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INTERNATIONAL

TEACHING THE WHOLE COUNSEL OF GOD

Matthew - Lesson 27H

Chapter 27:55-28:1

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- Time is running out to get Jesus' body in the tomb before sundown on the Passover
 - At 6 PM a new day begins in Jewish reckoning, the first day of the feast of Unleavened Bread
 - The first and last days of Unleavened Bread are always High Sabbaths
 - And since Passover fell on a Thursday this year, the High Sabbath was followed by the weekly Sabbath in that year
 - That meant there would be two Sabbaths back-to-back which made it all the more important to get Jesus buried on Passover
 - Once that double Sabbath began, all work ceased until Sunday, including the work of preparing a body for burial
 - And Jesus' friends could not bear the thought of leaving Jesus hanging exposed on the cross for that long
 - So they are searching desperately for a way to get Jesus off the cross, to prepare His body and bury it before sundown
 - Even the chance to bury Jesus before the end of the day was unusual, since most victims of crucifixion survived a day or longer
 - Eventually, the victim succumbed to shock, fatigue and ultimately suffocation
 - If that process went on too long for the Romans, they would hasten death by breaking the legs of the person
 - Without the use of their legs, the person could no longer push up to gain a breath, and suffocation would follow in minutes
 - But when Jesus died at 3 PM by giving up His spirit, it meant a Passover burial was possible...and it fulfilled Scripture
 - In Exodus 34, God told Israel that nothing of the Lamb could remain at the end of the Passover feast
 - The lamb was to be fully consumed by the family or else burned so that as the Passover ended, nothing of the lamb was left
 - That requirement pictured the body of Christ, the Lamb of God, buried out of sight before the end of Passover
- So Jesus dies early enough on Passover to give opportunity for His disciples to arrange for His burial before the start of a Sabbath
 - But there are several hurdles standing in their way
 - First, there were very few disciples available to do the work and they were all women for the most part

Matt. 27:55 Many women were there looking on from a distance, who had followed Jesus from Galilee while ministering to Him.

Matt. 27:56 Among them was Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.

- Matthew and the other Gospels report that as Jesus dies, a few women looked on from a distance

- Specifically three “Mary’s”: Mary Magdalene, Jesus’ mother Mary, and Mary, the mother of the apostle James the Lessor
- Given the male-dominated culture of Jesus’ time, it was shameful that only female members of Jesus’ inner circle remained to help
- And the absence of men stands in the way of burying Jesus before 6 PM
 - These few women did not have the physical strength to remove nails from the cross and lower a body by themselves
 - So if Jesus is to be buried before sundown, it will require at least one or two men to step forward to offer assistance
- Secondly, the Romans had to give permission for family members to bury a crucified prisoner, and that was not easy
 - Romans preferred to let crucified prisoners rot on the cross for days or weeks because it reinforced the deterrent effect
 - So someone with political clout would be needed to convince Pilate to release the body that day
- Finally, someone needed to secure a nearby place to bury Jesus, and that was probably the hardest problem to solve
 - Grave sites were owned by families, but an itinerant person like Jesus would have had no family burial site in Jerusalem
 - So someone with means would need to arrange for the purchase of a tomb, which is nearly impossible to do in such a short time
- Each of these barriers were significant, but taken together they made the prospect of burying Jesus before 6 PM seem almost impossible
 - But of course, God was going to make sure His Son was placed in a tomb before sundown as planned
 - And the Lord solves all three problems with just one man
 - So as minutes tick away and the situation grows ever-more desperate for these women, a man finally steps forward

Matt. 27:57 When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who himself had also become a disciple of Jesus.

Matt. 27:58 This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate ordered it to be given to him.

Matt. 27:59 And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth,

Matt. 27:60 and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn out in the rock; and he rolled a large stone against the entrance of the tomb and went away.

Matt. 27:61 And Mary Magdalene was there, and the other Mary, sitting opposite the grave.

- In v.57 Matthew says it was now evening, which refers to the final hour of daylight, so the start of the Sabbath was fast approaching
 - Jesus was still hanging on the cross, and the women were likely pleading for anyone to help them get Him down

