

FEBRUARY 26, 1995

ACCEPTING THE CHALLENGE

Everybody likes to win! Some will tell you that "winning isn't everything, it is the only thing." In years gone by (whenever that was) we were taught "the way we played the game" was more important than winning or losing. Not too many years ago most of us thought the "judicial system" was operated in such a way to make sure justice was carried out. By and large, we have gotten over that delusion and now realize that it is really about winning and losing. Justice does not seem to be a consideration. The "way it used to be" (or at least the way I thought it was) seems to me to be a lot better than the way it is now. The former seems to be "the high road" and "win at any cost" surely seems to be "the low road." Fairness and justice are Godly concepts while anything less appears to be have been hatched in Hades.

On Friday, when the crucifixion was in process, Satan was celebrating his victory over this person Jesus -- he had won, he had defeated the Son of God -- so he thought. The Jewish leaders had their victory and they wanted to make sure that nothing happened to change the outcome.

MATTHEW 27:62-66 The Jewish leaders knew how the world operates. They themselves operated by the way of the world which is by deception, scheming, and trickery. They suspected that the followers of Jesus would be as "smart as they were" and would try to pull off some scheme to convince people that Jesus would rise from the dead. It turns out the Pharisees and chief priests paid more attention to Jesus' predictions about rising again (took it more literally) than His disciples did. The disciples were off somewhere in hiding, fearing that they too might be crucified.

The irony of what the religious leaders did by putting guards on the tomb was to actually provided the basis for proof that Jesus' body was NOT stolen, that He did rise from death. We should live our lives so that even our worst enemy in his accusations against us give evidence that we are loyal, honest, decent, and thoroughly Christian.

The treachery of the accusations that the leaders brought against Jesus shows up in this passage. They had claimed that Jesus had threatened to tear down the Temple and build it back in three days. After His death, they acknowledged that they really knew He meant that He would rise from death. Many of the criticisms leveled at the church in modern times stem from deliberate misinterpretation of the teaching of the church.

The tragedy of the situation is that, in their hearts, they KNEW who Jesus was and yet they chose to rebel against what He was doing and thought that they could thwart the purposes of God by scheming and conniving. You would be surprised at how many people in and out of our churches are fully aware of what God wants them to do and yet they do not follow His lead.

The Jewish leaders were intelligent enough to know how powerful the message that Jesus had risen from death would be. Consequently, they had reason to be cautious.

MATTHEW 28:1-7 It had been a miserable Sabbath. The disciples were hiding out and the women had guilt feelings because they didn't have enough time to give Jesus a proper burial. Normally, the body would have been sprinkled with sweet smelling spices. It was tradition and in the haste to get the corpses off the cross and in the grave before 6:00 P.M. on the day of the crucifixion there was simply not enough time. So, early on the morning following the Sabbath, a couple of the women arrived at the tomb. Before they arrived some unusual things had happened: first of all, an earthquake shook the region. When Jesus died an earthquake happened and about the time He was resurrected another one occurred. It would appear that the two earthquakes were more than just coincidences. There could be a correlation of significant spiritual activity having effect on the physi-

cal. When Moses went up on Mt. Sinai to meet with God, there was an earthquake. We are told in the Revelation that during the last days there will be a significant increase in earthquake activity. Second, there was a supernatural being (an angel) that broke open the seal of the Roman government and opened the tomb. The guards were so frightened they literally passed out. When the two Marys arrived the angel was just sitting on the stone waiting to give them a message. Jesus was no longer there, so the angel invited them to see for themselves. If the world would just look around, they would see evidence that Jesus is alive, that He is risen. Since He is risen, then we need to heed the message He sends to us. There was a message for the disciples. This message was simple and direct, it said that Jesus would go before them into Galilee and that they should meet Him there. For us today, we need to hear the message that Jesus "goes before us," that He is leading the way in which we are to follow. So often, we pray asking God to go with us and help us do our thing, when what we need to do is pray that we would go with God and be useful to Him in what He is doing.

MATTHEW 28:8-10 We don't normally think of FEAR and JOY as going together. This combination of emotions should be normal for the Christian. As we see the power of God operating in our lives, we should be filled with awe and amazement. Simultaneously, we should be gloriously happy that we have been chosen by God to be a part of what He is doing in the world.

At the same time these women were experiencing the mixed emotion of fear and joy they were going about the Lord's business with enthusiasm, they were running to carry out the instruction delivered by the angel. We need to be careful lest we get so caught up in the emotion of the moment in our spiritual walk that we fail to be about the work that is before us. As they were about the business of being obedient they experienced a deeper, more meaningful spiritual encounter -- they met Jesus face to face. Many people in their walk are looking for new and deeper spiritual experiences and this should be the desire of each Christian. Apparently, one of the proven methods of doing this is to be about the Lord's business, full of enthusiasm, joyful in our hearts, and having a deep sense of awe and reverence.

As these women met the Lord, He spoke to them the same message that had been delivered by the angel. When God speaks to us in our devotion and prayer time, when we dream or have visions, or even if Jesus Himself were to appear to us, we can be assured that His message will be consistent with His message that He has already given to us in the Word of God. As we experience the joy of this Resurrection celebration and the awe of God's greatness and goodness in providing salvation to us let us at the same time resolve to be about the Lord's business and to listen to the message of the word already given to us.

MATTHEW 28:16-20 The message Jesus gave to the disciples before He ascended into heaven is still valid for present day disciples. Jesus told us to GO and to MAKE DISCIPLES of ALL nations. We really haven't done a good job of carrying out His commandments. The challenge is still there. It is not "a challenge to win" since Jesus already has the victory. The challenge for us is to be obedient to the One we call Lord.