

SECTION 75

JESUS' TOMB IS GUARDED

TEXT: 27:62-66

62 Now on the morrow, which is *the day* after the Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees were gathered together unto Pilate, 63 saying, Sir, we remember that that deceiver said while he was yet alive, After three days I rise again. 64 Command therefore that the sepulchre be made sure until the third day, lest haply his disciples come and steal him away, and say unto the people, He is risen from the dead: and the last error will be worse than the first. 65 Pilate said unto them, Ye have a guard; go, make it *as* sure as ye can. 66 So they went, and made the sepulchre sure, sealing the stone, the guard being with them.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. Why do you suppose the Jews waited till Saturday to think about guarding Jesus' tomb against the disciples? Did not they risk quite a bit already? At about what time do you think they approached Pilate requesting a guard?
- b. Why did they request the guard just "until the third day"?
- c. How did they seal the tomb? How would this help protect the tomb from unauthorized manipulation?
- d. Why would the Jews have no scruple about setting the guard on duty during the Sabbath?
- e. Why do you suppose Pilate was so willing to concede them a guard at the tomb? What personal interest did he have in guarding the tomb against tampering?
- f. How do these accurate precautions contribute directly to your faith?

PARAPHRASE

Next day, that is, the day after Friday, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered in a group before Pilate to say, "Sir, we recall that this imposter, while he was still alive, said, 'After three days I shall rise again.' Order, therefore, that the tomb be closely guarded until the third day, so that his disciples cannot go and steal the corpse, and tell the people, 'He has risen from the dead.' The last piece of deception will be worse than the first."

“You have a guard of soldiers,” Pilate answered, “Go, guard it as well as you know how.”

So they went to make the tomb secure by setting a seal on the stone and by mounting a guard.

SUMMARY

Jewish leaders, unwilling to risk a counter-move on the part of Jesus' disciples by spiriting away the body and claiming a faked resurrection, requested official permission to guard His tomb. Pilate sanctioned this move.

NOTES

HISTORY'S MOST FUTILE PRECAUTIONS

27:62 Now on the morrow, which is the day after the Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees were gathered together unto Pilate. That *the Preparation* is not a readying for the Passover but the normal weekly preparation for the Sabbath is authentically evidenced by Josephus (*Ant.* XVI,6,2) and by the practice of the Galilean women (Luke 23:56; Mark 16:1; cf. John 19:31; Mark 15:42; Luke 23:54). Modern Greek continues the use of *Preparation* as the normal word for Friday. (See fuller notes on 26:17.) Hence, *the morrow, which is the day after the Preparation* is the Sabbath. It is not clear whether the Jews presented their request to the procurator after sundown on Friday (= Saturday) or after sunrise on Saturday. Since Jesus had expired around three p.m. and was buried shortly before sunset, the guard could move in almost immediately as soon as the prefect gave the word. The Jewish authorities undoubtedly acted as decisively as cunning foresight permitted them to perceive the direction a potential counter-attack of the Nazarene's disciples might take.

The chief priests and the Pharisees were gathered together unto Pilate, perhaps not as a body, but privately lest their going to Pilate appear to be a violation of the Sabbath. Further, that these religious authorities went to Pilate on the Sabbath involves no incongruity for men who already violated every principle of their own jurisprudence to put Jesus on the cross. They could have little scruple about the Sabbath violation involved in standing guard on the Sabbath, since Gentile rather than Jewish soldiers would be employed for this.

However, when Matthew could have written more simply, his involved wording, *morrow, which is the day after the Preparation*,

seems as if he were studiously avoiding the expression "morrow, which is the Sabbath." (Cf. Mark 15:42.) Nevertheless, he could identify the day when the guard was set in two ways: (1) call it "the Sabbath" or (2) call it the day after Jesus died, i.e. the day after Friday. If his primary interest is to establish that the guard was set reasonably soon after the burial, then by choosing the latter expression he assures the reader that the guard was placed soon enough to avoid the theft of the body feared by Jesus' enemies and, thus, to guarantee the reality of the resurrection. Thus, Matthew's complicated expression actually certifies that the authorities would not leave the tomb unguarded for even one night during which a resurrection hoax could be executed. Thus, *morrow* is intended in the Jewish sense, i.e., after sunset on Friday evening (= Saturday).

27:63 saying, Sir, we remember that that deceiver said while he was yet alive, After three days I rise again.

At first glance it is astonishing that the Lord's enemies recalled a prediction of Jesus that should have emboldened His disciples, and did everything feasible to hinder it, while the disciples themselves neither remembered it nor did anything to enhance it! (Cf. John 20:9; Luke 24:25ff.; cf. Acts 17:3.) But God makes even men's unbelief to praise Him: Jesus' followers, because they did not yet believe He would rise, remained completely out of the situation and did not compromise the evidence. They thus facilitated the enemies' efforts at tightening security around Jesus' tomb to avoid a faked resurrection. These very precautions become our most convincing proof that the resurrection really occurred and that the hypothesis of a hoax is itself false.

How could the skeptical leadership of Israel remember what the most devoted disciples did not? Many, especially *Pharisees*, knew that Jesus predicted it (Matt. 12:38, 40; cf. v. 46). Jesus had predicted it in cryptic language of signs (John 2:18ff.; Matt. 12:38ff.; 16:4) and in frank expressions (16:21; 17:9, 22f.; 20:17ff.). His disciples puzzled over its meaning among themselves (Mark 9:9f.). Precisely because puzzling, the meaning of these prophecies might be debated beyond the circle of the inner group of disciples, and consequently leak out to a wider group, especially to the ever vigilant Pharisees. Again, all of Jesus' great well-known claims to come from God and return to Him supported the resurrection concept (John 7:33, 36; 8:21-30; 10:17-21). Finally, because He had resurrected Lazarus right under His opponents' nose, His predictions of His own resurrection took

on startlingly new power and meaning. Study the Sanhedrin's panic in this light (John 11:45ff., 57). There was no question that He had said it.

