

NOON BIBLE STUDY: MATTHEW 28

Matthew 28:1-10 - He Is Not Here. He Is Risen, Just As He Said

This is quite the early morning wake up call! Earth quakes, angelic stone moves and trembling soldiers all color the record of the first Easter Sunday. Two of the women who saw Jesus die and saw him buried are first to see the tomb empty and later see their Lord alive again!

After hearing instructions from the angel, at some point in the women's trip back to the male disciples, Jesus meets them and repeats the angel's message, asking the women to tell his disciples this message: "I've risen from the dead and I'm going back to Galilee where I will meet them." So the disciples head back to Galilee where they will meet Jesus again.

Galilee is where everything started (3:13), and they are heading back there because this exciting adventure is not over! Matthew intentionally brings the story full circle. Jesus began his public ministry in Galilee (4:12-17). He called his disciples there. He preached the kingdom there. Now the risen king gathers them there to launch the worldwide mission.

Matthew 28:11-15 - Guards Report To Chief Priests & Cover-Up Begins

While the disciples head to Galilee with fear and excitement, the shocked soldiers head to the chief priests to tell them what they had seen and heard. The religious leaders craft a story for the soldiers which would give an alibi for the empty tomb: "they were sleeping on the job and the disciples came and stole Jesus' body." This wouldn't have reflected favorably on these soldiers from a job performance point of view, so the priests also say they will deal with the governor if they get in trouble. And then the priests give the soldiers a "large sum of money" which likely was the only reason they were willing to agree to tell people that they were asleep at their post and were foiled by some tiptoeing fisherman who were able to move a sepulcher stone and remove a body without anyone noticing till morning.

Matthew 28:16-20 - Jesus Appears To Disciples, Gives Their Mission

v. 17 - Some worshipped. Some doubted. "Some were doubtful" (1365b, διστάζω *distazo*) doesn't suggest outright rejection, but hesitation as some struggled to grasp what they were seeing. (it's the same word used when Peter started to sink when walking on the water, Matthew 14:31). And yet, Jesus doesn't rebuke them or postpone their mission, he gives the Great Commission to disciples who are still learning to fully comprehend the magnitude of the resurrection.

Some important truths from these final verses:

1 - The resurrected Jesus has been given “all authority in heaven and on earth” which echoes the Son of Man passages from Daniel 7 that we have referenced many times. Early in Matthew's Gospel, Satan tempted Jesus with a shortcut to authority by offering him the kingdoms of the world in exchange for worship (Matthew 4:8-10). Jesus refused, choosing faithful obedience to his Father instead. Now, after the cross and resurrection, the Father gives Jesus what Satan could never truly give.

2 - He is commissioning his disciples to make more disciples. These disciples should be baptized (by highest spiritual authority - the name (authority) of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit”) and then taught to observe all that Jesus has commanded - much of which we have learned as we read Matthew’s account.

3 - Jesus will be with them always, even to the end of the age. Matthew doesn’t elaborate here, but we know from the other accounts that through the Holy Spirit, Jesus would be present with and working through the disciples/church. John 14-16 tells us that it was advantageous for Jesus to leave because with the coming of the Holy Spirit, Jesus would be with each of his disciples wherever they would be rather than just one place at a time. Matthew 1 started with an emphatic message to the world that “God is with us” through the birth of his Son (1:23). And now Jesus is telling us that even after his resurrection, we aren’t abandoned, for he will be “with us” till the end of the age (28:20)

So as Matthew concludes his biography of Jesus he packs a punch - Jesus has been given all authority, so go and make disciples, and he’ll be with you all the way.

Matthew’s chapter on the resurrection of Jesus is very different from the chapters he gave us on the trial, suffering and death of Jesus. They were long and detailed, Matthew 28 seems quick and lacking the rich detail of the previous chapters and even Luke’s biography account of the resurrection and ascension. But if we look a little closer, we will find a number of things which speak loudly on the truth of this chapter, without needing to use a bunch of words. Michael Green highlights 6 in his commentary on Matthew (The Message of Matthew: The Kingdom of Heaven, The Bible Speaks Today):

1 - The female witnesses - as we considered in Matthew 27, the fact that women are prominently featured as eyewitnesses communicates that Matthew is simply recording what actually happened, rather than creating some air-tight mythological account to win the masses.

