesus while He was *alive*, choose now to do so after Jesus was *dead*?

4. The tomb in which Jesus was buried belonged to Joseph, intended no doubt for himself and his family. It was, however, a *new* tomb, and one, writes John, “wherein was never man yet laid.” Can you explain why that was significant?

5. Two Marys were “sitting over against the sepulcher” watching (Matt. 27:61). The thinking of these two dear friends of Jesus was like that of the rest of His followers. How does Luke 23:56 show that a resurrection was far from their thoughts?

6. Read Leviticus 23:10, 11 and I Corinthians 15:20, 23. The New Testament here sheds light on the typical significance of a ceremony of the old dispensation. Do you see how Jesus’ resurrection was like the “firstfruits” of a harvest?

7. The ceremonies of the Old Testament were instituted by God Himself. The chief priests were therefore *obliged* to lead the people in keeping those ceremonies every year. It’s clear that the chief priests delighted in doing that. However, on the very day that they conducted part of the ceremony of the firstfruits, these same chief priests asked Pilate to place a guard at Jesus’ tomb. Do you see, then, why their offering of the firstfruits, though it may have been done exactly as God required, was nevertheless an abomination in His sight? Can you think of a way in which we might sometimes be guilty of doing something like that?

8. The chief priests asked for a guard at the tomb in order to prevent Jesus’ disciples from stealing His body. They asked, however, that the tomb be secured only “until the third day.” How does that show that the chief priests were really concerned about more than what the *disciples* might do?

9. The chief priests warned Pilate that if the disciples were able to steal the body of Jesus, “the last error shall be worse than the first.” What did they mean by that?

10. Pilate hated the Jews. When they asked, earlier, that the superscription on the cross be changed, he had refused even to consider it. Why, do you suppose, was he so quick to grant their request for a guard?

11. An armed guard at the tomb could prevent a theft of the body. But it could not at all prevent a *resurrection*. What do you think, did the chief priests *understand* the futility of it all?

12. In the providence of God, the guard did in fact serve a useful purpose. Can you show how that purpose was precisely the *opposite* of what the chief priests intended?

13. Jesus could not have been in the grave much more than 36 hours. How then can it be said that He was *three days* in the grave?