Rather, the difference in remembering is psychologically explicable on the basis of each group's reaction to it; the disciples wanted to believe Jesus would never need a resurrection, the enemies wanted to believe He could never accomplish it once they got Him dead. The disciples were stunned by their grief and blinded by their distorted vision of an immortal political Christ, but His enemies dreaded Jesus' influence even while dead.

Precautions against imposture

27:64 Command therefore that the sepulchre be made sure until the third day, lest haply his disciples come and steal him away, and say unto the people, He is risen from the dead: and the last error will be worse than the first. The Jews' suggestion, *Command*, argues that they had no intention of employing the Levitical Temple police to guard an unclean tomb area during the feast. Jewish guards may have had no authority beyond the Temple itself, hence, Roman soldiers were required.

Concerning the phrase, *Until the third day*, McGarvey (*Jesus and Jonah*, 68) wrote:

Why say "till the third day," if he was to rise *after three days*? We would have said, till the fourth day; for if he was to rise after three days it would not be earlier than the fourth day, though it might be later. Evidently they understood the time included in the expression "after three days" as terminating on the third day. And as Jesus had been buried near the close of a day, and they expected him to rise, if at all, on the third day, they must have counted the small fraction of a day that remained after his burial as one of the three days. Their expression, "till the third day," also shows that they expected him to rise before the third day would end, and that they therefore count a part of that day as a day.

They obviously meant to bracket the period He predicted for His entombment, so if the guard were set on Saturday (= even Friday night), the guard would remain until Monday, i.e. all day Saturday, Sunday and Monday. This, because the Jews were unaware of the

disciples' objective confusion and must utilize the broadest interpretation of the day count supposedly being used by anyone planning a hoax. Their alarm would be in force until Sunday evening (= Monday's beginning).

Lest haply his disciples come and steal him away. These guilty men who had stooped to betrayal to ensnare Jesus and deception to sentence Him to death, now fear that His men would also make use of some trick to recover the advantage. Little did they realize that these very followers, even after personally seeing Jesus risen from the dead, could hardly grasp what to do with this earth-shaking fact until Pentecost, much less make use of it to embarrass the Jews before then. They were emotionally incapable of simulating a resurrection!

The last error (plâne, "deception") proclaimed by the Galileans, that He had risen, *will be worse than the first* proclaimed by "that deceiver" (*ekéinos ho plânos*, 27:63), that He was the political Messiah, the king of the Jews. They imply that they fear Jesus' disciples' potential political power, if they could ever be persuaded that He were risen, whether true or not.

27:65 **Pilate said unto them, Ye have a guard: go, make it as sure as ye can.** This could be weary indifference, even though the prefect was as much concerned about quelling tendentious rumors as the Jews were. *Ye have a guard (écheté koustodian)* is a positive reaction that grants the request: "You have what you requested from me." He does not refer to their own detachment of Temple police. They had come to him requesting something they did not already possess or could have used without his permission. When the Roman soldiers report back to the chief priests after the resurrection (28:11), this only confirms their being at the disposal of the Jews, as Pilate affirms here.

Make it as sure as ye can are words more precious to the Christian than any other order the Roman governor ever gave. They secure the authenticity of the resurrection by guarding against the imposture of stealing the body.

27:66 **So they went, and made the sepulchre sure, sealing the stone, the guard being with them.** This latter phrase suggests that the Jewish authorities were not content to entrust this critical detail to the Roman military, but actually supervised it personally. And would not their suspicions demand that someone be sent into the tomb to assure them that the body were really there before sealing the door? Then, after

stretching a cord across the face of the great stone door from one side of the tomb door to the other, embedding each end of the cord in sealing wax, they pressed an official seal into the hot wax to give the seals authority. The purpose of the seals is not to hold the door shut, but to threaten anyone from opening it without due authorization from him whose seals they were (cf. Dan. 6:17). So long as the seals remained intact, it would prove that no one had bribed the soldiers to open the door. Backing up the seals was the Roman *guard* (*koustodia*, Latin: "custodia").

It should cause no surprise that the historical reliability of this section has been attacked by critics. Certainly, it has tremendous apologetic value, in that it proves that Jesus was really buried and that His body could not have been stolen, because the tomb was guarded against precisely this eventuality. But does this prove that Matthew invented his facts? For a Gospel in circulation among Hebrews who could ascertain the truth through private investigation and interviewing the enemies of Jesus, it would be worse than simply fraudulent, were these fictitious "facts." The fundamental basis of Christianity, the certainty of Christ's resurrection, would be undermined by doubts at its source, the tomb of Joseph.

God would have the last laugh however, because that guard and that seal meant that these non-disciples would be forced to be the very first to bring the astounding news to Jesus' enemies that all their precautions had been futile (Ps. 2:4; 76:10). The disciples had indeed not tampered with the tomb or the body. He arose!

FACT QUESTIONS

1. What day follows the day of Preparation?
2. On what day was the guard placed on watch?
3. Who set the guard at the tomb?
4. Why was the guard placed there?
5. Why was Pilate requested to cooperate?
6. For how long was the guard to watch the tomb?
7. Why and how did they seal the tomb?
8. Explain Pilate's expression: "You have a watch."
9. Show how the Jews' diligence to avoid all deception served to establish incontrovertibly the reality of Jesus' resurrection.