

The Priority of the Great Commission

Matthew 28:11–20¹

Introduction

There are plenty of people in the world who have said that they would believe the gospel and turn to Christianity if they saw clear evidence for it. There are various objections that scrutinizers give for their unbelief:

- There is no clear evidence for Biblical stories in other historical sources (note: blatantly false).
- How could a good God allow evil?
- The tales in the Bible are too crazy to believe as factual.
- Science clearly demonstrates that various claims of the Bible are patently false.
- You can only trust what you experience, and it is really hard to experience God.

The same is true of the Biblical account of Jesus' resurrection. People have postulated various theories in an effort to "rationally explain" the resurrection.² It is all done to undermine the clear teachings of Scripture. And ultimately the Evil One, Satan, would like nothing better than to cause people to doubt the truthfulness of Scripture. But *although Satan will try to obliterate the veracity of the resurrection, we know that our risen Lord has commanded that we make disciples and share the truth of the gospel.*

Matthew 28:11–20 ¹¹ Now while they were going, behold, some of the guard came into the city and reported to the chief priests all the things that had happened. ¹² When they had assembled with the elders and consulted together, they gave a large sum of money to the soldiers, ¹³ saying, "Tell them, 'His disciples came at night and stole Him *away* while we slept.' ¹⁴ And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will appease him and make you secure." ¹⁵ So they took the money and did as they were instructed; and this saying is commonly reported among the Jews until this day. ¹⁶ Then the eleven disciples went away into Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had appointed for them. ¹⁷ When they saw Him, they worshiped Him; but some doubted. ¹⁸ And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, *even* to the end of the age." Amen.

Preview Outline:

1. **Satan's Slanderous Lie** — *His disciples stole the body*
2. **Jesus' Authoritative Truth** — *Make disciples of every nation*

¹ Unless otherwise noted all Scripture quotations taken from the New King James Version.

² For example, some theories include the Swoon Theory, Hallucination Theory, Mistaken Identity Theory, No Burial Theory, among others.

The power of the resurrection of Jesus Christ is first seen in Satan's frantic effort to slander the truth.

1. Satan's Slanderous Lie (vv. 11–15) — His disciples stole the body

The Report (v. 11)

“Now while they were going, behold, some of the guard came into the city and reported to the chief priests all the things that had happened” — After the events in Matthew 28:1–10 had transpired, the scene shifts from the women who witnessed the risen savior (and were currently on their way to report to the disciples) to the report of the guards to the chief priests. The contrast of the reports and the responses is startling. One group goes to report with “joy and fear” (v. 8); the other goes to report out of desire to slander.

But why did they run to the chief priests instead of Pilate himself? The answer is, in part, because the Jewish religious leaders were the ones who wanted the guards to be placed by the grave in the first place.

Matthew 27:62–66 ⁶² On the next day, which followed the Day of Preparation, the chief priests and Pharisees gathered together to Pilate, ⁶³ saying, “Sir, we remember, while He was still alive, how that deceiver said, ‘After three days I will rise.’ ⁶⁴ Therefore command that the tomb be made secure until the third day, lest His disciples come by night and steal Him *away*, and say to the people, ‘He has risen from the dead.’ So the last deception will be worse than the first.” ⁶⁵ Pilate said to them, “You have a guard; go your way, make *it* as secure as you know how.” ⁶⁶ So they went and made the tomb secure, sealing the stone and setting the guard.

The religious leaders began their slander before Jesus was even in the grave! I wonder to what degree the religious leaders wished to see if Jesus would do as He claimed (i.e. rise from the dead). In the back of their minds were His words concerning his death and resurrection (cf. Matt. 16:21; 17:23; 20:19). Even in their supposed “victory” the religious leaders wondered at whether or not Jesus would pull the “ultimate stunt” in somehow raising from the dead.

The Bribe (v. 12)

“When they had assembled with the elders and consulted together, they gave a large sum of money to the soldiers, saying...” — As if the religious leaders could not stoop low enough, Matthew records their descent further into duplicity. It begins by each of them assembling together so as to make a plan. This assembling together has always been for sinister purposes.

Matthew 26:3–4 ³ Then the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders of the people assembled at the palace of the high priest, who was called Caiaphas, ⁴ and plotted to take Jesus by trickery and kill *Him*.

