Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

The Amazing Burial of Jesus, Part 1
Scripture: Matthew 27:57-61
Code: 2399

INTRODUCTION

Matthew 27:57-65 is a text of Scripture often passed over rapidly. It isn't one many of us are familiar with. Nor does it contain any verses we might remember. It appears to be a routine portion of Scripture that discusses the burial of Jesus Christ. But in actuality it teaches us some astounding truth.

Anyone knowledgeable about the Christian faith is aware of the significance of the cross, where our sins were borne by the Lord Jesus Christ to free us from the penalty and guilt of sin. Just as significant is the resurrection of Jesus Christ--the single greatest miracle the world will ever know. It demonstrates Christ's finished work of redemption and reminds us that His power over death will bring us to glory.

Between the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ is His burial. It's a marvelous account of God's intervention into every detail in the life of Christ. We see God's testimony unfold through Joseph of Arimathea (vv. 57-60), the two Mary's (v. 61), and the chief priests and Pharisees (vv. 62-66). They play important roles in the burial of Jesus, validating the truthfulness of Christ's claim to be the Son of God.

LESSON

I. JOSEPH OF ARIMATHEA (vv. 57-60)

Two Key Prophecies

Two explicit prophecies had to be fulfilled in the burial of Jesus.

1. Isaiah 53:9

The entire chapter of Isaiah 53 is devoted to the death of Christ. It says He was despised and rejected, truly a man of sorrows (v. 3). He bore our griefs and carried our sorrows (v. 4). He was wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities (v. 5). He was taken from prison into

judgment (v. 8). Verse 9 says, "His grave was assigned to be with wicked men, yet [He was] with a rich man in his death" (NASB). That unusual prophecy would be difficult to understand apart from the scenario of Christ's burial. He was supposed to have been buried with criminals, but instead was buried in a rich man's tomb.

2. Matthew 12:40

Jesus said, "Just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (NASB). Jesus predicted that there would be three days between His death and resurrection--that He would be in the earth for three days.

Those two prophecies clearly refer to the burial of Christ. God used Joseph of Arimathea to fulfill those prophecies, and thus provide testimony to the deity of Christ.

A. God's Timing (v. 57a)

"When the evening was come."

The "evening" referred to is the early evening of the Jewish day (from 3 P.M. to 6 P.M.). The Sabbath would begin at 6 P.M. and end at 6 P.M. the next day. So the setting of verse 57 is around 3 P.M. By that time Jesus was dead. That fact in itself is amazing--Jesus was nailed to the cross at nine in the morning, but most victims lingered much longer on the cross, some for many days. No one took His life from Him; He voluntarily gave it up (John 10:17-18). Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor who ordered His execution, was astounded when He heard Christ was dead so soon (Mark 15:44).

It was imperative that Christ be dead early enough in the day so He could be put in the grave some time on Friday. That day had to be included as one of the three days He would be in the earth (the others being Saturday and Sunday).

1. The preparation

As Jesus yielded up His life He said, "It is finished" (John 19:30) and "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit" (Luke 23:46). He who controlled life also controlled death. He who could raise Himself from the dead also willed His own death and Himself into the Father's presence.

a) Its importance

John 19:31 begins, "The Jews, therefore, because it was the preparation." By "the Jews," the apostle John had in mind the Jewish leaders who were hostile to Christ, not the Jewish people. The Greek

word translated "preparation" (paraskeue) refers to the day before the Sabbath, or Friday. It was called the day of preparation because Exodus 16:23-30 instructed the Jewish people to keep the Sabbath holy. That meant any food they required on the Sabbath had to be prepared the day before. When God provided manna, the people had to collect enough food on Friday to eat on Saturday. Thus Friday became known as the day of preparation for the Sabbath.

b) Its implications

(1) No body could remain on a cross

John 19:31 continues, "The bodies should not remain upon the cross on the sabbath day (for that sabbath was an high day)." That also indicates the day of preparation was Friday because the religious leaders were concerned that the bodies of criminals not be exposed on the Sabbath. But this wasn't just any Sabbath--it was "an high day," a Passover Sabbath. The Jewish leaders were sure to obey all the rules and regulations on Passover. They derived this particular rule from Deuteronomy 21:22-23, which says, "If a man have committed a sin worthy of death, and he be put to death, and thou hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain all night upon the tree, but thou shalt surely bury him that day (for he who is hanged is accursed by God), that thy land be not defiled." Apparently they didn't always follow that regulation since historians tell us that bodies were often left on crosses for days. But on this Passover they made sure to perform this particular injunction to the limit.

