
Attempting the Impossible

“Now on the next day, the day after the preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered together with Pilate, and said, ‘Sir, we remember that when He was still alive that deceiver said, ‘After three days I am to rise again.’ 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.’ Pilate said to them, ‘You have a guard; go, make it as secure as you know how.’ And they went and made the grave secure, and along with the guard they set a seal on the stone” (Matthew 27:62–66).

After wrapping linen cloth around Jesus’ body and covering it with spices, Joseph and Nicodemus buried it in Joseph’s personal tomb late Friday evening. They rolled a huge stone against the entrance to the tomb and returned to enter into the Sabbath and Passover observances. Matthew indicated that two women remained across from the tomb after the two councilors had left (Matthew 27:61). They must have watched the tomb in grief as long as they could before they needed to return to their homes in view of the Sabbath descending upon them.

The next morning, after the Sabbath had fully come, a delegation of chief priests and Pharisees went to Pilate and urged him to provide a special armed guard for the tomb. They argued that Jesus had said that He would rise on the third day. Their only concern, they were implying, was that the tomb might be broken into, the body stolen, and a false rumor circulated that He had risen. Matthew, the only Gospel writer to mention this episode, wrote:

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They intimated to Pilate that they had remembered certain facts about Jesus just in

time to do something about them, the chief of which was that He had made the claim that on the third day He would rise again. They may have thought of His mysterious saying that had baffled them for many months: “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (John 2:19). They may have thought of that other cryptic saying that had angered them and produced in them great animosity: “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” (Matthew 12:40). Perhaps they had heard secondhand of the passion prophecy that He had given to His disciples more than once, the prediction that He would be put to death and He would rise from the dead on the third day (Matthew 16:21; 17:22, 23; 20:18, 19; Mark 8:31; 9:31; Luke 9:22; 18:31–33).

The words “in three days” or “the third day” resounded in the minds of these Jewish leaders. In the beginning stages of the case that was brought against Jesus, these words were often mentioned (Matthew 26:61; Mark 14:58). However, they had been dropped when the false witnesses had failed to agree in their testimony. This phrase had powerfully provoked and annoyed those who prosecuted Jesus. It became one of the taunts they leveled against Him on the cross (Matthew 27:40; Mark 15:29, 30); furthermore, it lived on to haunt them after He was dead (Matthew 27:63). These leaders remembered what Jesus’ disciples had forgotten. They were seized by fear, while His disciples were seized with despair.

Because of this phrase, the chief priests and the Pharisees knew that the body would be secure on the Sabbath, for it was not until the third day that He was supposed to rise again. They also knew that the critical period would be confined to the twenty-four hours from the Sabbath sunset to the Sunday nightfall: that would comprise the third day in which it would be vital to guard the tomb.

The Jewish leaders would not have been so concerned had the body remained in the control of the Roman authorities, but the entire situation had been altered once it had been consigned to Joseph of Arimathea. The easiest solution would have been to employ their own temple police (cf. John 7:32; 18:3); however, it would be far more to their advantage if they could have an armed guard of Roman soldiers. This would make Pilate responsible once more for anything that might happen.

Pilate had already been bullied, coerced, and misused by the Jewish leaders, and, apparently, he was unwilling to put up with any more of their conniving. This was the third time that Pilate had been confronted with a petition from the Jews since he had condemned the Son of Man at their request. First, the chief priests had come and protested against the words of the superscription that had been nailed above His head (John 19:19–22). Their next request took place as the day of the cross drew to a close and they asked him to put the criminals to death by breaking their legs because the Sabbath was approaching (John 19:31). Now, they have come to ask for an armed guard at the tomb. Pilate must have grown tired of their requests. He had already done enough for them. He responded to them, “You have a guard; go, make it as secure as you know how” (Matthew 27:65, 66).

After this charge of Pilate, they sent their own temple guard over to the tomb to keep watch over it. They had their own temple police and could order out a guard for the tomb just as they had furnished a guard for His arrest. Thus Pilate must have dismissed them with a pointed rebuff, and they had to return and provide their own guard.

The hostility of the Jewish leaders did not subside even when the scarred body of Jesus had been laid in that newly-cut tomb. The men who had displayed so much concern to have

the dead removed before sunset on that Friday now showed the same concern to have the tomb patrolled before nightfall on the Sabbath.

With all the evidence before them—the resurrection of Lazarus, the healing of the servant’s ear, the miracles associated with His death—they still were determined to guard the tomb and prevent, if necessary, the resurrection of Jesus. Apparently, it had not dawned upon them that guarding the tomb would be as fruitless as attacking Gibraltar with a popgun.

