

They Laid His Body in the Tomb

The Incontrovertible Death of Jesus

Scripture: Matthew 27:57-68

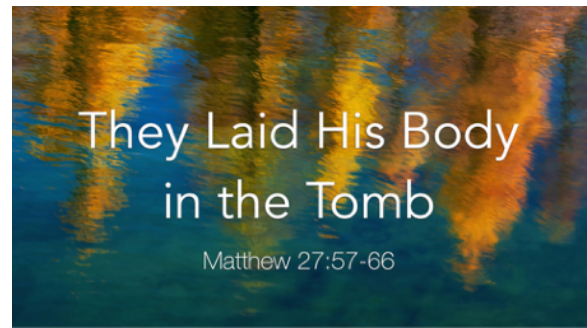
Sermon Series: *Matthew*

Topic: Jesus, Crucifixion, Burial, Death

Introduction

Where We Were Last Sunday

Last week we left Jesus hanging on the cross. Matthew took us through the amazing events that surrounded the death of Jesus. We saw the four witnesses to the fact that Jesus *truly is the Son of God*; 1) **Creation** bore witness to the divine sonship of Jesus through three hours of darkness, an earthquake, and splitting rocks, 2) **Jesus** himself bore witness as he cried out in “anguish of soul”¹ as the sins of believers were laid upon him and he chose the moment of his death, 3) **God** bore witness by tearing apart the veil in the temple and the tombs in the cemetery, and finally, 4) the **Soldiers** (one centurion and four² foot soldiers) bore witness to Jesus saying, “Truly, this was the Son of God” (Mt 27:54).



Where We Are Going Today

The portion of Scripture before us this morning falls into two sections, both of which testify to the *actual, physical, bodily death and burial of Jesus*.

1. The first section (vs.57-61) testifies to the fact of the death of Jesus through *the faith of Joseph of Arimathea* as he goes to Pilate, makes a request, has his request granted, and then he takes Jesus' body to the tomb.
2. The second section (vs.62-66) testifies to the fact of the death of Jesus through *the fear of the priests and Pharisees* as they too go to Pilate, make a request, have their request granted, and then they go to the tomb.

Jesus' death is first confirmed by the faith of his friends and then by the fear of his enemies.

¹ Matthew 27:46; cf. Isaiah 53:11.

² John 19:23.

They laid His Body in a Tomb

The death of Jesus is not fiction, but rather an incontrovertible fact that unfolded in fulfillment of the sovereign plan of God to provide salvation to the lost. The whole emphasis of this portion of Scripture is upon the actual bodily death of Jesus. This fact will be confirmed by both his friends and his enemies.

The Death of Jesus Confirmed by the Faith of Joseph of Arimathea (vs. 57-61)

First, the fact of Jesus' death is confirmed by the faith of his friends.

Matthew 27:57-61 (ESV) ⁵⁷ When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who also was a disciple of Jesus. ⁵⁸ He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. ⁵⁹ And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen shroud and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had cut in the rock. And he rolled a great stone to the entrance of the tomb and went away. ⁶¹ Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb.

When it was evening (v. 57). You'll remember from last week that Jesus was crucified at 9:00 a.m.³ There was darkness from noon until 3:00 p.m., at which time Jesus cried out with a loud voice, surrendered his life, and chose to die as he *"yielded up his spirit."* (Mt 27:45-46, 50). Matthew now tells us what took place from 3:00 p.m. to sunset, which at that time of the year happened around 6:00 p.m.

Buried Before Sundown

According to the Mosaic law (Dt 21:22-23), a condemned criminal was to be buried before sundown. Thus, sometime after 3:00 p.m., as the day was coming to a close, in order to hasten death, the Jews had asked Pilate to break the legs of these three crucified men.

John 19:31-37 (ESV) ³¹ Since it was the day of Preparation, and so that the bodies would not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), the Jews asked Pilate that their legs might be broken and that they might be taken away. ³² So the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first, and of the other who had been crucified with him. ³³ But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. ³⁴ But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water. ³⁵ He who saw it has borne witness—his testimony is true, and he knows that he is telling the truth—that you also may believe. ³⁶ For these things took

³ Mark 15:25 "And it was the third hour when they crucified him." The first hour of the day was 6:00 a.m. thus, the third hour would be 9:00 a.m.

place that the Scripture might be fulfilled: "Not one of his bones will be broken." ³⁷ And again another Scripture says, "They will look on him whom they have pierced."