- There were few believing men in the vicinity who heard their pleas but hesitated to respond
- If someone stepped forward, they would be exposed as a Jesus-sympathizer which was a great risk
 - There was real reason to fear what the Jewish leaders would do to such a person
 - Being known as a disciple of Jesus could result in persecution in various ways
 - A man's family could be ostracized from Jewish society...he could lose everything: his livelihood, his home, his life
- Which makes what happens next all the more remarkable...a rich man of great power and with much to lose steps forward to assist the women
 - The man is Joseph from Arimathea, the home of Samuel located 21 miles from Jerusalem
 - The other Gospel writers tell us that Joseph was a Pharisee and a member of the ruling Sanhedrin Council
 - And that he, along with fellow Pharisee Nicodemus, were secret disciples of Jesus on the Sanhedrin
 - Over the past couple of years, these men followed Jesus from a distance while remaining loyal Pharisees serving on the counsel
 - Perhaps they told themselves they could do more good for Jesus in their behind-the-scenes role than if they came out publicly
 - Perhaps they thought they could use their influence on the counsel to help Jesus in one way or another from time to time
 - If so, then they were trying to have their cake and eat it too...they tried to retain their positions of power and authority in this life...
 - While at the same time, being devoted to their Messiah and expecting Him to receive them warmly in the Kingdom
 - But Jesus told His disciples that they couldn't have it all...we can't seek unity with this world while also preparing for the next
- Jesus summed it up this way:

Mark 8:34 And He summoned the crowd with His disciples, and said to them, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me.

Mark 8:35 “For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it.

- Jesus said if our priority is “saving” this life, meaning preserving the status and wealth and comfort and achievements found in this life...
 - Then we are putting at risk those same things in the next life...we will lose our life in the sense of our eternal rewards
 - Because you can't simultaneously work for the rewards of this life and the rewards of the next life

- We have to pick one, so Jesus told us to be willing to lose this life when necessary to gain what He may have for us in the next
- We gain the rewards of eternity by serving Jesus sacrificially now
- Jesus always describes discipleship in this way, as an “either/or” proposition
 - Either we follow Jesus, or we chase after the world
 - Either we seek to please Jesus, or we seek the approval of men
 - Either we serve God or we serve wealth...you can't serve both
- Joseph and Nicodemus were good men – righteous men even – but until this moment, they were trying to have both
 - They wanted to remain on the Sanhedrin Counsel and with the approval of the other Pharisees and Sadducees...
 - While at the same time, they wanted credit for following a Messiah that the rest of the Counsel despised and wanted to kill
 - But there was literally no way they could have both...one allegiance would always win out over the other
- Luke tells us in his Gospel that when the counsel convened on the night before Jesus died and voted to condemn Jesus, these two men were not there
 - Their faith in Jesus would not allow them to be party to a vote to condemn the Messiah to death
 - Mark tells us that when the Jewish counsel condemned Jesus, it was an unanimous decision
 - So had these two men been present, they could have voted against condemnation, and perhaps altered the outcome
 - That's the challenge facing every disciple of Jesus...we are called out of the world by our faith, and yet we remain in the world for a time
 - So that presents a dilemma...which world will we serve? Do we serve the interests of this world or the interest of the Kingdom?
 - Serving this world means agreeing with the world, thinking like the world, approving what the world approves
 - It means conducting marriage and raising kids and following careers according to the values and priorities of the world
 - But Jesus said we must be willing to “lose” this world so we can serve the interests of the next, and that means making different decisions
 - And as we make different choices than the world makes, we will inevitably offend the world and the world will turn against us
 - Following Jesus may mean losing a few friends, losing promotions or your job...it may even mean losing your life
 - That's the dilemma Jesus places in front of *all* His disciples...which is why Jesus asked us to count the cost of following Him
 - Matthew tells us Joseph was a rich man, so we would understand the great sacrifice he was making by stepping forward
 - He would likely lose his position on the counsel, his place in society, the

respect of his peers, and his means of support

- Joseph couldn't know for sure, but it didn't take a genius to understand that if you side with Jesus, it meant trouble
 - And as he does, Joseph also fulfills Scripture
 - Isaiah 53:9 says the Messiah dies among criminals and He is buried in a rich man's tomb...
- So now as Joseph and Nicodemus heard the pleas of the women, they recognize it was time to count the cost and to stand in the gap
 - So in v.58, Joseph steps forward and begins to solve the three challenges to burying Jesus before sundown
 - First, Joseph goes before Pilate and asks for permission to claim the body of Jesus and remove Him from the cross
 - Given how much the counsel fought with Pilate to crucify Jesus, Pilate would not have been inclined to release Jesus so easily
 - He was probably concerned that the Sanhedrin would return to him complaining that Jesus had been let go too easily
 - So it's likely that the only person who could convince Pilate to release Jesus would be a member of the Sanhedrin Counsel like Joseph
 - So because a member of the Sanhedrin requested Jesus' body, Pilate was willing to release Jesus for burial
 - And in v.59, Joseph returns to the cross, and with Nicodemus' help, they remove Jesus from the cross
 - And then with the women's help, the men prepare the body for burial, wrapping it quickly with linen but without embalming spices
 - Normally a body was prepared with embalming spices that helped dry the body over time
 - But with time running out and with no chance to buy the necessary spices, they are forced to use linen only
 - This was to be a temporary concession on their part
 - The women were planning to return to the tomb on Sunday after the double Sabbath to apply the spices
- So with Joseph's help, the women have claimed Jesus' body and removed Him from the cross, which leaves only the final challenge of where to bury Him
 - In that day, burial was typically a two-step process
 - First, a body was wrapped and placed in a tomb, either a cave or a sarcophagus, where it would decompose over a few years
 - Later, the bones would be retrieved and placed in an ossuary for safekeeping in a home or for burial underground
 - Most people were entombed in caves shared by many other bodies but the wealthy could afford to purchase a private tomb
 - These tombs were multi-room affairs, with a low passage leading to separate rooms for different family members

