

Sermons on Matthew

Well Funded Lies

Matthew 28:11-15

With Study Questions

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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. ⁻¹²⁻ When they had assembled with the elders and consulted together, they gave a large sum of money to the soldiers, ⁻¹³⁻ saying, "Tell them, 'His disciples came at night and stole Him *away* while we slept.' ⁻¹⁴⁻ And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will appease him and make you secure." ⁻¹⁵⁻ So they took the money and did as they were instructed; and this saying is commonly reported among the Jews until this day (Matthew 28:11-15).

Introduction

'The Passover Plot' was a movie made in 1976. Nominated for an Academy Award (Best Costume Design), the movie offered an alternate version of the resurrection of Christ.

Jesus, according to this theory, planned for His crucifixion by taking a drug that would simulate death. His listless body would then be stolen by Zealots who would spread the rumor that He had risen from the dead, thus fulfilling prophecy. The only thing truly fulfilled in this vain theatrical endeavor was the prophetic words of Solomon:

_That which has been is what will be, that which is done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun.
¹⁰ **Is there anything of which it may be said, "See, this is new"? It has already been in ancient times before us (Ecclesiastes 1:9, 10).**

The context for this morning's text is the resurrection of Jesus. The resurrection was accompanied by a great earthquake and the announcement that Jesus had risen. The announcement was made by an angel of the Lord whose "**countenance was like lightning and his clothing was as white as snow**" (*cf.* Matthew 28:2, 3).

The angel's mere presence stupefied the guards who in their fear "**became like dead men**" (Matthew 28:4). These guards had been placed at the tomb at the request of the Jewish leaders to make sure nobody stole the body of Jesus thus continuing the supposed "**deception**" (Matthew 27:64) that He would rise from the dead.

The angel told the women who had come to the tomb that Jesus had risen (Matthew 28:6) and then instructed them to bring this information to the disciples (Matthew 28:7). On the way they had an encounter with the resurrected Christ who granted them peace and encouragement that He was not only risen, but that they should rejoice and have no fear. He also, in an act of astonishing kindness, continues to refer to His followers as His brethren (Matthew 28:10) though they had denied Him and fled in fear.

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 (Matthew 28:11).

Three Sets of Feet

In context we see three sets of feet. The feet of Jesus, where the women fell in worship (Matthew 28:9); the feet of the women, which became the **“beautiful... feet of those who preach the gospel of peace” (Romans 10:15)**; and the feet of the guards and chief priests which are, as Solomon wrote, **“swift in running to evil” (Proverbs 6:19)**.

Instead of running to Pilate, which would have meant death for the soldiers since it was a capital offense to lose a prisoner (Acts 12:9), the soldiers went to the chief priests. Matthew informs us that the guards reported **“all the things that had happened.”** This would include the earthquake, the angel, the rolling away of the stone and, little doubt, the announcement by the angel of the resurrection of Jesus.

The Sign of Jonah

The one sign Jesus promised these treacherous leaders would be given had taken place.

_Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered, saying, “Teacher, we want to see a sign from You.”⁻³⁹⁻ 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.⁻⁴⁰⁻ __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.” (Matthew 12:38-40)

Here it was, the sign of Jonah. But instead of repenting and praising God for the wonderful gift of victory over death, they would enter into collusion with the guards to quell the good news. It is no wonder Jesus said:

The men of Nineveh will rise up in judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah is here (Matthew 12:41).

People will often ask for a sign. They wonder why God is hiding Himself. On judgment day they'll be glad they didn't get one; for signs are of no use against a hardened heart. On the contrary, signs only serve as a testimony against the one refusing to be moved by them. An apt observation by Matthew Henry:

The most sensible evidence will not convince men, without the concurring operation of the Holy Spirit.¹

How often in Scripture the Holy Spirit reveals the weakness of signs and undeniable events to cure the sin of the human heart. Did not Jesus convey this exact fact in his lesson of Lazarus and the rich man? The rich man assumed if his five brothers saw Lazarus go to them from the grave they would repent. Jesus assures the rich man of the ineffectiveness of even the most spectacular miracle. Jesus said to him:

If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, _neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead (Luke 16:31).

In the above passage "Moses and the prophets" is referring to the Scriptures. Once again we see the centrality of the gospel—the good news that Jesus came **"to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10)**. The gospel is the means by which the power of God comes to man (Romans 1:16). And there is simply no conspiracy, no matter how well funded, strong enough to prevail against the advancement of the Kingdom of God through the preaching of the Gospel (Matthew 16:18).

¹Henry, M. (1996, c1991). *Matthew Henry's commentary on the whole Bible : Complete and unabridged in one volume* (Mt 28:11). Peabody: Hendrickson.

When they had assembled with the elders and consulted together, they gave a large sum of money to the soldiers... (Matthew 28:12)

Large Sums of Money

It is likely that these priests used the temple funds for the bribery. Matthew mentions it was a “large sum,” probably much more than the thirty pieces of silver given to Judas.

It can be discouraging when, in your fight for truth, you’re up against a lot of working capital. We see it in many of our struggles today. Ungodly enterprises, whether political, academic, philosophical or theological, seem to have unlimited funding. From the amazing campuses built by the Latter-Day Saints to the abilities of the pro-homosexual community to produce a play (*Prop 8, the Musical*) with some of the biggest stars in Hollywood at a moment’s notice, it can seem as if Christians are against overwhelming obstacles.

