

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP STUDY OF THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW – PART TWENTY-EIGHT

The religious leaders had decided. Jesus must die. He had dared to claim to be the Christ, the Son of God. But they had one remaining problem. Only the Roman rulers had the authority to execute the offender. How would they persuade Pilate, the Roman governor, to carry out their sentence?(27:1,2)

First they had to deal with another problem. Judas, the traitor, who had sold his best friend for 30 pieces of silver, the price of a slave, felt remorse when he saw the consequence of his action and tried to return the money. Remorse or regret is a long way from true repentance.(II Cor.7:8-11) Repentance leads to life.(Acts 11:18) Remorse leads to death, as for Judas it led to suicide when his attempt to put right the wrong he had done failed. The chief priests also tried to escape responsibility by using the returned money for a good cause, a cemetery for strangers, instead of accepting it themselves. Unwittingly they had fulfilled yet another of Zechariah's prophecies.(Zech.11:12,13) Now they were ready to manipulate the governor.(27:3-10)

Just as Jesus when He stood before the chief priests had acknowledged His identity and His ministry but remained silent in the face of false accusations, so He did again before Pilate. Pilate realised this prisoner was different from any other he had ever tried. He desperately sought to evade his responsibility to be an honest judge. Recognising the motives of the religious leaders, Pilate hoped to have the crowd make the decision he should have made to release Jesus. He invoked the custom of an amnesty for one prisoner on this special occasion. Even his wife intervened on Jesus' behalf because of a God-given warning in a dream. Faced with the choice of Barabbas, a notorious rebel and murderer,(Lk.23:19) and Jesus, their rightful King, the crowds were persuaded to shout for the death of Jesus. After trying one more time to convince the crowd that Jesus was innocent, Pilate gave in but disclaimed responsibility by washing his hands in public. The mob then took the blame on themselves, on behalf of all of us. Pilate showed once more that he was both a coward and a bully,(Lk.13:1-3) by having the innocent prisoner publicly beaten.(27:11-26)

A group of Roman soldiers, who almost certainly had no idea who Jesus was, and why He was to be crucified, did as those who have unchecked power without ethical leadership so often do, and abused their prisoner. They mockingly crowned Him with thorns and pretended to worship Him to impress their 600 man audience. In the present day they would probably have videoed the whole process.(27:27-31)

A push from a Roman soldier changed a black man, Simon of Cyrene, from a curious onlooker to a deeply involved participant. Carrying Jesus' cross must have been his first step to learning how Jesus was to carry his sin on the very same cross. He later became a leading Bible teacher in Antioch.(Acts 13:1) Rufus, one of his sons, would be one of Paul's valued co-workers.(Mk.15:21; Rom.16:13) At Golgotha, Jesus declined the offered pain relief,(Ps.69:21) and was nailed to the cross. He watched as soldiers gambled for His clothes unaware that they were fulfilling another Psalm.(Ps.22:18) One by one a succession of people abused Him. First there were Roman soldiers with their sign, 'Jesus, the King of the Jews'. Then there were the robbers who both, for the moment, insulted Him. One would later change his mind.(Lk.23:39-43) Passers-by challenged Him to prove His claim to be the Son of God by getting off the cross. The chief priests and their followers came to gloat with the same challenge. What an over whelming defeat for Jesus it must have seemed!(27:32-44)

At midday it suddenly became like midnight as the prophet Joel had warned.(Joel 2:31) At 3pm Jesus asked His Father a question with the words that open Ps.22, why had He been forsaken by God? As Jesus bore the sin of the world, God who cannot look at sin, withdrew His Spirit. Almost certainly this, not the physical pain, was Jesus' greatest suffering. Some

onlookers whose Aramaic or hearing was weak thought He was calling for Elijah.(Mal.4:5) Again they unconsciously fulfilled Ps.69:21. The moment had come for the Son of God to leave the earth which He willingly did, giving up His life, completing the purpose for which He came. More dramatic natural events signalled how important this moment was. An earthquake shook the ground and ripped the temple curtain showing that God had opened the way for all to come into His presence. Not only were tombs broken open but some dead believers were resurrected to the intense surprise of those who had known them. Matthew's first record of a new believer after the crucifixion was of a Roman centurion, presumably the very one who had been in charge of the execution squad. Finally there was the sad little group of women who had followed Him and sought to care for Him. Three were identified, Mary Magdalene, who had been demon possessed,(Mk.16:9) Mary, Jesus' mother, and the mother of James and John who had earlier pushed for her sons' promotion.(Matt.20:20; 27:45-56)

Three friends did what they could to give Him a decent burial. Joseph of Arimathea, a wealthy believer, provided his own tomb, not realising for how short a time it would be occupied. The two Mary's came to the graveside to mourn. What else could they do?(27:57-61)

Only one group of people had taken Jesus' promise of resurrection seriously, His enemies! To make quite sure His disciples did not fake a fulfilment of His promise they sought Pilate's assistance. They were given a guard to watch the tomb and permission to seal it, thus unwittingly providing further compelling evidence of His resurrection three days later.(27:62-66)

The final chapter described the world changing climax of the story.

28:1 Q.1 How can we account for the seeming differences in the accounts of who came to the tomb and when?(Mk.16:1,2; Lk.24:1-10; Jn.20:1) How does this illustrate the two ways we can respond to apparent inconsistencies in the Bible?

28:2-10 Q.2 Whom did the women meet and what were they told? Why were they, not the apostles, chosen as the first messengers of the resurrection? Why were they told first to come and see before they went to tell? How is the same instruction relevant to us today?

28:11-15 Q.3 What happened to the guards, first at the tomb, and then subsequently? How did a scheme intended to prevent the resurrection being believable become a powerful testimony to its truth? What does this story show us about the thinking processes of those who refuse the truth?

28:16-20 Q.4 At which mountain in Galilee might Jesus have met His disciples? What special significance could that meeting place have had? What were the reactions of the disciples when they did meet Jesus? Why might their reactions have been so mixed? What final instruction did the King give to His followers? Why would His authority be so important in carrying out His plan? What was His final promise which would make the plan work? How is knowing this still the secret?