(2) Death needed to be hastened

The bodies could be removed only after they were dead, and death wasn't likely to occur so soon since they had been on the cross for only six hours. That's why the Jewish leaders "besought Pilate that their legs might be broken" (John 19:31). The Greek word translated "broken" means "to shiver to pieces." The Romans used a large wooden mallet to smash the legs of the victims until their bones were nothing but splinters. That caused the body weight to shift onto the two nail wounds in the wrists, resulting in suffocation of the internal organs. When the victim could still use his legs, he could push himself up to breathe. But once his legs were smashed, the victim had no way to prevent his body from suffocating. The pain would be excruciating.

Following that, the soldiers would give the victim what Jewish scholar Alfred Edersheim termed the "coup de grace" (lit., "the stroke of mercy")--the death stroke (The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah, 2 vols. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953], 2:613). A soldier would ram his spear into the victim's heart. But since they did that, why bother breaking the victim's legs? Commentators have suggested two reasons. One proposal is that the pain of his shattered legs would traumatize the victim so that the spear thrust would be somewhat of a relief. On the other hand, Edersheim suggests they crushed the legs as an "increase in punishment, by way of compensation for its shortening by the final stroke that followed" (p. 613). The general idea behind the spear thrust and the leg breaking

was to cause the victim to die immediately. That way the Jewish leaders could remove the body from the cross and maintain the sacredness of the Sabbath. Yet how inconceivable that they would slaughter the Lord of the Sabbath in an effort to keep the Sabbath! Their twisted thinking was the result of their twisted religious system.

2. The prophecies

a) Christ's unbroken legs

John 19:32-33 says, "Then came the soldiers, and broke the legs of the first [one of the thieves crucified with Christ], and of the other who was crucified with him, but when they came to Jesus, and saw that he was dead already, they broke not his legs." Even in His death prophecy was fulfilled. Psalm 34:20 says explicitly of the dying Savior, "He keepeth all his bones; not one of them is broken." We know that prophecy was intended for Jesus Christ because of the testimony of Scripture. John 19:36 says, "These things were done, that the Scripture should be fulfilled, A bone of him shall not be broken."

b) Christ's pierced side

John 19:34 says, "One of the soldiers, with a spear, pierced his side, and immediately came there out blood and water." Since the soldiers already knew He was dead, why did they give Christ the death stroke? One answer is in verse 37: "Again, another Scripture saith, They shall look on him whom they pierced." That particular Scripture is Zechariah 12:10. One prophet said they wouldn't break His legs; another said they would pierce Him. They did exactly what God intended, and thus indirectly certified that Jesus was of whom the prophets spoke.

Verse 34 tells us that blood and water came out of Christ's pierced side--a sign of death. That's a fulfillment of a prophecy from Psalm 69--a psalm that contains prophecies of the crucifixion scene, such as verse 21: "They gave me also gaul for my food, and in my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink." Verse 20 says, "Reproach hath broken my heart." Under the intense weight of all the sins of everyone who ever lived or will live, it is not inconceivable that a human heart could rupture. Thus another prophecy was fulfilled.

The spear thrust was so deep that Christ could say to Thomas, "Reach here thy hand, and thrust it into my side; and be not faithless, but believing" (John 20:27). When Thomas needed assurance that he was observing the risen Christ, Jesus gave it to him.

Once it was proven that Jesus was dead, His body had to be removed from the cross. But who would care for His body? The disciples had fled. We're not sure that the apostle John was still in the vicinity (cf. John 19:26). The women (Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James

and Joses, and the mother of Zebedee's children) probably didn't have the means to bury Christ--they were from Galilee, a poor area. Whoever was going to care for the body would have to do so quickly. His body had to be in the grave by 6 P.M. on Friday so the prophecy that He would be in the earth three days could be fulfilled.