Roman soldiers were experts in killing criminals. This squad of four⁴ soldiers and one centurion⁵ who had been charged with keeping watch over Jesus (Mt 27:36), had overseen the crucifixion of criminals dozens of times. They had been watching Jesus since they drove the nails into his hands earlier that morning.

Breaking the legs. Now they received orders to hasten the death of these three men so that they would not be hanging on the cross on the Sabbath, but could be buried before sundown, which marked the beginning of the Sabbath. The means of hastening the death of those crucified was to **break their legs** so that they could no longer push against the nails in the feet in order to raise themselves up to breathe more easily. To break the legs hastens asphyxiation. But when the soldiers came to Jesus, they saw that **"he was already dead"** (Jn 19:33). Therefore, there was no need to break his legs. That his legs were not broken happened to fulfill the Scripture that said, **"not one of his bones were broken."** This fulfilled OT prophecy written by both Moses and David (Ex 12:46; Num 9:12; Ps 34:20). None of the bones of the Passover lambs were to be broken, and since Jesus is our Passover Lamb, none of his bones were broken.

Piercing his side. However, that Jesus was actually dead had to be confirmed. He looked dead to these soldiers, but they had to confirm this fact. In order to do this, one of them drove a spear up and into his side. Jesus did not scream. His body did not flinch. He was dead. These expert Roman killers saw no sign of life. In fact, what they did see confirmed the fact that Jesus was dead. **"Blood and water came out."** This means that either the **pleural cavity** (the water sack surrounding the lungs) or the **pericardial sac** was punctured. Either his lung or his heart was punctured. Jesus was certainly dead. And this fulfilled the prophecy written by Zechariah, **"they will look on him whom they have pierced"** (Zech 12:10).

This all took place some time late afternoon just before Joseph arrived.

There came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who also was a disciple of Jesus (v.58). Mark tells us that this **rich** (this fact is important and will be further discussed at v.60) man was a **"respected member of the council"** (Mk 15:43), which refers to the Sanhedrin. Luke tells us that he was **"a good and righteous man who had not consented"** to their condemnation of Jesus (Lk 23:50-51). Both of Luke and Mark tell us that **"he was looking for the kingdom of God"** (Mk 15:43; Lk 23:51). Matthew tells us that he **"was a disciple of Jesus"** and John adds that he kept this fact a **secret "for fear of the Jews"** (Jn 19:38). So this man, Joseph, is an

⁴ John 19:23.

⁵ Matthew 27:54.

influential member of the Sanhedrin, who had become a secret disciple of Jesus. But now, we see a change in this disciple. He overcomes his fear of the Jews and chooses to go public with his faith. This will no doubt have costly consequences for him.

He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus (v.58). Pilate is still in control of these events of this day and he simply cannot get away from Jesus. His wife had warned him to “have nothing to do with this righteous man,”⁶ and yet the talk of Jesus continues all day long. Joseph’s fear of the Jews is no longer controlling his behavior. His faith in Jesus is now stronger than his fear of the Jews. Mark tells us “*he took courage and went to Pilate*” (Mk 15:43). What this man is doing required courage.

Roman custom was normally to leave crucified criminals on the cross to rot⁷ and be eaten by the birds. However, Pilate has already consented to allowing these three criminals to be taken down from their crosses, but “executed criminals were buried in a public plot, without honour, and were not allowed to be placed in their family tombs.”⁸ This request by Joseph is bold, especially considering the fact that it was the judgment of the Sanhedrin that called for Jesus’ death as a treasonous criminal. Yet, now a member of the Sanhedrin came to honor this man with a proper burial. Assuredly, this was the end of Joseph’s membership among the Sanhedrin. He would be rejected by the rulers of Judaism in Jerusalem. Joseph was no longer hiding his devotion to Jesus. He had now come to a point where he was not afraid to be publicly known as a disciple of Jesus. He was now willing to accept all the consequences of this courageous act of devotion.

Pilate Confirmed Jesus’ Death

Mark tells us that this request by Joseph surprised Pilate, and he therefore sought to confirm Jesus’ death.

Mark 15:44-45 (ESV) ⁴⁴ Pilate was surprised to hear that he should have already died. And summoning the centurion, he asked him whether he was already dead. ⁴⁵ And when he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the corpse to Joseph.

