

## Prayer

Almighty God our heavenly Father, forgive us we pray, for we want so much yet need so little. Help us to appreciate all that You have done for us; both physically so that we might live, and spiritually so that we might know You and enjoy life forever. Let us be satisfied with this, and content in Jesus Christ our Saviour and our Lord; AMEN

## Prayer Suggestions

### Prayer ideas

*Today is a day for getting on with life and thinking carefully about what has happened and what is to come. Find some space in the day to do just this.*

### On-going prayers

- **Pray for higher education** *Pray that those who expand the horizons of knowledge will be careful to do only what is good for all*
- *Pray for those who reject Jesus and all He has done for us*
- *Give thanks for those who will testify to their faith in Jesus today*

## Meditation

What is this day?

A day that lies between two other days;  
Good Friday, and Easter Day.

It is a Sabbath Day, when 'nothing shall be done'  
And God who made all things declared a rest.

I wonder; did this waiting try God's patience?  
Did He long, as we do, for the Easter morn,  
When Resurrection's power could be let loose,  
And Glory be made know to all  
Within the wondrous declaration, 'Jesus is alive'!

Lord, forgive my enquiring mind;  
I know that Jesus Christ has died for me,  
And all my sins were dealt with by His sacrifice  
And now I have new life in Him ...

But I'd love to know;  
When did Jesus actually escape the tomb?

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## Bible passage – Matthew 27:55-66

<sup>55</sup> There were many women there, looking on from a distance. They had followed Jesus from Galilee to care for His needs. <sup>56</sup> Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.

<sup>57</sup> When it was evening, a rich man from Arimathea came, named Joseph, who was himself a disciple of Jesus. <sup>58</sup> He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus, and Pilate ordered it to be given to him. <sup>59</sup> Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth <sup>60</sup> and placed it in his own new tomb, which he had cut in the rock. He then rolled a large stone across the door of the tomb and left. <sup>61</sup> Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb.

<sup>62</sup> The next day, the one after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate <sup>63</sup> and said, 'Sir, we remember what that impostor said while he was still alive, "After three days I will rise again." <sup>64</sup> Therefore give orders that the tomb be secured until the third day; otherwise his disciples may come and steal him, and tell the people, "He has been raised from the dead,' for then the last deception would be worse than the first.' <sup>65</sup> Pilate said to them, 'You have your own guard of soldiers; go and make it as secure as you can.' <sup>66</sup> So they and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone and mounting a guard.

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## Bible Study

### Review

At the beginning of our reading, we are still watching the Cross, but Jesus has died. Yesterday we read about the flurry of activity that took place immediately after Jesus' death, (27:51-54) as God broke open tombs and rent the curtain in the Temple. Now, we read about a number of very important facts and incidents, all of which would prove to have an important bearing on what happened next; the resurrection! Matthew records the names of the women who followed Jesus (27:55-56), the arrangements for the burial of Jesus' body (27:57-61), and the beginnings of a dispute about what happened to Jesus after His death (27:62-66).

We will look at the names of the women later in the study ('going deeper'), but their inclusion here is very important. While writing about the life of Jesus, Matthew does not say much about women apart from Mary, Jesus' mother (Matt 1,2). However, women would soon figure prominently in his story, for the primary witnesses to the resurrection were women (28:1-10). In today's passage, Matthew introduces some of these women by name (27:56) and tells us that they had been present while Jesus died, '*looking on from a distance*' (27:55). Furthermore, there were '*many*' of them (27:55). This is quite remarkable, and we would love to know more about them. Nevertheless, Matthew tells us that these women had all followed Jesus from Galilee and had made it their business to '*care for His needs*' (27:55). They were no casual observers, they were the main source of information about Jesus' death and His resurrection.

Next, Matthew tells us about Joseph of Arimathea, the rich disciple of Jesus who saw to His burial (27:57-61). In the course of His ministry, Jesus had spoken strongly to rich people who came to Him, and He required that they give up their possessions to God (19:16-24), so Joseph must have been a remarkable man. There are many theories about Joseph and who he was (see 'going deeper'), but Matthew seems more concerned with what he did than who he was. At a time when all Jesus' close followers had fled, this otherwise unknown disciple came forward and did what was required for Jesus to be laid to rest, and without this, there could be no resurrection! Matthew reports the details carefully; Pilate was informed of Jesus' death and agreed for Jesus to be buried, the tomb was properly prepared and Jesus was laid in it without ceremony because of the late hour. The tomb was then closed up again (27:60), and this was watched by two women. Matthew reports all this for one important reason, which is to tell his readers that the death of Jesus was no hoax. He really was dead.

The Sabbath began when the sun went down on the Friday evening, and from then, no work was allowed. Matthew says nothing about the activity of the Jewish people in the story at all. He simply reports the beginning of the scandal that would one day engulf the early church; the suggestion that Jesus' rising again was a trick and Jesus was an impostor (27:62-66). He lays the blame for this accusation firmly at the feet of the Jewish authorities, and it is fascinating to read that Pilate wanted little to do with their plans and scheme. He told the chief priests and Pharisees to use the military muscle available to them (being the Temple guards), to guard the tomb. They were the one who were worried, so they would have to deal with it!

