

THE BAPTIST HOUR

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Senseless Sentinels

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SENSELESS SENTINELS

If you were asked to select the most pitiful scene found in the aftermath of the crucifixion, which would be your choice? Would it be the lifeless body of Jesus taken from the cross? Or the caravan of sadness and silence which bore His body to the tomb? Or the weeping women sitting quiet and forlorn in their waiting watch of love? Or the apostles scattered and in shame, their hopes shattered, their souls plunged into an abyss of remorse and grief? Which would you choose?

I think that I would select the little band of Roman soldiers standing guard before the sealed tomb. They were not there by choice. They were simply obeying orders. They were helpless pawns on the chessboard of history. They were but unwitting tin soldiers caught in the no-man's-land of the conflict between good and evil, between God and Satan.

Nameless are they, with no identity in the annals of men by which to declare their glory or shame. Who were they anyway? Perhaps a blond German youth, a raw recruit far from home, disillusioned, homesick for mother, sweetheart, or familiar faces and youthful haunts. Maybe a battle scarred veteran from Spain, whose many encounters with death had hardened him to regard life, even this One, as cheap. Or a mercenary from Gaul who would do anything for a price. We will never know.

What were they thinking? Or were they thinking? Bored would probably be a better word. Orders are orders. The tomb is sealed. The guard is set. Nothing to do but wait.

But one thing we do know. Never did soldiers have so hopeless an assignment. To keep Jesus in the tomb! It would be to laugh, were it not so tragic. Nameless immortals? "Senseless sentinels" would be a better word.

For, unknown to them, what seemed to be a routine assignment was soon to witness the greatest event in the history of the world. Unknown to them even now two angels, not twelve

legions, just two angels, were winging their way from the realms of glory to proclaim, "He is not here: for he is risen . . ." (Matt. 28:6)

Three affirmations tell the story of the "senseless sentinels." None of them was of their doing. Yet they were a party to each of them. These affirmations are: (1) Jesus must not rise; (2) Jesus did not rise; (3) Jesus is risen. The first is the voice of prejudice; the second is the voice of denial; the third is the voice of truth.

THE VOICE OF PREJUDICE

The voice of prejudice says, "Jesus must not rise." This is the voice of "the chief priests and Pharisees."

What strange bedfellows prejudice makes! The chief priests or Sadducees and the Pharisees were as widely separated as the poles on just about any issue that you might imagine.

Perhaps their greatest difference revolved about the resurrection of the dead. The Sadducees, being rationalists and materialists, denied it. The Pharisees, being literalists and spiritual, affirmed it. (cf. Acts. 23:6-10) Yet it was this very doctrine that brought them together.

Matthew says that "the chief priests and Pharisees came *together* unto Pilate." (27:62, author's italics) And why? To prevent the resurrection of Jesus.

Now, it is understandable why the Sadducees wanted to prevent it. But one would think that the Pharisees would be all for it. Not so. Why, then, this strange coalition? Because of their mutual prejudice with respect to the deity of Jesus. For it was this very sign of His resurrection on the third day that Jesus had given when they demanded a sign of His deity. (Matt. 12:40)

So, they forgot their differences in the face of their common problem. They must prove that Jesus is not the Son of God. Consequently, by hook or crook, He must not rise from the dead.

So they asked Pilate for a guard. "Until the third day."

Pilate granted their request. "You

have a watch . . . make it as sure as you can." Did Pilate also fear that Jesus might rise? The mystery is compounded. Roman and Jew, conqueror and conquered, paganism and theism, rationalism and spiritualism join in the common prejudged purpose. Seal the tomb with the Roman seal of authority. Set the watch of Rome's vaunted military power. "Make it as sure as you can." Jesus must not rise!

This attitude seems so very far away and long ago. But is it?

Why did they want to keep Jesus dead? For that matter, why do we? A risen Jesus would prove the enormity of their crime. He might bring a revolution down on their heads. So long as Jesus stayed in the tomb they were safe. Pilate could go on being governor. The chief priests could maintain their position of power and plenty. The Pharisees and Sadducees could continue to debate their theology, and let it go at that.

A dead Jesus on a cross is so convenient. We can hang Him on the wall, over our altars, or about our necks. We can paint His picture to adorn our art galleries. We can compose and sing songs about Him. We can point to Him as our Saviour. It makes us feel so smug, so complacent, so respectable, so secure. We can bow before our altars, pay Him lip service, and go on our ways. We leave Him there while we go on our cool, sequestered way of life. A dead Jesus on a cross or in a tomb disturbs no one.

But a living Christ is quite another matter. He disturbs us. He reminds us of duty. Religion becomes more than a formality. As He walks among us we see His wounded hands and feet. They speak of sin to be reckoned with, injustices to be overcome, sacrifices to be made. A living Jesus insists on intruding into our plans, our lives, our deeds. He gets in our way as we walk our selfish paths.

So what do we do? We make as sure as we can that Jesus does not become a living Presence in our lives. We seal Him off from our plans. Oh,

we roll away the stone once a year. But we put Him right back again. Perhaps we crack the seal just a little on a few other Lord's Days. We sing a song, utter a prayer, hear a sermon. And then the seal is renewed. We go back to our governing, our money changing, and our theology.

In our prejudgment to live our lives as we please we leave Jesus in the tomb where He can scarcely become a living Power or Presence in our lives and in our world. With our lips we sing, "Up from the grave He arose." But with our lives we say, "He must not rise."