Here we see another confirmation of the death of Jesus. This centurion had been watching over Jesus since his crucifixion at 9:00 a.m. that morning. He had heard the words of Jesus as the nails were driven into his hands. He had witnessed the conduct of Jesus as he was mocked by many and yet said nothing in return. He had sat through three hours of darkness and heard Jesus cry out, “*My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?*” He had heard Jesus breathe his final breath. And at that very moment he felt the earthquake and heard rocks split. He

⁶ Matthew 27:19.

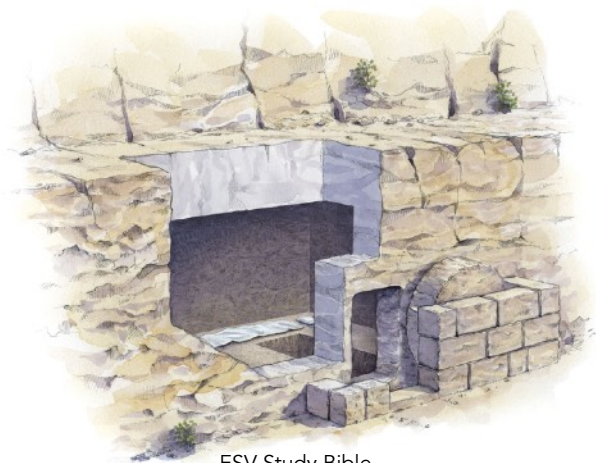
⁷ Craig S. Keener, *Matthew*, vol. 1, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), Mt 27:57–61.

⁸ R. T. France, *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 1, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 408.

watched as a soldier drove a spear into his side. And after he had seen all of this and said, *"Truly this was the Son of God!"* (Mt 27:54). He was—past tense—the Son of God. He was, but now he was dead and this centurion knew this for a fact. Roman soldiers knew death when they saw it. This centurion was not mistaken about the fact of Jesus' death. He wasn't mistaken because he knew such a mistake could cost him his life. According to Roman law, if he was wrong about this and Jesus was not actually dead, then he himself could later be executed for having failed to fully carry out the death sentence upon a criminal convicted of treason. Jesus was certainly dead according to very informed attention of a Roman centurion and the other four soldiers who had been watching over Jesus the whole day.

Then Pilate ordered it to be given to him (v.58). Despite the unusual request of Joseph and the fact that seditious criminals were never granted an honorable burial, Pilate grants the request almost certainly because he knew there was no truth in the accusations against Jesus.

And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen shroud and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had cut in the rock (vs.59-60). That Joseph was rich is evidenced by the fact that he had *"his own new tomb cut in the rock."* ⁹ "A tomb cut out of rock would have been particularly expensive." These tombs were often family tombs¹⁰, in which more than one body could be laid until the body decomposed, and then the bones would be placed into an ossuary (i.e. box built to hold bones). The fact that Joseph had commissioned this "new tomb" and has on hand a burial shroud may mean that a family member was close to death. Joseph is here treating Jesus as a member of his family.



ESV Study Bible

Joseph would not have been alone in doing all this. Matthew has already told us that Joseph is a *rich* man (v. 57) and he certainly would have had at least one and maybe two servants with him. John tells us that Nicodemus, a prominent Pharisee, also was there helping him and brought with him 75 lbs. of spices and oils (Jn 19:39). These two men, who are clearly now willing to admit to the watching world that they are disciples of Jesus, dress Jesus' body, place the spices and oils, wrap him respectfully, and lay him in Joseph's *own new tomb*. The courageous and kind work of this rich man fulfills what was written by Isaiah.

Isaiah 53:9 (ESV) And they made his grave with the wicked

⁹ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, vol. 33B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1995), 858.

¹⁰ Craig S. Keener, *Matthew*, vol. 1, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), Mt 27:57–61.

and with a rich man in his death...