B. God's Man (vv. 57b-60)

1. His identification (v. 57b-c)

a) As a rich man (v. 57b)

"There came a rich man of Arimathaea, named Joseph."

(1) His characteristics

He was more than just a rich man. Mark 15:43 says he was a "prominent member of the Council [the Sanhedrin]" (NASB)--the Jewish ruling body that sentenced Jesus Christ to death for claiming to be the Son of God. That verse also says he anticipated the kingdom of God--he had a heart for God's truth. Luke 23:50 tells us he was a good and just man. Verse 51 says he did not consent to condemn Jesus to death. But most importantly he was rich--a fulfillment of Isaiah 53:9.

(2) His home

Matthew 27:57 tells us Joseph was from Arimathea. The only thing we know about Arimathea is that it was "a city of the Jews" (Luke 23:51). We assume it was close to the city of Jerusalem since Joseph's own grave was just outside the city. We assume he wouldn't have lived very far from there.

b) As a disciple of Christ (v. 57b)

"Who also himself was Jesus' disciple."

A better translation of the Greek text is that he was "discipled by Jesus." He had become a follower of Jesus. The verb in the text means "to be a learner." He was learning from Jesus, believing what He said. John 19:38 gives us additional information about his relationship with Jesus: he was "a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews." Up to this time Joseph had been a secret disciple because he was afraid of the leaders and what they might do to him if they found out.

Joseph had to act fast because Jesus had to be buried before the Sabbath began on Friday night. So far the Jewish leaders were performing their role in God's plan--they were in a hurry to get Him down from the cross. Pilate could have left Jesus hanging on the cross, but he honored their request because he didn't want to offend them. He'd been blackmailed enough by them in the past (John

19:12).

How Many Days Was Christ Dead?

Some people have difficulty reconciling what Jesus said in Matthew 12:40 about the length of His stay in the grave: "As Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." Does that mean Jesus had to be in the earth three full days and nights? No. Many commentators take that view and back the crucifixion to Thursday, so the three days and nights are Thursday, Friday, and Saturday, with His rising on Sunday. The obvious problem with that view is that we are left with a fourth- day resurrection. Yet all the passages in Scripture dealing with this issue indicate He was to rise on the third day. That eliminates the need for interpreting Matthew 12:40 as referring to three 24-hour periods. The phrase "three days and three nights" was simply an idiom of the Jewish people referring to a three-day period.

For example, if you were to say, "I'm going to San Diego for three days," does that mean you'll be there for three 24-hour periods? Not necessarily. It could mean you'll be there for a few hours one day, all day the next day, and a few hours the third day. That is how Scripture refers to Christ's burial.

In Luke 24:21 the disciples traveling the road to Emmaus were bemoaning the death of Christ, saying, "We hoped that it had been he who should have redeemed Israel; and, besides all this, today [Sunday] is the third day since these things were done." They understood that the Lord's prophecy of His resurrection wasn't going to take place after three 24-hour periods, but on the third day, which from Friday would be Sunday. After all, Jesus said He would "be killed, and be raised again the third day" (Matt. 16:21). Matthew 17:23 repeats, "They shall kill him, and the third day he shall be raised again." The chronological, historical references to the death of Christ indicate a third-day resurrection, not one following three 24-hour periods. When Jesus referred to three days and three nights, we can conclude He was referring to a part of three 24-hour periods. Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah (who lived around A.D. 100) said, "A day and night are an Onah [a portion of time] and the portion of an Onah is as the whole of it" (Jerusalem Talmud, Shabbath ix.3; cf. Babylonian Talmud Pesahim 4a).

2. His commitment (v. 58)

"He went to Pilate, and begged the body of Jesus. Then Pilate commanded the body to be delivered."

a) A high price

Joseph was taking a great risk when he did that. He didn't know what Pilate might do to him. After all, Pilate had had enough of the Jewish leaders, who blackmailed him with their threats to report him to

Caesar if he didn't crucify Jesus. Furthermore, Joseph would have had to explain why he wanted the body since he was a member of the Sanhedrin, the body of leaders who wanted Jesus dead. In addition, since he wasn't a member of Jesus' family, what could Joseph have said to convince Pilate to give him the body, other than that he was a follower of Him? There was no good reason for Joseph to have expected to receive the body.