- They were hewn out of solid rock and sealed with a large rolling stone
 - Joseph being wealthy had recently completed construction on just such a tomb in a quarry close to the city
 - Carving a new cave out of rock was a labor-intensive business, so this cave would have been quite expensive to build
 - Some estimate it might have cost Joseph as much as \$40,000 in today's money
- But with time running out and no other options, Joseph gives up his tomb so that Jesus could have a proper burial that day
 - Joseph stepped out of the shadows, exposing himself publicly as a follower of Jesus and made a significant sacrifice in the process
 - He most likely sacrificed his career, friends, and perhaps his security as well
 - To say nothing of the sacrifice of \$40,000 in the form of that tomb
 - He traded things of this life for the rewards of the next just as Jesus said
 - But notice what he gained...first, by his faith in Jesus, Joseph traded death for life
 - Jesus took the penalty for Joseph's sin, dying in his place, which is beautifully pictured by Jesus taking Joseph's place in the tomb
 - What's more, Joseph's name is recorded in Scripture for all eternity, forever after known as the man who buried Jesus
 - Finally, Joseph even got his tomb back, because as it turned out Jesus only needed it for a few days
 - That's the power of obedience...serve Jesus sacrificially and become a part of His story and be blessed in the end
 - We may not see our names in Scripture, but we will see ourselves making an impact for the Kingdom
 - And even if our worldly accomplishments seem impressive to us now, they won't seem so impressive in the Kingdom
 - But the things you did to serve Jesus will never be forgotten, and in the Kingdom they will become crowns of glory
- Then notice in v.61, Matthew once again mentions the women looking on as Jesus is buried
 - Matthew's showing us how these women are acting as a chain of custody to authenticate the story of Jesus' resurrection
 - In detective work, it's important to maintain a chain of custody for all evidence, so that no one can question its authenticity
 - From the moment a piece of evidence is collected, the police must be able to prove how that evidence was handled
 - That chain of custody assures that the evidence is trustworthy
 - Without these women present, Jesus had no witnesses to testify concerning the most important moments of His ministry
 - Remember, Paul called those three things – death, burial, resurrection – of first importance for the Church

- So we're thankful these women were courageous enough to remain with Jesus after the men had run away
- And because they did, they served as a chain of custody for Jesus' body (more to follow)
 - These women were present from the moment Jesus died on the cross until the tomb was sealed
 - And as we'll see in Chapter 28, they will be the first to visit the tomb on Sunday morning to find it empty
 - They could testify that Jesus did, in fact, die, spend three days in a tomb and resurrect
- And ironically, Jesus' enemies, the religious leaders, unintentionally added to the authenticity of their claims

Matt. 27:62 Now on the next day, the day after the preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered together with Pilate,

Matt. 27:63 and said, "Sir, we remember that when He was still alive that deceiver said, 'After three days I am to rise again.'

Matt. 27:64 "Therefore, give orders for the grave to be made secure until the third day, otherwise His disciples may come and steal Him away and say to the people, 'He has risen from the dead,' and the last deception will be worse than the first."

Matt. 27:65 Pilate said to them, "You have a guard; go, make it as secure as you know how."

Matt. 27:66 And they went and made the grave secure, and along with the guard they set a seal on the stone.

- On the first day of the Sabbath, the chief priests and Pharisees made a special visit to Pilate
 - They had begun to worry that Jesus' disciples might try to fake a resurrection by stealing the body
 - Had this happened, it would have been especially troublesome for the Sadducees, who were the majority party on the counsel
- Sadducees were from the liberal wing of the political spectrum, and they didn't believe in a literal resurrection
 - They believed that we die, we exist in spirit form only and will never occupy a body again
 - So if Jesus' body disappeared and people claimed He was resurrected, it would undermine the Sadducees' position
- So they and the Pharisees demand that Pilate guard the tomb, and Pilate, weary from dealing with these men, agrees to give them guards
 - The religious leaders take the guards to the tomb, secure it with a seal of some kind, and station the guards there
 - Ironically, these men were worried about someone faking Jesus' resurrection

- But in the end, they only succeeded in making Jesus' actual resurrection all the more believable
- To end today's lesson, we look at the first verse of Chapter 28, where we find our final proof to know that Jesus died on a Thursday, not Friday as tradition holds

Matt. 28:1 Now after the Sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to look at the grave.