Guarding the tomb was a waste of time because Jesus, the Son of God, was in that tomb! They were scheming against the Son of Man and did not know that they were aligning themselves against the power of the almighty Christ. No power on earth could prevent Him from rising. All the powers of the earth put together could not interfere with His resurrection.

The most famous sign He had ever given was that He would be in the grave for three days and then He would rise again (Matthew 12:38–40). This action of the Jews to seal the tomb and stand guard over it would soon help to confirm the sign of His deity that they meant to prevent. They had spared no pains to see that the tomb and body were as secure as the hands of men could make them. They had done all that man could do to rule out any interference. They themselves had sealed the stone and placed the guard. It seemed as though they had mastered the whole situation; they had killed the Christ and had made sure that He would stay dead. However, no earthly power could hold Jesus in that grave.

Guarding the tomb was a waste of time because God’s promise revolved around the One in that tomb! Who could prevent God from keeping one of His promises? Nothing is stronger than God’s integrity! The heavens and the earth will pass away but His promises will not pass until they are fulfilled (Matthew 24:35; Mark 13:31; Luke 21:33).

The guard was on duty throughout the night and was still at the tomb when the first streaks of dawn began to appear. A great earthquake shook them, shaking the ground and the tomb. An angel descended. He rolled away the stone from the mouth of the tomb.

The temple police had fallen to the ground in amazement when the Son of Man was ar-

rested in the garden (John 18:6). Now they were seized with alarm as they clutched their spears in the presence of the angel. The text said, "The guards shook for fear of him and became like dead men" (Matthew 28:4). They shook and quaked and fell to the earth as men who had lost all self-control. They fled as soon as they could muster the strength to get on their feet. They ran to the priests and reported what had happened. Matthew wrote: "Some of the guard came into the city and reported to the chief priests all that had happened" (Matthew 28:11b).

Through the ages, the resurrection of Jesus had been planned. God had made a promise to His Son, and Jesus had accepted it: "My flesh also will dwell securely. For You will not abandon my soul to Sheol; nor will You allow Your Holy One to undergo decay" (Psalm 16:9b, 10). God's eternal purpose had been put into place, and no human, earthly, or demonic power could push it aside. His resurrection was going to be the final confirmation of His deity and the major validation of His claims. The tomb housed that promise, and no temple guard could prevent its fulfillment.

Guarding the tomb was a waste of time because God's invincible power rested upon the body that was in the tomb! The frail human guard was raising its fists to the Power who originates all power, the Power who holds the universe in His fingers. Nevertheless, this setting shows the foolish reasoning of puny man. Just think of it: He has braced himself to fight against God.

When Jesus arose, the guard did not know what had happened. With one brief look from a messenger of God, the guard melted in terror. Who would dare to go against God, the One who suspended the earth in space upon nothing and keeps it spinning in its proper orbit by His word?

At the tomb, we see little man aligning himself against the power of God. There was no contest. Egypt tried it and had lost before the battle ever started—so did Babylon, Assyria, and Rome!

At the resurrection, no member of the guard

even raised a spear. One look at the angel and they fell over, paralyzed by fear: "The guards shook for fear of him and became like dead men" (Matthew 28:4). Their attempt to guard the tomb was such a disaster that the Jews had to resort to bribery and deception to cover up the silly attempt that they had made. Matthew reported:

Now while they were on their way, some of the guard came into the city and reported to the chief priests all that had happened. And when they had assembled with the elders and consulted together, they gave a large sum of money to the soldiers, and said, "You are to say, 'His disciples came by night and stole Him away while we were asleep.' And if this should come to the governor's ears, we will win him over and keep you out of trouble." And they took the money and did as they had been instructed; and this story was widely spread among the Jews, and is to this day (Matthew 28:11-15).

The cross and the resurrection divide the world into two groups: believers and unbelievers. The evidence is so convincing and clear-cut that often those who reject it resort to some kind of deceptive cover-up in order to maintain their self-respect. The tragedy of the placing a guard at the tomb was the tragedy of confronting truth, the truest truth that exists, and not only rejecting it, but also paying others to deny it!

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The great transformation of our Lord's resurrection must have occurred in the early morning, not long before daybreak, but while it was yet dark. Mark plainly says that He rose "early on the first day of the week" (Mark 16:9). No eye beheld the change nor saw what took place within the tomb; neither man nor angel was there to see Him rise so that they could tell of the process that took place. The Lord rose in His human body, rising from the stone slab where His body had lain in the stillness of death. By God's power He came to life, and, after placing the grave clothes in order, He passed through the great stone that sealed the tomb.