

# Matthew 27:55-66

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Date: 05 July 2020

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[ 0 : 00 ] And we miss you and hope you can join with us soon. Okay, Matthew 27, verses 57 to 66.

It's great that you've brought your Bibles! It's taken a pandemic, hasn't it, for you to bring your Bibles. It's a good thing. General elections. You know, the day after a general election, the stickers of the party that have lost the election begin to be taken off, don't they?

The posters in people's windows begin to be taken down. Because in a political election, the loser just kind of slides away, don't they?

Nobody celebrates the losing party in an election. And I think we're tempted to feel a little bit like that when we come to this part of Matthew 27. All the hopes that were in Jesus, all the plans that the Jews had, they thought that he would be the great Messiah, but on Good Friday he's put to death.

And it feels like it's all over. And yet we know, don't we, from the Gospel, that actually it isn't all over. And death, wonderfully, is not the end of the story.

[ 1 : 18 ] But I want us to go to that evening, Good Friday evening, and I want us to see, first of all, unwavering devotion to Jesus. Can you see it with me? Verses 55 and 56.

Unwavering devotion to Jesus. Listen to what Matthew writes. I'm in the right passage. Do you see what it says?

Verse 55, There were also many women there, looking on from a distance, who'd followed Jesus from Galilee. Ministering, among whom were Mary Magdalene, and Mary, the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.

So these followers of the crucified are an example of devotion to Jesus. Even when the cause of Jesus appears to be defeated. Even when the cause of Jesus is clearly unpopular in the eyes of the world.

Now these women, they are comparatively minor characters, aren't they, in the Gospels? Minor characters. And yet here, in the midst of the Passion narrative, Matthew wants you to know that these women stuck by Jesus.

[ 2 : 27 ] Even when the main characters, the superstars, the disciples, the apostles have fallen away. The shepherd was struck. Do you remember that? And the sheep have been scattered. But not all the sheep have been scattered.

There are these remarkable sheep that didn't run away. And who were these women? Well, first of all, as we look carefully at the verse, it wasn't that there was just a few of them. It wasn't that there was just a handful.

Look what Matthew says. He says, there were many women. But there are three in particular that he names. Doubtless, they were known to Matthew and the church of his day.

There's Mary Magdalene. There's Mary, the mother of James and Joseph. And there's the mother of the sons of Zebedee. You remember that last lady? She is the lady that pestered Jesus back in chapter 20 and said, when you come into your kingdom, let one of my sons sit on the right hand and the other on the left hand.

And these women show their devotion to Jesus. Look what it says about them. It says, in the end of verse 55, they followed Jesus.

[ 3 : 34 ] That is a basic statement of what a Christian is, of what a disciple is. What is a Christian? It is somebody who follows Jesus, who follows the crucified.

The same verb is used in the 12 disciples. Do you remember, they left all and they followed him.

And so there's neither male nor female when it comes to the benefits of redemption or discipleship. It says they followed him from Galilee. That is, they left home. And for these past several months, they've followed him. It's a considerable sacrifice for these women to make. It's a sacrifice of time

and resources.

They followed Jesus and they ministered to him. Luke 8 verse 2 says that these women actually were quite wealthy and they gave and supported Jesus and the disciples financially.

They gave resources to supply Jesus and the disciples. And so in other ways, they showed their following Jesus in practical ways. They show their love for Jesus, don't they, in this verse, by looking on from afar.

[ 4 : 42 ] It's probably as close as they can get to the cross. But there is this unwavering devotion. Unwavering devotion, which is shown by the women, but not by Jesus' closest disciples.

Where are they? Where are they to be found? We don't know. In Calvary, in John 19:25, he tells us that John was there near the cross.

But all the rest of them have run. Matthew mentions, doesn't he, only these women. These women, they stand forever as an unwavering and an enduring devotion to Jesus.

When all the others have abandoned him, they remain standing to the end. When everyone else has left the tomb a little bit later on, the guards are positioned, but in verse 66, there's this lovely vigil of these women.

Mary Magdalene was there. And the other Mary, sitting opposite the tomb, unwavering devotion. Now what does this mean to you and I? You will know if you've read kind of modern historical and theological circles, they make an awful lot of these women.

[ 6 : 04 ] And they want to assign to these women and say, well, here they are given an apostolic authority. Here they are, they are appointed preachers of the gospel. And you'll find that an awful lot is made of Mary Magdalene.

It's amazing to me the amount of biography that people are able to dredge up about Mary Magdalene. Amazing tales. In the Bible, we're told, first of all, that she drove out seven demons. In Mark 16, verse 9. And the second thing we learn is that she came from Magdala. That's all we know about her. That's it. That hasn't stopped, does it?

Sensational mythology building up around her. And so if you've seen the Da Vinci Code, it's coming, isn't it, to the West End. You'll know that somehow she ends up in France, she marries Jesus and they have children.