- The same women who were present when Jesus' tomb was sealed are the first to return to the tomb after the double Sabbath on Sunday
 - Notice Matthew says they came to the tomb as it began to dawn on the first day of the week
 - The first day of the Jewish week is Sunday just as it still is today
 - Technically, the Sabbath ended at 6 PM the night before, but women didn't venture outside the city walls at night
- So they wait until shortly before dawn on Sunday, and then Mark tells us they visited the tomb to finish the job of embalming Jesus

Mark 16:1 When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, bought spices, so that they might come and anoint Him.

Mark 16:2 Very early on the first day of the week, they came to the tomb when the sun had risen.

- Mark says they first had to buy spices, which they did after the Sabbath ended on Saturday night
- When the weekly Sabbath ends on sundown Saturday evening, shops reopen and Jews go out for the evening shopping
- So the women bought spices in the city Saturday night and then left the city early Sunday morning to visit the tomb
- But when they arrive at the tomb at daybreak, they find it empty
 - We'll study more about Jesus' resurrection next week
 - But for now Matthew 28:1 gives us the final piece of data we need to fix the day of Jesus' death with certainty
 - And not just the day of the week, but we can also fix the specific date in history when Jesus died
- Since we now know that Jesus resurrected prior to daybreak on Sunday, let's focus our timeline on the days of Thursday–Sunday
 - We know the day Jesus resurrected, but the Bible never tells us what day Jesus died...but he does give us the way to figure it out
 - In Matthew 12 Jesus gave us the math to use in calculating the day of His death

Matt. 12:40 for just as JONAH WAS THREE DAYS AND THREE NIGHTS IN THE BELLY OF THE SEA MONSTER, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

- Jesus said He will spend three days and three nights in the grave, referring to periods of daylight and darkness
- So let's count periods of day and night, and to start let's count from Friday, since Friday is traditionally considered the day of Jesus' death
 - We don't count Sunday's daytime since the Gospels tell us Jesus' grave was empty by daybreak
 - So counting the rest of the day and night periods between Friday and Sunday we find there are only two of each period
 - There is simply not enough time for Jesus' prophecy to be true if Jesus died on a Friday
- There are some creative counting methods used by scholars to get around this problem, but it's completely unnecessary
 - The problem is of their own making...there is no reason to assume Jesus died on a Friday
 - There is no Scriptural reason to insist on a Friday death...it's just tradition
- If we move back one day to Thursday, sure enough the problem goes away and everything fits
 - Jesus died on a Thursday, and there are three periods of day and night between Thursday and before daybreak Sunday
 - Furthermore, the double-Sabbath created by the High Sabbath and Weekly Sabbath ensured the tomb remained undisturbed
 - God had designed the calendar on that year to ensure that no one would visit the tomb until Jesus was resurrected
 - This further ensured that the chain of custody was preserved
 - So now with the day of the week fixed by Scripture, it's possible to calculate the exact day of Jesus' death using other data in Scripture
 - We know Jesus born about 2 years before Herod died in 4 BC (Matthew 2:1; 13-16)
 - Luke tells us Jesus began His ministry at age 30 (Luke 3:23)
 - And by counting the number of Passovers in Jesus' ministry we know it lasted 3 years
 - Putting all that together, we can calculate that Jesus must have died in either AD 27 or 28
 - Since Jesus died on a Thursday, we consult astronomical tables to see if one of these years had Passover starting on Wednesday night
 - And sure enough, in AD 27 Passover began on a Wednesday night, April 9th
 - Which means Jesus died the next day, Thursday, April 10, AD 27
 - And interestingly, the 2,000 anniversary of His death will be April 22, 2027

- Should we care about this detail? We should care about getting our interpretation of Scripture correct, and little details like this test our teachability
 - Are we willing to accept the Scripture over tradition and popular opinion?
 - And more importantly, are we willing to change our minds when the Bible challenges our prior understanding on any matter?
 - I have a saying I use a lot: I would rather know the truth than be “right”
 - Being right means stubbornly clinging to my ideas or opinions even when better information comes along
 - It means pridefully thinking I’m right every time I open my mouth because being wrong about anything is more than I can stand
 - I know that feeling too...I like being right...but I would rather know the truth than be right
 - And that means I would rather be corrected by someone who has the truth than to continue in my wrong beliefs
 - Because when I face Jesus, then everything that is true will be known and we will all see where we were wrong
 - And when I get to that moment, I want to be wrong about as few things as possible
 - So better to be shown that I’m wrong here and now so I can be right when I see Jesus