What is there to do on a Sabbath day, the day after momentous things have happened? For all those who witnessed the death of Jesus, the next day was one in which nothing could be done, and it must have felt as if the world had stopped. God had said He would rest on the seventh day after he made the world (Gen 2:1-3), and He called this day the 'Sabbath' and asked all creation to follow His example. Now, in a reverse of the story of Creation, God rested before doing a new work that would change the world forever; the work of Resurrection!

### Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- The women (27:55,56)
- Joseph of Arimathea (27:57-61)
- The guard at the tomb (27:62-66)

## Going Deeper

### ***The women (27:55,56)***

Almost any commentary on Matthew discusses the identity of the different women mentioned here at length, comparing the names here with those mentioned in Mark 15:42-47, Luke 23:50-56, and John 19:38-42. The identity of Mary Magdalene (27:61) has always been a mystery, debated since the early days of the church, and interestingly, given the hype in recent past years around Dan Brown's book 'the Da Vinci Code', we should note that there was no hint of her being married to Jesus as this unhelpful book suggests. She was, however, closely associated with John and some parts of the church (The East) believe that they possess good historical evidence of her marriage to John at the 'Wedding at Cana' recorded in John chapter 2. As far as Matthew is concerned, it was probably quite natural for him to refer to some of the women who had served Jesus during His ministry and who would have naturally, in that culture, felt it their duty to mourn and perform funeral rites.

Matthew does not mention Jesus' mother among the women called Mary, and it is hard to imagine he would leave her out if he knew she was there. The mother of the sons of Zebedee (27:56) is fortunately identifiable as Salome (Mark 15:40). Then, the last unsolvable mystery, from the point of view of reading Matthew's Gospel, is that Mary Magdalene is mentioned alongside Mary the mother of James and Joseph (common names, giving us no real clues) in verse 56; but later in verse 61, she is mentioned alongside someone else called 'the other Mary'. The intrigue about the 'other Mary' arises because she is also a witness to the resurrection (see 28:1) and the empty tomb; but Matthew does not say clearly who she is! We can guess that she was the same Mary previously mentioned (the mother of James and Joseph) but this is only a guess. We just do not know who this Mary is! However, it is important to note that it was unlikely to be the Mary of 'Mary and Martha' who lived in Bethany (near Jerusalem), because Matthew has already said that these were all women from Galilee!

### ***Joseph of Arimathea (27:57-61)***

There is a great deal of mystery surrounding Joseph of Arimathea. Firstly, it is not known where Arimathea was! There are a number of sites suggested in Israel. If we were to look at the different Gospels, we could gather a range of information about him, even suggesting that he was a rich elder and member of the Sanhedrin (Mark 15:43), the very council that had accepted Caiaphas' decision that Jesus deserved to die!

Matthew presents Joseph simply as a rich man who was a disciple of Jesus, and does not embarrass us with any connection with those who had pronounced His death. Again, I prefer to read the Gospel for what it says, and I shall talk more about the problem of Joseph's connection with the Sanhedrin when I discuss Mark 15:42; and we may find that what the Gospel of Mark says about him is quite different. However, as far as Matthew is concerned, we cannot unpick the mysteries of whether Joseph was at the Sanhedrin or how long he was a disciple, as some commentaries try to do.

Joseph was certainly a man of substance who knew what to do to organise things. He was influential enough to go straight to Pilate (27:58) and ask for the body of Jesus; an unusual request given that the soldiers had their own routine for disposing of bodies quickly, and in a manner that was dishonourable for a Jew. Joseph's actions prevented this happening, and he then provided Jesus with a burial place near Jerusalem; the most honourable place for burial, normally reserved for the privileged, the rich, and ancient kings (1 Kings 15:8,24 etc). The tomb was made from a hole cut out of the side of rock. Joseph was able to offer this newly made tomb probably cut for himself, and dealt with the matter personally as it was not allowable under Jewish law for Jesus to be left on the tree overnight (Deut 21:23 'his corpse must not remain all night on a tree; you will bury him that same day'). Further, his action in covering Jesus with a linen shroud was the proper 'male' thing to do; covering Jesus' nakedness after his body was taken down from the Cross. Incidentally, archaeology confirms the general tradition that bodies were placed upon a shelf inside such a tomb.

Joseph himself is described rolling a 'large stone' over the entrance to the tomb, presumably cut for the purpose, as was the tomb. It was also probably positioned so that it could be rolled into position by one man, but once in position it would have taken considerable force to move it.

### ***The guard at the Tomb (27:62-66)***

The story of how a seal came to be placed on the tomb by soldiers of the Guard completes the day, the first 'Good Friday'. Matthew describes a meeting taking place between Pilate and the religious authorities, convened to make sure that their day's work in getting rid of Jesus was complete (27:62-65).