I've just ruined the book and the play for you. But that is what the Da Vinci Code is about. And all this kind of mythology but what matters to us is what does the Bible actually say?

[ 7 : 05 ] It's not very glamorous to the world, is it? But it is glorious in God's eyes. And it implies that they followed Jesus. And that's the glorious thing about Mary Magdalene.

She was a follower of Jesus to the very end. And these women, they work behind the scenes of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem.

They use their gifts to support Jesus' ministry. And they show their unwavering devotion to the Lord. And it is glorious because it is so ordinary.

It is so ordinary. They follow Jesus, they serve Jesus to the end, and that is what God noticed. And that is what set them apart in God's sight.

And that earns them a mention in the passages, in the passion narratives of Scripture. What is it that pleases God? What is it that prompts God to make mention of you before the angels?

[ 8 : 07 ] It's not the great exploits that you perform. It's not your popularity. It's not the famous names that you might be able to drop in your conversation.

But it's that you know and follow and serve his son. Listen to what God says through Jeremiah. He says this, Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom.

Let not the mighty man glory in his might. Let not the rich man glory in his riches. But let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows that I am the Lord.

And so when God engages in name dropping, he loves to mention nobodies. Nobodies like Mary, the mother of James and John.

Who was she? She was a mum and she followed Jesus. That's it. And it is glorious and it is wonderful.

[ 9 : 08 ] And God drops her name and that is because in God's economy the last are first and the first are last. And so think, how many great ancient emperors aren't even mentioned in the Bible?

Giants of world civilization that aren't even given a footnote but devoted servants of Jesus are remembered by name. Here is the glory of the ordinary.

The ordinary Christian life. The twelve disciples, they've got a glamorous ministry. They are up front. They're up front and centre. They are the highest profile.

They are celebrities of the early church. But don't forget, it would not even have been possible without the faithful and unsung and often unnoticed ministry of these women travelling along with them, supplying their needs, financially providing for them.

But God notices. And God notices and he puts it forever on record at this critical moment in the gospel. The record of the death and the burial of Jesus.

[ 10 : 18 ] And they're not only given an honourable mention in passing, they are the unique hand-picked, God's hand-picked star witnesses to the resurrection of his son.

How about that? God honours those who honour him. And so we face the battle, don't we, Christian man or woman or boy or girl, that you don't value your usefulness as a disciple by how prominent you may be in the kingdom.

Because in the kingdom we are all servants, we use our different gifts to follow the same king. And not one of us, not one of God's children will miss his or her award.

He will make sure of it. God takes pleasure in his faithful and wavering Christian devotion to his divine son.

And so you toil away in the home or the office. You quietly encourage the saints behind the scenes. You persevere in the fight against stubborn sins.

[ 11 : 33 ] You serve families. You change nappies. And all of that is known to God. And he sees that.

And he is pleased. And all of it is done with an eye of unwavering devotion to Jesus. Now unwavering devotion to Jesus, let's see secondly the utmost respect for Jesus.

So back in Deuteronomy 21, in the Jewish law it said that anyone who was crucified on a cross, who was hung up on a tree, needed to be taken down, their body taken down, by sundown.

But the Romans, they weren't bothered by that. They would leave people on the cross for days to rot on the tree or they would bury them in a mass grave at the site of the execution.

It's a shameful end for the saviour. But there's one man in Jerusalem, one man who's got the utmost respect for Jesus and one man who's got sufficient influence to prevent this indignity from happening.

[ 12 : 35 ] And once again, he's a minor character, isn't he, in the story? But he is God's man of the hour and Joseph Barimathea. He is an example to you and I of honouring the saviour.

Honouring the saviour at great personal cost and liability. What do we know about Joseph Barimathea? Well, not very much to be honest. Verse 57 tells us he was a rich man and he was from Barimathea and he was called Joseph and he was a disciple of Jesus.

And we could learn that he was wealthy from verse 60. You're not able to kind of get a new tomb in Jerusalem. They don't come cheap. Luke in his account tells us that he was a council member.

He was part of the Jewish ruling Sanhedrin. And that he was a good and he was a just man and he had not consented to their decision and to what they had done to Jesus. This man is a member of the elite.

He's a member of the Sanhedrin and yet he was a disciple a follower of Jesus. And that was a very dangerous thing to be and it was especially a dangerous thing to be if you were a member of that Jewish ruling council.

[ 13 : 51 ] But here is a man that doesn't lack backbone and doesn't lack courage. Look at verse 58. He goes to Pilate and he asks for the body of Jesus.

He's got sufficient influence that Pilate commands the body to be given to him. And so here is a man who acts in absolute defiance of the clear consensus of the council.

He stands alone. and he makes a startling request of Pilate and it is motivated by the utmost respect for Jesus' dignity.

It's a costly decision. It would have made his former associates, his bitterest enemies. And it's a great reminder to you and I that to publicly identify with the disgraced and humiliated king of the Jews may destroy your reputation.