And there is no doubt that the furtherance of the gospel has an economic side to it. Jesus, in sending out His disciples commands them, **“But now, he who has a money bag, let him take it (Luke 22:36).** Paul, in his letters to the church at Corinth also confirms the duty to tithe (1 Corinthians 9:12-14) as well as give offerings (2 Corinthians 8, 9) for the advancement of the gospel. Jesus and His apostles did have a money bag from which Judas stole, though there is little doubt that it contained a modest amount.

My point here is that the well funded efforts of the guards and priests are no match for the running feet of the women who would faithfully proclaim the risen Christ. Churches must be careful not to answer the well-funded innovations of the enemies of Christ’s church by establishing their own well-funded innovations.

Do not answer a fool according to his folly, Lest you also be like him (Proverbs 26:4).

The gospel is not a show; it’s not a clever scheme. The gospel is a message that Jesus came to die as a ransom for sinners (Matthew 20:28). The finances in God’s kingdom are to always be primarily earmarked for the advancement of a message. And here we see the ‘Passover Plot’.

...saying, "Tell them, 'His disciples came at night and stole Him away while we slept.' -14- And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will appease him and make you secure" (Matthew 28:13-14).

The Passover Plot

Now with these two verses comes a great temptation to answer the fool according to his folly and become like him. When I saw the Passover Plot I entered into a full litany of arguments of how implausible it was. The friend who I went with, sadly, has since passed away. I am not sure if he ever called on the name of the Lord. But he was the kind of person who would listen to a good argument so I did my best:

- How improbable is it that Jesus would find a drug to help Him swoon to convince Roman soldiers (who were well acquainted with death) that He was actually dead—especially with the death penalty hanging over the soldier for this level of error?
- How would He or His comrades overcome a Roman guard?
- How would they move the stone—which was sealed?
- How would the soldiers know Jesus' body was stolen if they were sleeping?
- How would Jesus' disciples, who were fearful and scattered, muster up the courage to face a Roman guard?
- To what end would they do this, since it almost assured their own death? Many have died for a lie (eg. the thirty-eight members of Heaven's Gate, the UFO religion led by Marshall Applewhite, took their own lives in hopes of avoiding the recycling of the earth). But why die for something you know to be a lie?
- The resurrection of Christ was known by non-Christian sources.
- How come they couldn't find the dead or swooned body?
- How come they couldn't/didn't arrest or expose Jesus when He appeared afterward?
- How did they explain the ascension?

The arguments go on and on. They are good arguments. They are valid. We believe other historical events to be true with much less evidence. The conversation might prove valuable at some level. But someone could easily answer all these arguments by simply saying "Funny things happen. Maybe someday we'll figure out why. I just don't believe

any of the stuff written in the Bible. I most certainly don't believe someone can rise up from the grave." That kind of ends the discussion.

Friends, when we engage in that type of apologetic or defense for the faith, all we're doing is trying to get our friends to acknowledge that these events actually happened. But if we give it a second thought, we realize that the guards and chief priests knew it happened. In many of our apologetic arguments we're merely trying to get our friends to a level of belief that already existed among these among these biblical villains. What good is that?

The guards were apparently unmoved by the events and the chief priests promised the guards that if they would lie, they would pay them and make sure Pilate didn't condemn them—probably by bribing him (cf. Acts 24:26).

So they took the money and did as they were instructed; and this saying is commonly reported among the Jews until this day (Matthew 28:15).

Lies Die Out, The Truth Wins

Whether the motivation is money, fame, acceptance, a sinful lifestyle, *etc.*, people have a deeper reason for believing or denying the truth than the evidence by which they are surrounded or presented. This lie would be contended with through the early stages of the new covenant church. Justin Martyr in approximately A.D. 170 in his *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*, says the story was sent by Jewish messengers into every country.

If we were to continue following the early church through Acts we would continue to see the same cast of characters continue in their deception and oppression. But what strikes me about the behavior of the godly in these events is that there is no indication that the women who were delivering the message of the risen Savior were in any way halted by the lie.

Through all of Acts and the remainder of the New Testament there is no evidential argument made to confirm the reality of the resurrection. There is simply the declaration that it truly and physically took place having been seen by hundreds (1 Corinthians 15:6)².

God would not leave the destiny of our souls to fallible human wisdom and innovations. Here, as we approach the conclusion of

² That Paul refers to five hundred seeing Jesus is not an argument based upon evidence. It is a declaration of an actual physical resurrection against the Gnosticism and docetism prevailing in the church.

Matthew's gospel, we read of a notorious, powerful, well-funded lie against the backdrop of women faithfully spreading the good news. May we be as determined and unflappable as these women; that the church might ever be a house of redemption, ever holding to the centrality of that message, that Jesus was crucified to save sinners.

Questions for Study

1. What is the Passover Plot? Is it new (page 2)?
2. What is the context for the events in today's passage (pages 2, 3)?
3. Discuss the different sets of feet (page 3).
4. What was the sign of Jonah and how did the chief priests respond to it (pages 3, 4)?
5. How effective is evidence for the resurrection? Does this mean the resurrection is unreasonable (pages 4, 5)?
6. How powerful is the gospel (page 5)?
7. Discuss the role of money in advancing godliness and ungodliness (pages 5, 6).
8. How would you defend the assertion of a Passover Plot (pages 6, 7)?
9. What is the mission of the church (pages 7, 8)?