Matthew 26:57 And those who had laid hold of Jesus led *Him* away to Caiaphas the high priest, where the scribes and the elders were assembled.

They offered a bribe of money to the guards to propagate a lie. In fact, the original reads that they gave the soldiers a “large sum of money.” Money was a theme surrounding the actions of those who wished to destroy Christ. Judas, for example:

Matthew 26:14–16 ¹⁴ Then one of the twelve, called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests ¹⁵ and said, “What are you willing to give me if I deliver Him to you?” And they counted out to him thirty pieces of silver. ¹⁶ So from that time he sought opportunity to betray Him.

The love of money is, indeed, the root of all kinds of evil (1 Tim. 6:10).

The Lie (vv. 13–14)

“Tell them, ‘His disciples came at night and stole Him away while we slept.’ And if this comes to the governor’s ears, we will appease him and make you secure.” — The story that they wanted the guards to propagate was the story they had hoped to avoid in the first place (Matt. 27:64). This outright lie was dangerous for the soldiers because to sleep while on duty was to mean a death sentence for a Roman guard. This is why the religious leaders promised to “cover” for them if the governor should find out that the guards had “fallen asleep” (v. 14).

The Result (v. 15)

“So they took the money and did as they were instructed; and this saying is commonly reported among the Jews until this day.” — The most incredible thing to me is that these soldiers took the bribe and agreed to spread the ridiculous lie. These men had witnessed an angelic creature come from heaven with earthquakes and an appearance as that of lightning. They watched the angelic creature pull back the sealed stone from the opening of the tomb. Depending on the layout of the actual tomb (which we cannot know for certain what it looked like) they could see that the tomb was empty—there was no dead body inside! The angel who had rolled away the the sealed stone door to the tomb was displaying for the guards (and thereby the world) that Jesus’ was not in the grave. He had risen from the dead (“just as He said” — v. 6). These soldiers were eyewitnesses, too! Yet even though they saw the empty tomb and the angelic creature that came with great power and splendor to display the empty tomb, they took the large sum of money that was bribed to them. This only goes to show how depraved mankind is in his thinking. As I mentioned earlier, Paul wrote rightly that “the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil” (1 Tim. 6:10).

I have heard and read that some people say they will believe in Christ and Christianity if they saw the miraculous acts that Jesus did, or if they could have some kind of undeniable proof that they could observe. My answer to that is: “No, you won’t believe.” Scripture records how people saw Jesus’ works (healings and miracles) and those same people still cried out for Him to be crucified. The guards who witnessed the early morning happenings at the tomb *still refused to believe that Jesus is the Son of God*. Such denial is no surprise even in the face of undeniable evidence; only if the Spirit of God opens your blind heart and eyes to reality of the truth of the gospel will you be able to believe it. You must be made alive by the power of God (cf. Eph. 2:1ff; John 3:8; Col. 2:12–14).

Jesus illustrated this in His description of Lazarus and the rich man. The rich man sees Lazarus with Abraham and calls out to him:

Luke 16:27–31 ²⁷“Then he said, ‘I beg you therefore, father, that you would send him to my father’s house, ²⁸for I have five brothers, that he may testify to them, lest they also come to this place of torment.’ ²⁹Abraham said to him, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.’ ³⁰And he said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ ³¹But he said to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead.’”

Application — It is no surprise that Paul was already dealing with the question of the gospel’s origin:

1 Corinthians 2:1–5 And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God. ²For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. ³I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. ⁴And my speech and my preaching *were* not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, ⁵that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

The good news of the resurrection of Jesus Christ was disputed by people from the very beginning. Satan has always sought to either dispute the resurrection so as to undermine the gospel, or he has sought to change the gospel so as to cause people to believe a false gospel.

What if the resurrection of Jesus Christ was in fact false? What are the implications of that? If Jesus did not raise from the dead:

- Everything Jesus said was a lie.
- The sacrificial system must continue because Jesus did not raise again; he died for his own sins.
- People are still dead in their sins.
- People have suffered and even died for what would be the greatest hoax in the history of mankind.
- The Bible cannot be trusted.
- Jesus was not God.
- Could there even be such a thing as the afterlife?