And in this case it may well have been political suicide. To make a public stand on matters pertaining to the truth of God's word.

[ 14 : 59 ] To stand for God's truth and the cause of Christ and his righteousness maybe in work or in your family or in school. And you know it would be so costly.

And we are called upon by God to step out publicly and to identify with Christ. To be loyal to him. You can imagine, can't you, what the columnists and the media would call Joseph. The comments on Twitter and Insta. How unpatriotic. How undignified. How backward. How dishonorable.

You see, if you're going to show the utmost respect for Jesus you are going to invite the utmost disrespect from the world. And that is the way it was and that is the way it is. It's the way it always will be. But isn't Jesus worth it? Jesus, Jesus, the apparently failed candidate for king in the eyes of the world.

[16:13] An object of utmost ridicule, dying in disgrace, the laughter of the world in his years. But for Joseph, even in his death, Jesus is worthy of utmost respect.

He's honored by God. He becomes Jesus' personal funeral director. And what did that involve? It says fairly carefully, literally, that when Joseph had taken the body, it's really careful language how he treated and respected the body of Jesus.

and loved it. He wrapped it in a clean linen cloth. He laid the body in his tomb which he'd hewn out of the rock.

And he rolled a large stone against the door of the tomb and departed. It was unpleasant work. It was difficult work. It was despised work. But in showing the utmost respect for his Lord, Joseph becomes the key man, doesn't he?

In this final aspect of our Lord's humiliation is burial. There's simply no way is there that Peter or James or John could have waltzed into Pilate's office and said, could we have the body?

[17:26] They could never have sauntered in there, the disciples, and requested such a favor. But it took a prominent member of the Jewish council who could do it and had the guts to do it.

And again, all of this is in the plan of God. So do you remember Isaiah 53? In verse 10, his grave was assigned with the wicked. He was crucified, wasn't he, with the wicked.

And yet, he was with a rich man in his death because he'd done no violence nor was there any deceit in his mouth. And so Jesus' body by right should have been flung onto the mass grave with the other corpses of crucified criminals, left in a heap with other wicked men and yet the prophet says God will sovereignly intervene by means of a rich man.

Joseph Arimathea, and this intervention by God is making a theological point that Jesus is innocent. There's no deceit found in his mouth. Jesus of Nazareth is worthy of the utmost respect, not the indignity of a mass grave.

But it also helps us with a practical point, isn't it? How would Jesus, how else could it be verified that Jesus of Nazareth rose bodily from the dead if he'd not been buried in a specific identifiable new tomb?

[18:57] Owned by a specific well-known figure in the community with several witnesses. And so it is, we are ready for the resurrection.

Joseph's tomb becomes the staging post for the most miraculous miracle in all of history. Christ bodily raising from the dead. And Joseph gives Jesus his very own tomb for a very dignified burial. Jesus didn't need it for long. It was only on loan. And Jesus' grieve is temporary and so is ours if we are in Christ.

As I want you to think as we finish that Jesus lay in Joseph's tomb. Jesus lay in Joseph's place. Jesus lay in a grieve of Joseph's own making. A grave that Joseph had hewn out of the stone.

[20:06] Joseph had prepared his own grave. It had his own name on it. He was going there someday but Jesus lay in his grave instead.

dead. And so even in this final step of humiliation of our Lord as our substitute just as he was in his sufferings and in his death in his burial!

Jesus is taking your place. It's not that the mortal remains of Joseph and Arimathea are still kind of lying somewhere out there in Palestine but in a metaphorical sense you have prepared a grave for yourself.

Your sins have hewn it out and written the epitaph but if Jesus has laid in your grave if Jesus has tasted death's sting on your behalf in your place you don't need to be afraid of dying anymore.

And that is such good news isn't it because for the last three to four months what have we seen in our culture? We've seen a culture terrified of dying. And yet because of Christ's sufferings and death and his burial you who are in Christ we must not be terrified of dying.

[ 21 : 44 ] He's tasted death's sting. The German reformer Usainus writes this Jesus would be buried so that we might not be terrified in view of the grave but that we might know that he has sanctified our graves by his own burial so that they are no longer graves to us but bed chambers and resting places in which we may peacefully and quietly repose until we are again raised to life. and so there's unwavering devotion to Jesus and there's utmost respect for Jesus and I noticed as I was preparing do you notice the cast around the cross you've got a cohort of Roman soldiers you've got a group of relatively unknown Galilean women and you've got a wealthy member of the Jewish aristocracy and I think it's hard to think of a more diverse cross section of society at that time and all of them together were united as followers of the crucified and even though his cause seemed finished and defeated and it seemed final as we'll see he is not in the grave anymore and he is risen and so Christ says to all and to every one of us take up your cross and follow me and we may not consider the cost of doing that too high but may we be willing to bear his shame and to be followers of the crucified let's pray together