THE VOICE OF DENIAL

Consider the voice of denial. It says, "Jesus did not rise." This is the voice of the Sadducees. Despite the "senseless sentinels" Jesus did rise.

If this be true, then there is no evidence that a Sadducee ever believed in Jesus.

Which brings us back to our voice of denial. When the soldiers reported to the chief priests the fact of the resurrection of Jesus, they took counsel, bribed the soldiers, and promised them immunity to tell the story that Jesus' disciples stole His body *while they slept*. (Matt. 28:12-15)

While they slept! What a story! If they slept, how did they know? The story is cut out of the whole cloth of deceit. What the Sadducees had propounded by inference, that Jesus was a deceiver and the disciples thieves, they compounded into deceit by felonious intent.

The same chief priests who gave money to bring Jesus to His death, gave money to belie His resurrection.

In the face of the facts of the resurrection of Jesus, how can one explain the attitude of the Sadducees—yes, even modern Sadducees who continue to deny this greatest truth in history?

You may reply that the Sadducees were rationalists and materialists. And that is true, for they claimed so to be. But will this stand up under examination?

A rationalist is one who lives by

reason. He begins with one fact and reasons from that to another.

A materialist is one who ignores the spiritual, saying, "I believe what I see."

Had the Sadducees lived by these definitions they would have been brought to an acceptance of the bodily resurrection of Jesus. They had the fact of Jesus' prophecy of His resurrection on the third day, the fact of His death, of the occupied and sealed tomb, the fact of the report of the soldiers. But there is no record that they ever examined the evidence. As materialists they could have seen the empty tomb. They could have handled the grave clothes lying in orderly fashion. But they did none of these things.

Furthermore, they ignored the transformation wrought in the apostles. They could have reasoned from the facts of their fleeing in disorder and their remaining in hiding like frightened animals to their boldness after Pentecost. But they did not do so.

Rationalism? Materialism? Prejudice would be a better word. Doctor G. Campbell Morgan expresses it for us. "It is wonderful [full of wonder] how men may set themselves in such resolute antagonism to a truth, that at last they are persuaded that their antagonism is the truth, and the truth itself a lie."*

No matter how wise a man may be, he is still a man. And men are creatures of prejudice. They may reason ever so skilfully. They may analyze material evidence ever so carefully. But they must sometime draw a conclusion. And in the drawing of it prejudice will have the last word.

It was true of the Sadducees. It is true today. The word "prejudice" means "pre-judgment." It means to judge before and not after the evidence.

Now few modern rationalists are so blatant as to agree with one who

**The Gospel According To Matthew*, Revell, New York, 1929, p. 318.

said a few years ago that he believed that the ashes of Jesus' body still lie in a Palestinian tomb. That is not orthodox. So they become neo-orthodox, and say that the resurrection of Jesus does not mean that His body arose, but that His spirit lives on in history. However, it is just a more roundabout way of saying the same thing. Either Jesus rose from the grave or He did not.

Such a thought is not new, up-to-date, fresh, modern thought. It is an old thought adorned with modern, rationalistic—shall we say prejudiced?—trappings. For over three hundred years before Christ, Plato, the pagan Greek philosopher, taught the same. The spirit was everything, the body nothing. The soul lived on after death, but a bodily resurrection was unthinkable to him.

It was his philosophy which Paul was combatting in I Corinthians 15, the greatest of all statements regarding the bodily resurrection of Jesus, and, subsequently, our bodily resurrection as well. And when Paul said that after His resurrection Christ "was seen," (I Cor. 15:15) he used a word meaning to see with the natural eye, not some spiritual vision.

So take your choice. The Sadducees or the Saviour, Plato or Paul, prejudged rationalism of men or the New Testament revelation of God. In each case I prefer to stand with Jesus, Paul, and the New Testament.

THE VOICE OF TRUTH

The voice of truth says, "Jesus is risen." This is the voice of the angels. It is the voice of the messengers of God. The "senseless sentinels" did their best. They sealed the tomb. They set a watch. But God overruled. Even while they stood guard before the sealed tomb, Jesus already had risen from the dead.

The angels did not roll away the stone to let Jesus out of the tomb. They did so that the soldiers and disciples might see that He had already departed, not through the aid of man but by the power of God. His resurrection body, recognizable to those

who saw Him, yet different, no longer was subject to the laws of time, space, and thickness—or to the senseless sentinels, pompous Pilate, prejudiced Pharisees, or skeptical Sadducees.

“He is risen, as he said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay.” (Matt. 28:6) See where He *lay*, not where He *lies*. For already the living Lord was with strident step marching down the corridors of time, changing the course of the river of history and striking the gates of rebellious empires off their hinges.

Modern sentinels, armed with the weapons of reason, prejudice, denial, and agnosticism, still march back and forth before the tomb of Jesus. But they are more to be pitied than the sentinels of old. The latter, without comprehending the issues involved, stood their guard with the tomb sealed, unaware that the Lord had risen. When the stone was rolled away they left their post to declare the tomb empty.

But modern sentinels, knowing the fact and significance of the empty tomb, still march back and forth to deny the fact. But as they march they march not with, but across, the course of history. Prejudice could not keep Jesus in the tomb. Reason may deny that the tomb is empty. But neither prejudice nor reason can put our living Lord back into the tomb. For the message of God eternally is “He is not here: for he is risen . . .”

And “thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (I Cor. 15:57)

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