Joseph surely realized that once word got out that he intended to bury Jesus Christ, and that he was himself a disciple, he would have lost his reputation and social standing. His actions may have put him in a situation where he no longer could do business with people. The price of his commitment was very high.

b) A deep love

Joseph was committed to a man who was dead and not yet risen. That is a remarkable commitment. So convinced that Jesus was who He claimed to be, Joseph stepped out in faith and courageously gave Him the dignified burial He deserved. He was drawn by his love for Christ, even if it meant losing everything he valued in life.

According to Matthew 27:58 Joseph had to beg Pilate for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate commanded that Jesus' body be given over to Joseph. Mark 15:44-45 tells us Pilate was surprised to hear that Jesus died so soon, so he checked with a centurion who had been at the scene to verify that He was dead.

3. His actions (vv. 59-60)

a) He carried the body (v. 59a)

"When Joseph had taken the body."

Perhaps Joseph carried Jesus' body himself. According to the latest archaeological discoveries, his tomb was close to the cross, so he wouldn't have had to carry the body very far. One of the spots believed to be the burial place of Jesus Christ is called "The Garden Tomb" or "Gordon's Calvary." God ensured it was near enough so Joseph would be able to bury Him by Friday night.

b) He wrapped it in linen (vv. 59b)

"He wrapped it in a clean linen cloth."

John 19:39-40 tells us another man was with Joseph: Nicodemus (cf. John 3:1-21). Nicodemus was a teacher in Israel, no doubt another member of the Sanhedrin. Both men were prominent in the nation. Verse 39 says Nicodemus "brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes." The Jewish people didn't embalm

their dead; they anointed the body with a heavy load of spices to keep the smell of death from permeating the area until the body was buried. Myrrh was a liquid and aloes was a powder; the two were mixed together. Joseph brought fine linen (Matt. 27:59). The women helped Joseph wrap each limb and the torso of Christ's body with the fine linen, and then provided a special napkin for His head.

c) He laid it in the tomb (v. 60a)

"[He] laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn out in the rock."

The Garden Tomb was cut by hand out of a wall of rock acting as the face of a low cliff. Just off to its right is another rocky cliff that resembles a skull. Beneath that cliff is a highway where many believe Jesus was crucified. If that indeed is the place, Joseph would have carried Christ's body only a short distance to his tomb.

d) He rolled a stone in front of the tomb (v. 60b)

"He rolled a great stone to the door of the sepulcher, and departed."

The stone was required because of grave robbers. It was a common practice for people to be buried with their belongings, some of which were valuable. Furthermore, the body had to be protected from animals and birds. Today at the Garden Tomb is a great trough holding a huge circular stone that can be rolled across the entrance.

The burial was accomplished before the end of Friday. Matthew 27:62 says, "Now the next day, that followed the day of preparation." Jesus was in the grave before that next day, Saturday, so the prophecy would be fulfilled when He rose on Sunday, the third day. The events surrounding the burial of Jesus Christ were orchestrated by God to fulfill specific prophecy. He would be three days in a wealthy man's grave.

I don't know what caused Joseph of Arimathea to publicly manifest himself as a follower of Jesus Christ. Perhaps it was the earthquake, the darkness, the graves opening, and the veil of the Temple ripping from top to bottom (Matt. 27:45, 51-54). Perhaps it was simply his love for Jesus and the agony he felt watching Him endure pain and suffering on the cross. One thing we can be sure of: God worked on his heart to bring to pass the fulfillment of prophecy.

II. THE TWO MARYS (v. 61)

A. Their Description (v. 61a)

"There were Mary Magdalene and the other Mary."

Mary Magdalene came from Magdala, a village on the west coast of the Sea of Galilee. The other Mary was the mother of James and Joseph (v. 56). John 19:25 calls her the wife of Clopas, or Alphaeus. (Matthew 10:3 refers to James as the son of Alphaeus to differentiate him from James the son of Zebedee.) She was one of the ladies who followed Him from Galilee to attend to His physical needs by providing food and sustenance. Other ladies had been present during the crucifixion and burial, but they apparently left with Joseph and Nicodemus (v. 60). Only these two women remained.

