

THE SOLDIERS WHO FAINTED ON DUTY

And, behold, there was a great earthquake: for the angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat upon it. His countenance was like lightning, and his raiment white as snow: And for fear of him the keepers did shake, and became as dead men. (Matt. 28:2-4)

How close to the kingdom of God can a man be and yet fail to obtain admittance? John Bunyan believed it was possible to reach the gate of heaven and still be rejected. He described the man who bypassed the cross of Calvary, and by climbing over a wall, took a short cut to the highway that led to the Celestial City. When he reached the end of his journey, he was appalled to discover he had made the greatest mistake of his life. The writers of the Gospels would endorse that account, for they spoke of Judas, who was a companion of Jesus for three memorable years, but his career terminated at the end of a rope. Matthew mentions a rich young ruler who became concerned about the possibility of inheriting eternal life. Unfortunately, when it appeared the cost was too great to pay, he left the Savior and went away grieved because he had great possessions. One of the most challenging stones relates to the soldiers who were commissioned to guard the tomb of Jesus. How near they came to the kingdom of Christ may never be known, but seeking answers to some important questions may help in understanding what happened on the first Easter morning.

How Much Did the Soldiers Care?

Probably not very much. Romans had superintended the crucifixion of the Lord, and it may be safe to assume some, if not all, were commanded to guard His tomb. The prospect of leaving their beds in the garrison to remain all night in a drafty garden was not attractive. Those disgruntled men considered the fears of the Jews to be unjustified. Why should any man risk his life to rob a grave? If the disciples of the

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dead man had failed to help their leader when He was alive, they would hardly attempt anything when He no longer existed! The soldiers lit a fire in the garden and at intervals during the night changed sentries so that everybody could share the warmth. They were placed at strategic places throughout the area and were ready to repel invaders, but it all appeared to be senseless. Perhaps those soldiers had witnessed the supernatural phenomena surrounding the man's death, which had terrified the crowd, and if they were superstitious might have become increasingly concerned. They knew Jesus was a notable Jew who had infuriated the Sanhedrin, but He was now dead and apparently helpless. The men who were temporarily off duty placed wood on the fire and probably closed their eyes.

They resemble the citizens of the modern world. The amazing power of the gospel has been experienced in all countries, but there remain millions of people who could not care less about the Son of God. They have heard the message of the man from Galilee, of His death and resurrection, but like the rich young ruler are more interested in material prosperity. If such people are to be won for the kingdom of Christ, an intervention from heaven will be necessary. The Spirit of God must make some impression upon their complacent hearts.

How Much Did the Soldiers Know?

"The angel of the Lord descended from heaven... His countenance was like lightning, and his raiment white as snow." It is not known at

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what hour the Lord actually rose from the dead; probably it was approaching dawn when the angelic messenger sat upon the stone. The guards were awaiting relief from their task, while others who had completed their watch might have been sleeping when the earth began to shake. As buildings swayed and the earth split, the terrified soldiers trembled. Then suddenly they saw the angel sitting outside the tomb. It is written that he came and rolled back the stone, but whether this was done by his touch or whether the angel used the strength of the earthquake is not known. Yet even the soldiers knew that something unusual was taking place. Unbelievers can argue that since an earthquake occurred when Jesus was crucified, this one was merely an aftershock. Yet all believers know that natural phenomena cannot explain why the sun had apparently ceased to shine and the city had shaken at the time of the crucifixion and again that Easter morning as if held by an omnipotent hand (see Matt. 27:45-51).

The soldiers only saw the angel for a moment, but the vision was

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unforgettable. Romans believed in many deities, but none of these ever sent an angel to converse with men and women. If those military men heard the testimony of their centurion, "Truly, this was the Son of God" (Matt. 27:54), they would have been increasingly anxious. Could it be that a god was about to avenge the death of his child? The Lord has roundabout ways by which to reach people, and all should be watchful, for in a moment they could be presented with their greatest opportunity to learn eternal truth.

How Much Did the Soldiers Receive?

The men were amazed when they saw the stone had been rolled away. The tomb was empty, and the angel had disappeared. They remembered the splendor of the heavenly visitor. Had they been dreaming, or had the followers of Jesus stolen away the body of their leader? Then one of their number suggested the necessity of reporting to the Jewish authorities, and a deputation was appointed for that purpose: "Behold, some of the watch came into the city, and shewed unto the chief priests all the things that were done. And when they were assembled with the elders, and had taken counsel, they gave large money unto the soldiers, saying, Say ye, His disciples came by night, and stole him away while we slept. . . So they took the money, and did as they were taught" (Matt. 28:11-13, 15a).