If the good news of Jesus' resurrection were a lie we would be of all men most miserable (1 Cor. 15:19). The consequences of no resurrection are devastating. But God by His matchless wisdom has revealed to all through these verses that to deny the validity of the resurrection of Christ is to believe a slanderous lie promoted by Satan, the father of lies, who wishes to dissuade people from believing the truth.

Though Satan tried to slander the truth of Jesus' resurrection, the fact remains that Jesus did raise from the dead and has all authority to command that we propagate the veracity of the gospel.

2. Jesus' Authoritative Truth (vv. 16–20) — Make disciples of every nation

The remaining verses of Matthew's Gospel are very familiar to us. The contrast between the lie concerning the resurrection in vv. 11–15 and the command to make disciples of every nation by preaching the truth of the gospel could not be more stark.

The Disciple's Reaction (vv. 16–17)

“Then the eleven disciples went away into Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had appointed for them. When they saw Him, they worshiped Him; but some doubted.” — Jesus met with the disciples on a mountain that He had previously instructed them to meet him on. No doubt some were still experiencing joy over the course of the 40+ days that Jesus was with them. Yet even in that relatively short period of time with the risen Christ, some of the disciples still doubted as to what was happening. However, they did what should rightly be done to the King of kings and Lord of lords: they worshiped Him. This is the proper response to Jesus the Messiah. Here are two examples:

John 5:22–30 ²² For the Father judges no one, but has committed all judgment to the Son, ²³ that all should honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him. ²⁴ Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life. ²⁵ Most assuredly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live. ²⁶ For as the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son to have life in Himself, ²⁷ and has given Him authority to execute judgment also, because He is the Son of Man. ²⁸ Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice ²⁹ and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation. ³⁰ I can of Myself do nothing. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is righteous, because I do not seek My own will but the will of the Father who sent Me.

Philippians 2:9–11 ⁹ Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, ¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, ¹¹ and *that* every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ *is* Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Jesus is the divine King who deserves the worship of redeemed sinners.

Jesus' Command (vv. 18–20)

These verses are very familiar to us. We know that these verses are what we call the Great Commission. Instead of expositing deeply from these verses, notice with me three things:

- (1) *Jesus has all authority as the divine King, the Son of God, to command His followers to obey Him.* The chief priests may have thought that they had authority even over Roman soldiers, but true authority belongs to the only sovereign God. Because Jesus has been given all authority in heaven and earth (i.e. over all things).
- (2) *Followers of Jesus are called to make disciples of all the nations by sharing the gospel (i.e. the truth).* We must obey. This is by no means an optional call for believers. We are to make disciples by sharing the truth: that Jesus is the Son of God (cf. John 20:30–31). New converts are to identify with their new master by baptism and obedience to His instructions. We have the blessed message of *life*. How important it is that we share it!

1 Corinthians 1:20–31 ²⁰ Where *is* the wise? Where *is* the scribe? Where *is* the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? ²¹ For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. ²² For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; ²³ but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, ²⁴ but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. ²⁶ For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, *are called*. ²⁷ But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; ²⁸ and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, ²⁹ that no flesh should glory in His presence. ³⁰ But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God—and righteousness and sanctification and redemption— ³¹ that, as it is written, “*He who glories, let him glory in the Lord.*”

- (3) *Jesus is present with every one His followers.* In contrast to the shaky assurance of the religious leaders to the guards, Jesus will always be with His followers as they propagate the truth. And He assures us that He will be with us to the end of the age (that is to say Jesus will be with us always). Regardless of the lies that Satan spreads, one day they will be exposed for what they are: lies from the father of all lies.

This is why the gospel is so important. This is priority of the Great Commission. It is through the spreading of the truth of the gospel that people who are slaves to sin can be set free.

Conclusion

Satan will continue to do his best to undermine the work of the gospel in people's hearts by proliferating false gospels. He will do what he can to breed doubt in the hearts of every person he can. How important it is for you and I to obey the command of our Lord to make disciples by sharing the gospel truth with everyone we can! Why? Because it is the power of God to salvation (Rom. 1:16). We serve a risen savior! Let us obey His command to us until He comes. Even so, come quickly, Lord Jesus.