As a convicted traitor, the body of Jesus would have been thrown unburied into a common grave with the two other "wicked" men with whom he was crucified. However, according to the sovereign plan of God and through the intervention of Joseph of Arimathea, who placed his body in his own tomb, Jesus ends up being "*with a rich man in his death.*"

And he rolled a great stone to the entrance of the tomb and went away (v.60). Joseph and Nicodemus (and perhaps their servants) rolled a large stone over the entrance of the tomb. The trough in which this large stone would have rested was often constructed at a slight downward angle, which made it easier to close than it was to open, since opening required the stone to be rolled slightly uphill. This was done to discourage grave robbers from entering tombs. These men are two additional witnesses to the fact of Jesus' death. They have dressed the body of Jesus. They saw his lacerated back, his pierced side, hands, and feet. His body was limp and cold and dead. They rolled the stone across the door of the tomb and went away because *Jesus is dead and now buried.*

Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb (v.61). The two Marys were also there, watching these two men. They knew where the tomb was in which Jesus was buried. Their hearts were broken. Jesus is dead. All they could do was sit there by the tomb. These ladies had also been watching Jesus from a distance all day. They saw him being crucified. They saw him hanging on the cross for six hours. They saw his body being taken down from the cross and now they had seen where he was buried. They provided additional witnesses to the fact of Jesus' death and burial. We will leave there sitting across from the tomb, but we will see them again.

The Death of Jesus Confirmed by the Fear of the Priests and Pharisees (vs.62-66)

Second, the fact of Jesus' death is confirmed by the fear of his enemies, the chief priests and Pharisees.

Matthew 27:62-66 (ESV) ⁶² The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate.⁶³ And said, "Sir, we remember how that impostor said, while he was still alive, 'After three days I will rise.'⁶⁴ Therefore order the tomb to be made secure until the third day, lest his disciples go and steal him away and tell the people, 'He has risen from the dead,' and the last fraud will be worse than the first."⁶⁵ Pilate said to them, "You have a guard of soldiers. Go, make it as secure as you can."⁶⁶ So they went and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone and setting a guard.

The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate (v.62). *"The next day"* refers to the day following Jesus' crucifixion.

Jesus was crucified on Friday. Mark explicitly states this, saying that the day he was crucified, *"...was the day of Preparation, that, that day before the Sabbath"* (Mk 15:42). The day before the Sabbath is Friday. Luke affirms the same, *"it was the day of Preparation, and Sabbath was beginning"* (Lk 23:54). With this, John also agrees, *"So because of the Jewish day of Preparation, since the tomb was close at hand, they laid Jesus there"* (Jn 19:42).

The day after the day of Preparation is Saturday. This means they went to Pilate on the Sabbath day. This is Saturday. The *"day of Preparation"* is Friday. It is called *"the day of Preparation"* because on Friday Jewish people prepared all necessary provisions which could not lawfully be done on the Sabbath day, such as cooking, work, etc.¹¹

Pilate cannot get away from Jesus. Yesterday it was all day Jesus and then he finally died. Pilate thought that was the end of him, but then Joseph showed up asking about Jesus. Now it's Saturday and the leaders of the Jews are back—talking about Jesus!

Sir, we remember how that impostor said, while he was still alive, 'After three days I will rise.' Therefore order the tomb to be made secure until the third day (v.63-64). It is interesting that the word *'Sir'* here is the Greek word *Kyrie* (κύριε), which depending upon the context can also be translated as *'Lord.'* In other contexts it is simply a term of respect; however, in Matthew's gospel, in almost all instances of this word, except in a few parables, it is reserved exclusively for Jesus himself.¹² It appears Matthew wants us to note that these religious leaders have fully and finally rejected the Lord Jesus and have opted for a political *'lord'* instead.

Note also that this group of chief priests and Pharisees understand Jesus to be presently dead. Their concern is about something that Jesus said *"while he was still alive,"* but in saying this, they make clear that they believe him to be presently dead. Thus, even Jesus' enemies here proclaim him to be dead and buried in a tomb.

These leaders are also aware that Jesus has predicted his resurrection from the dead after three days. They are standing before Pilate on Saturday because they realize the meaning of Jesus' words. His words mean that the third day will arrive on the next day, Sunday. Their appearing before Pilate on Saturday demonstrates their concern that as early as the next morning some kind of fraud could take place.

Lest his disciples go and steal him away and tell the people, 'He has risen from the dead,' and the last fraud will be worse than the first (v.64). These religious leaders think more of the disciples than the disciples do of themselves. They have all fled the scene and are nowhere to be found. The last thing on their minds is perpetuating a fraudulent claim of miraculous

¹¹ See Exodus 16:5.

¹² Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew*, vol. 1, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 1060.

resurrection. These leaders are afraid of rumors. Even after Jesus' death, they still fear what he said while he was living. In their fear, they are about to unwittingly provide greater confirmation of his death, burial, and resurrection.