It should be remembered that when Matthew wrote his gospel, the lie told by the soldiers was still being believed. Nearly thirty years after the resurrection of Christ, the apostle wrote, ". . . and this saying is commonly reported among the Jews until this day." It was amazing that intelligent people could believe the preposterous falsehood, and yet, after two thousand years, many refuse to believe that Christ rose from the dead. The Jews had given thirty pieces of silver to Judas, but it cost much more to silence the soldiers. The term large money should be translated sufficient money, for whatever was given was shared among the soldiers whose silence was purchased. It has always been expensive when people reject Christ. The leaders of the nation possibly used money taken from the treasury or other temple funds to quiet the agitated guards, but whatever was paid never compensated for the loss of their souls.

When sentries were caught sleeping on duty, they were executed; slumber threatened the safety of their comrades. If for no other reason, the idea that they should confess to an unpardonable deed was ludicrous. Even the commanders were susceptible to bribes. If an inquiry were made, all scruples could be overcome; the Jews would silence the

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officials. Possibly this was done, but nothing could prevent the spread

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of the gospel.

How Much Did the Soldiers Lie?

When those men who lied stand before God, they will be required to explain their disgusting conduct. Will the accused men remain silent or insist they were poorly paid men who were coerced into compliance by those in authority? They might remember the increasing enthusiasm of the crowds who desired news concerning Jesus and who were willing to pay for increased information. Those unfortunate soldiers had to choose between honor and avarice, peace of mind and plenty of money; but as their purses filled, their souls emptied. Maybe they told lies so often that ultimately they believed they were speaking the truth. Is it possible to lull a conscience to sleep, to continue evil actions until one is beyond redemption?

The men who were commissioned to guard the tomb of the Lord remind everybody of the choice enforced upon all people. Increased knowledge leads to greater accountability. No man can answer for what is unknown, but when his mind is enlightened, God is justified in expecting him to be answerable for his conduct. The soldiers could have spoken the truth, but alas, they buried their honor in a grave of greed. Some people desire wealth, popularity, illicit pleasure with evil associates, and many other things. When confronted and challenged by the claims of God, a choice is inevitable. To please others, people can refuse to do what is right, and upon an altar of personal pleasure may sacrifice their souls. Jesus said, "For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" (Mark 8:36).

How Much Did the Soldiers Lose?

They lost their freedom due to a relentless conscience. Guilt is the worst companion in the world. It is a perpetual thorn in the flesh, the guarantee that happiness will always be elusive. However, among the chief benefits of enjoying fellowship with the Savior is His promise that our sins have not only been forgiven—they are forgotten (see Jer. 31:34). It is not known how often the men were required to lie about the events in the garden, but it is safe to assume that in a world where Christianity was making enormous progress, multitudes of people desired to know more of the events being distorted by the leaders of the Jewish nation. As the lies were repeated, the men became entangled with their falsehoods. There was no peace for the wicked.

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They lost their chance of favor from the risen Christ. If they had lingered to worship at the tomb, their lives would have been enriched immeasurably. Their centurion had discovered treasure of incalculable worth; his testimony could never be forgotten. Judas betrayed the Lord; had they betrayed themselves? The money could not purchase happiness; it could only obtain transient things.

Nobody, neither in heaven nor upon earth, admires a liar. Judas hurt the Lord, but the men at the tomb hurt themselves and lost their chance to find peace at the feet of Jesus. They were alone, helpless, and despised by decent people. Did those men ever feel remorse for their shameful deeds? The mercy of the Lord embraces the world, and had they repented of their deeds, Christians everywhere would have welcomed them into the family of God.

They lost their chance of fellowship in the church. After serving for a specified period of time, Roman soldiers returned to their homeland to discover the message of Christ had preceded their arrival. The church, which had been established in the imperial city, was a thriving center of evangelism, and saints could be found even in Caesar's household. Within that ever widening circle of fellowship and happiness, the guards could have found peace. It is not known whether any of those untruthful men ever became Christians, but it is difficult to escape the conclusion

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that if they did, some mention would have been made concerning that fact. The earliest preachers, following the example set by Paul, tried to convince skeptical hearers that Christ had indeed risen from the dead. The stirring testimony of any of those soldiers would have been more effective than any sermon.

It has often been claimed that time changes things, but that only applies to certain areas of life. Right and wrong, white and black, goodness and evil remain changeless, and that is particularly true regarding the kingdom of God. Men can be honorable and wise and yield themselves to Christ, or by ignoring facts can be self-indulgent until their degradation is complete.

What will you do with Jesus?

Neutral you cannot be:

Some day your heart will be asking:

What will He do with me?

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