Fearing that the disciples would try and arrange for Jesus' body to be spirited away so that they could claim His prophecies of resurrection after three days had been fulfilled, it was decided to place a seal and a guard on the tomb. Little did they know of the real plight of the dispirited disciples; leaderless because of Peter's

failure. Nevertheless, Pilate agreed to place a seal, but was reluctant to commit any of his own soldiers. He told the chief priests to use a guard of soldiers from the Jerusalem cohort which was assigned to the Jewish authorities for the guarding of the Temple. It appears as if he was still washing his hands of the whole affair as he put the issue of security back in the hands of chief priests.

The question of the guard at the tomb is one that has intrigued many people for centuries, because it has a bearing on what people think about the bodily resurrection of Jesus. When Matthew wrote, he may well have done so in order to quash rumours of foul play. To help understand this, I quote from Davis and Alison's commentary, giving a purely imaginary conversation between Matthew and a Jewish sceptic about Jesus' death and resurrection. It is quite likely that similar discussions took place after the resurrection of Jesus, and it is understandable that Matthew wanted to deal with the whole issue in a conclusive way, and give the Early Church the facts that would enable them to refute any false allegations:

Matthew: Jesus rose from the dead and His tomb was empty (28:6)

Opponent: Maybe Jesus never died

Matthew: A Roman guard kept watch over Him, surely he was dead before his body was released (27:36)

Opponent: There must have been a mix up of tombs.

Matthew: Women saw where Jesus was buried (27:61)

Opponent: The disciples, seeking to confirm Jesus' prophecy of resurrection after three days, stole the body.

Matthew: The disciples had fled, they were nowhere near (26:56)

Opponent: Then someone else stole the body.

Matthew: A large stone was rolled over the tomb and it was sealed, and soldiers kept watch (27:62-66)

Opponent: The soldiers fell asleep!

Matthew: That's what they were paid to say! (28:12-15)

## Application

It is hard to say what we can take from this text by way of application. Certainly, we should note the significance of the women in this story. We cannot overestimate the importance of their role as witnesses to the death and resurrection of Jesus. It was essential that the early church accept that these two basic events were real and creditable, and the fact that they accepted the evidence of women is remarkable. The burial of Jesus is also important because it speaks of things being done properly by those who had the resources to do so. The story of the whispering and connivance of the chief priests and Pharisees is a reminder to us that the work of God will always have its opponents, and together with Matthew, we should know what they are doing.

It may be that God has spoken to you through this passage in a number of ways, but I suggest that we can take from this passage some thoughts about the provision of God for all circumstances. It is very easy to read the story of the death and resurrection of our Lord and forget details such as those we have read about today. If we are really to believe in the bodily resurrection of our Lord, which is a key part of traditional Christian faith, then this part of the story is as important as the rest.

Lastly, people who wish to undermine traditional Christian belief focus on these verses to try and tie a Christian in knots concerning the facts of the resurrection. People have been doing this for centuries. It is important for a Christian disciple firstly to know that the enemy has been trying to refute God's saving work through the bodily resurrection of our Lord for centuries. Secondly, they should get to know the facts of scripture thoroughly so that they can handle the genuine questions people raise about what happened to Jesus at His death and Resurrection. This is all central to our faith, and we should know how to handle what scripture says about it.

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## Discipleship

### *Questions (for use in groups)*

1. How important to the story of Jesus' life and death are the women who appear at important and critical times?
2. Why was it necessary for Jesus to be buried in a 'proper' tomb? What does the story of Joseph of Arimathea add to the story of Jesus' death and resurrection?
3. Do you understand the imaginary discussion quoted above? Have you come across people who doubt Jesus' resurrection? If so, what do they think happened?

## **Topics covered by this text**

- *The testimony of women to the death and burial of Jesus*
- *The burial of Jesus by Joseph of Arimathea*
- *The beginnings of numerous stories about the truth of what happened to Jesus*

## **Personal comments by author**

*It is extraordinary to discover that just when we thought the disciples were in disarray and incapable of functioning, people such as Joseph and the women appear who are ready to do God's will. Is there a parable in this for our church today? It may be that as a disciple, you identify with the twelve who are at this point of Jesus' story, in confusion; or you may identify with Joseph or the women who are ready and available. However, both will be needed to do God's will in the Church of the New Testament, and each one of God's people has a work to do which is necessary for the Kingdom. Our job is to be ready to do God's will, just like the women and Joseph in this story.*

## **Ideas for exploring discipleship**

- *Are you ready for anything other than the routine life of your church? Could Jesus ask you to do anything different than what you do already? Have you asked such questions of yourself before? Ask the Lord to help you face such questions, especially if they take you away from your 'comfort zones'.*
- *Take the opportunity to think and pray about how Matthew describes the death of Jesus, and let your spirit dwell on the reality of what happened. The Lord will inspire you as you do this, because Jesus' death and resurrection is the most powerful and significant event in the whole universe.*

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## **Final Prayer**

God of grace and God of glory, prepare our hearts for the great day that is ahead. Let us not be impatient in our waiting or too lazy in our expectation, but happy to be led by You towards the great resurrection rejoicing that awaits us! Thanks be to God. AMEN

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