Pilate said to them, "You have a guard of soldiers. Go, make it as secure as you can" (v.65). It would be nice if we could hear Pilate's tone of voice. Pilate grants their request and orders a guard of soldiers to go to the tomb to make it secure. This guard was comprised of at least two soldiers (and maybe even as many as four).

So they went and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone and setting a guard (v.66).

"*They went*" means some of the priests and Pharisees went with the soldiers to the tomb to make it **secure**. Thus, they knew exactly where Joseph had buried Jesus. Either Joseph told them where he buried Jesus, or some of them had been watching Joseph and Nicodemus. Either way, they knew where the tomb was. And certainly, these two soldiers would have opened the tomb before sealing it to ensure that Jesus' body was actually inside.

After checking that the body was inside the tomb, they **sealed the stone**. This was likely done by one or more wax or clay seals placed at intervals around the large stone covering the entrance of the tomb with a small cord running through them upon which the Roman imperial stamp would have been impressed.¹³ The **guards** were then **set** at the entrance to oversee the tomb and prevent disturbance. Guards had watched over Jesus on the cross, and now there are guards watching over him in his tomb. Thus, two more witnesses are now present to verify all that is about to happen at the site of this tomb.

Conclusion

Jesus is dead. He is thoroughly dead. He has been watched all day by four soldiers and a centurion. He has also been watched by the women. No one snatched away Jesus' body from the cross. The soldiers prevented this.

Jesus died around 3:00 p.m. on Friday afternoon. The Sabbath day was approaching, and the Jews wanted these criminals buried before sundown. Therefore, they requested their legs to be broken. This request was granted, but the soldiers discovered Jesus was already dead, and so they did not break his legs. However, to ensure he was dead, they speared him in the side. These two actions fulfilled two OT prophecies, but most importantly, they demonstrated that Jesus was actually dead.

After his death, a rich man named Joseph of Arimathea decided to stop being a secret disciple of Jesus and went public with his faith by going publicly to Pilate and asking permission to honor a condemned traitor with a proper burial. Pilate did not expect Jesus to be dead so

¹³ Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, vol. 22, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 425.

soon, so he asked the centurion in charge whether or not this was true. The centurion confirmed that Jesus was dead. Pilate, knowing that Jesus was innocent, granted this request.

Joseph and Nicodemus took Jesus' dead body and prepared it for burial. These two men confirmed that Jesus was dead. Knowing that he was dead, they put him in Joseph's own new tomb. This fulfilled what was written by Isaiah (53:9). Two women were watching. They too knew that Jesus was dead. All this took place by sundown on Friday.

On Saturday, the Sabbath day, the chief priests and Pharisees returned to Pilate out of fear of fraud by the disciples and requested that Jesus' tomb be sealed and that a guard be posted to prevent the body from being stolen by the disciples and any subsequent fraudulent claims of resurrection. In sealing the tomb, these two soldiers verified the death of Jesus by confirming that his body was lying inside the tomb on that Saturday.

Thus, by my count there are at least 12 credible witnesses to the fact that Jesus is actually, physically dead and buried; 4 soldiers, 1 centurion, Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus, Pilate, 2 women, and another 2 soldiers. We could also add in the chief priests and Pharisees who closely followed these events, but we don't know exactly how many of them there were.

Jesus of Nazareth actually died and was buried.

Discussion Questions

1. How would you summarize Matthew's main purpose in writing this portion of his gospel (Mt 27:57-66)?
2. Who is Joseph of Arimathea? How was he described in the sermon? What strikes you about him? What qualities or characteristics of him are worthy of being emulated? How was his faith manifested?
3. In what way is Joseph and his actions connected with the fulfillment of Scripture?
4. What are the two women doing in this section of Scripture (v.61)? What does this reveal about them?
5. On what day was Jesus crucified? Why is this important? On what day do the chief priests and Pharisees go before Pilate? What is the significance of this timing?
6. Of what were the chief priests and Pharisees afraid? Do you think their fears were valid?
7. What did the priests and Pharisees propose to Pilate as a solution to their problem? How might this solution actually serve to provide even further confirmation that Jesus truly is the Son of God?
8. What evidence was presented as verifying the death and burial of Jesus? Is it necessary to believe these facts in order to have salvation? Why or why not?
9. What, if any, portion of this Scripture spoke to your heart or gave you encouragement in your faith?
10. What questions do you still have?