B. Their Significance (v. 61b)

"[They were] sitting over against [opposite] the sepulcher."

They were probably in deep sorrow and agony. If Joseph of Arimathea was used by God to confirm the deity of Christ through fulfilled prophecy, these two women were used to affirm the same through first-hand testimony.

1. They saw the evidence

Matthew 28:1-5 says, "In the end of the sabbath as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week, came Mary Magdalene and the other Mary to see the sepulcher. 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 upon it. His countenance was like lightning; and his raiment white as snow; and for fear of him the keepers [Roman guards] did shake, and became as dead men. And the angel answered and said unto the women, Fear not." These two women felt the ground shake and heard the angel. We do not worship someone we hope came out of the grave--we have eyewitnesses who saw the empty tomb, evidence that the resurrection had occurred.

2. They were commanded to give testimony

The angel continued, "I know that ye 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" (vv. 5-7). These two women were given the command to give testimony to the resurrection of Christ. Verse 8 says they "did run to bring his disciples word."

3. They met the resurrected Christ

Verses 9-10 say, "And as they went to tell his disciples, behold, Jesus met them, saying, All hail. And they came and held him by the feet, and worshiped him. Then said Jesus unto them, Be not afraid; go tell my brethren."

God used two women who couldn't bear to part with Christ for very long. They left for a time on the Sabbath day, but they came back that third day--perhaps hoping against hope that what He said might come to pass. It did, and they saw the evidence. God honored their faith by allowing them to give testimony to what they saw. However feeble their faith may have been, it certainly was stronger than that of the disciples. Some people believe the twelve disciples fabricated the account of the resurrection to carry on their program, but they didn't see the evidence first- hand; the women did. The truth is that the disciples were reluctant to believe what the women said (Luke 24:6-12). Thomas was reluctant to believe when he heard from the other disciples who had seen their risen Lord (John 20:24-25). So God gave us first-hand witnesses to spread the word of the resurrection. Through eyewitness testimony and fulfilled prophecy in the burial of Christ, God was at work vindicating Jesus Christ as His Son.

Focusing on the Facts

1. What is the greatest miracle the world will ever know?

2. What two prophecies had to be fulfilled in the burial of Jesus Christ?

3. Whom did God use to fulfill those two prophecies?

4. Why did Christ have to be buried before the end of Friday?

5. What is the day of preparation?

6. Why did the Jewish leaders ask Pilate to break the legs of Jesus and the two criminals who were crucified with Him?

7. Why didn't the Roman soldiers break Christ's legs (John 19:32-33; 36)?

8. Why did the soldiers thrust a spear into Christ's side (John 19:37)?

9. Describe Joseph of Arimathea.

10. How can you reconcile Matthew 12:40 with the other prophecies that say Jesus would rise on the third day?

11. What did Joseph risk when he stepped forward to claim the body of Jesus?

12. Why was it important that Joseph's tomb close to the site of Christ's crucifixion?

13. Who helped Joseph with the preparations for Christ's burial?

14. Describe the two Marys who remained across from the entrance to Christ's tomb.

15. How did God use those two women to confirm the deity of Christ (Matt. 28:1-10)?

Pondering the Principles

1. Isaiah 53 is a moving characterization of Christ's death on the cross. It precisely describes how our Lord felt on the cross. Another chapter like it is Psalm 22. Read both. Record all the words and phrases that describe how Christ felt and how He appeared. Meditate on them. Ask God to help you better understand the pain and suffering that Christ endured on your behalf. Then memorize 1 Peter 2:24-25: "He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed. For you were continually straying like sheep, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls" (NASB).

2. John 19:38 tells us that Joseph was a disciple of Christ, "but secretly for fear of the Jews." That means when he stepped forward to claim the body of Christ, he exposed himself as a follower. To be a true follower of Jesus Christ requires that you be identified with Jesus. Besides your Sunday visits to church to worship God, how else do people see your commitment to Christ? Joseph exposed himself as a follower of Christ probably at a great cost to himself. What has following Christ cost you? Read Matthew 16:24-26. Are you trying to save your life or have you found your life because you lost it for Christ's sake? Don't be a secret disciple! Step out in faith and be identified with Christ.

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