2 - the empty tomb - if you want to prove that Jesus isn’t alive, just go back and look at the tomb he was buried in, which just happened to be guarded by members of the Roman military. If you want to say that Jesus was alive again in some sort of mystical-spiritual-warm-fuzzy-feeling way, the body would remain in the tomb and the testimony would be based solely on the disciples enthusiasm. But, Jesus actually came back to life and walked out of the tomb, thus no body remained. Professor C. H. Dodd put it: ‘When they said, “He rose from the dead”, they took it for granted that his body was no longer in the tomb; if the tomb had been

visited it would have been found empty. The Gospels supplement this by saying that it was visited and it was empty.’ (C. H. Dodd, “The Founder of Christianity” p. 166.)

3 - resurrection appearances - Matthew 28 alone records multiple people who saw and interacted with Jesus. Their encounters don’t happen years later, but right after his resurrection and their words are what fueled the spread of Christianity. Again, not “I feel Jesus alive in my heart” but, “I saw him, spoke with him, ate with him, touched him” (oh, and I saw him die and be buried too...)

4 - transformed lives - the account of history will give countless instances of people’s lives being changed because of Jesus Christ and the gospel. Christianity is not based on emotion, feelings or life principles that will help you find self-improvement if you stick with it - it is based on an historical fact. Jesus Christ died and was raised by God to life again - and the power of the name of Jesus (who is alive), has changed a life.

“The two Marys had approached the tomb with deep mourning for a dead friend and teacher. They returned full of awe and an indestructible joy to tell the others about Jesus, who had both risen from the grave and greeted them...James and John, those ‘sons of thunder’, became apostles of love. Simon Peter, that vacillating leader, became the rock-like man on whose fearless witness the early church was built. The eleven were no more a frightened rabble; they became an apostolic task force.” (Ibid, page 315-316)

5 - The fulfilled predictions - we have seen throughout the gospel of Matthew that Jesus foretold his disciples that he would die and rise from the dead (16:21, 17:23, 20:19). Even the religious leaders who opposed and killed Jesus knew this was something he had said (27:64). And so when the angel announces to the women that Jesus isn’t in the tomb, it makes sense why he would say: He is not here, for He has risen, ***just as He said***” (28:6). The disciples and early missionaries of the church will often reference this as support for their announcement, for it confirms Jesus’ prophetic fulfillment and prophetic office. It’s not that big of a deal to tell your followers that you’re going to die for your cause, but to also say you will come back to life...that is either going to happen or not. And if it does, that’s a pretty big deal.

6 - Spread of the gospel and growth of the church - Jesus’ final words in Matthew are the call for all of his followers to go and spread the message and make more disciples. And that is exactly what they did! And the core of their announcement was not good advice or good vibes, it was good NEWS - the announcement of something that had happened, is happening and will happen in the future - all centered on the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is what the church proclaimed, this is what the church died for, and this is what the church was fueled by - what Jesus had said was true and as a result, who Jesus said he was, was true too. And if he really was the Messiah, we better go tell the world. You couldn’t talk them out of this because their fuel wasn’t feelings, but facts they had seen and experienced. They could even die for this truth because they knew that because Jesus came back to life, they would too! That’s an unstoppable combination.

Based on this news, a small group of Jewish believers centered in Galilee and Judea launched the greatest, most enduring, and most far reaching movement in history. Lies can be compelling, but they lack the enduring power of truth, and truth based on historical events and not just feelings. That is what Jesus' movement is founded on - the truth that the one who died was raised from the dead and exalted as God's anointed king.

Matthew began his Gospel by introducing us to Jesus the Messiah, Israel's promised King. He closes it by showing us that this King now possesses all authority in heaven and on earth. The resurrection isn't simply proof that Jesus is alive; it is God's public declaration that his Anointed King now reigns. And because the King reigns, his followers are sent to announce his kingdom to the nations.

Maybe that's why Matthew 28 seems quick and almost rushed? Maybe Matthew isn't interested in sitting outside the tomb chatting about the time of day it was, what color the flowers were in the garden, how tall the soldiers were compared to the angel... Maybe Matthew has already started thinking about where else he needs to go and what else he needs to do. Maybe the truth of his final chapter was so important to him, and to the world, that he wanted to get busy telling everyone the good news from the graveyard. Jesus said "go and make disciples" and Matthew believed him and obeyed him.

Not a bad idea.