

# DEALING WITH DEATH

SERIES: THE FINAL HOURS



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Matthew 27:57-66  
Seventh Message  
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*Matthew 27:57-66*

I was sixteen years old when my grandmother died. We called her Maw-Maw. That's a Southern-style nickname for grandmother. Now, that's what my children call my mother. I loved my Maw-Maw dearly. She would visit us when we lived in Connecticut and always bring two suitcases; one for her clothes and one packed with food from Louisiana for us to enjoy: pecans and strawberries and barbecue sauce.

Later in her life, she had a stroke and moved into an assisted living environment. I was able to see her a few weeks before she passed away. And I answered the phone to hear that she had died.

I don't know why, and I'm ashamed even to say so, but after I got that phone call, I couldn't stop smiling. I wasn't happy. I loved Maw-Maw, and I knew that I'd miss her. But I don't think I knew what to do with the news.

In the movies, when someone hears about a loved one dying, they immediately crumble into sobs of grief. I didn't feel that way, so I was confused. I remember so vividly the sense that something was wrong with me. My grandmother had just died, and I was smiling.

How do we deal with death? How do we grieve? Is it like the movies? Or is it something else altogether? What does following Jesus have to do with death?

This morning, we're concluding our Lent series called *The Final Hours*. We started seven weeks ago with the meal that Jesus shared on the night before he was betrayed. We've tracked the last 18 hours of his life. The arrest. The betrayal. Trial. And execution.

Last week we heard about the final moments. Jesus hung on a cross, and he died. Today we'll see some different reactions to the death of Jesus. We'll see how the different people around Jesus were dealing with death.

Most years we think about Jesus dying on Good Friday, and then we celebrate his resurrection on Easter Sunday. This year we've slowed down our pace a bit. You could almost think of last Sunday as Good Friday.

We heard a love story. The love of Jesus to hang on the cross and the love of the Father to leave him there. All for our sake.

Today is that somber Saturday in between the death and resurrection. It's not a place in which we're used to spending time. But it turns out that a lot of growth happens in between death and resurrection in our lives.

We'll see some familiar characters this morning. We'll start with Joseph and Mary, but not the Joseph and Mary that you're thinking of. We'll see the priests and the Pharisees. These people will react in three different vignettes. Two powerful men will try to make something happen. Two lonely women will sit in silence.

Each of these characters will demonstrate a different way of dealing with death. As we walk through these vignettes, we'll recognize some of the ways we might deal with death. I'm hoping we'll learn some better ways. And I'm hoping that we'll see how the death of Jesus opens up a new path for us.

Those who follow Jesus ought to be the most skilled at handling death. We ought to be teaching the world around us how to face pain and death bravely and calmly and with the hope of the Gospel. But that isn't always the case. In fact, sometimes it's exactly the opposite. Tragically, sometimes it is within the church where people feel the least freedom to face their pain and admit their grief.

That's mixed up.

We need to learn how to deal with death. We need to learn how to face pain. We, of all people, have a path to follow. But we have to have the courage to walk it. Let's look at our story this morning and see if we can learn something about dealing with death. If we can, I think we'll learn something about living life as well.

## First Request

Our story begins immediately after the death of Jesus. The first scene shows one powerful man making a request of another powerful man.

**Matthew 27:57-60:**

**When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who also was a disciple of Jesus. 58 He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. 59 And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen shroud 60 and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had cut in the rock. And he rolled a great stone to the entrance of the tomb and went away.**

We don't know who Joseph of Arimathea was. People debate about the location of Arimathea. It doesn't seem to be a prominent place. But Joseph is rich. Other Gospel authors tell us he was a member of the council. He had power and influence. Joseph was able to go to Pilate and make a direct request. He is important enough to be mentioned in all four Gospel accounts.

Joseph is a fascinating character. He was part of the council that sought to have Jesus killed. He couldn't or didn't stop it even though he was a disciple. But then he comes to Pilate after the fact. He couldn't stop the execution, so he wants to do something about the burial.

Joseph makes a request of Pilate, one powerful man to another. Pilate immediately agreed. We are told that Pilate ordered the body of Jesus to be given to Joseph. That word will become significant later.

Joseph makes a request. Pilate gives a response. Then, the results. This same pattern will play out in the next story. Now we see a slow motion play by play of the burial.

Picture every action. See all the details. Joseph took the body, wrapped it in a clean cloth, and laid it in his own tomb, which he had cut. He rolled a great stone across the opening of the tomb and then went away.

Last year I built an outdoor table out of reclaimed redwood. It was painstaking work. I had to clean the wood. Cut the worn edges off. Plane off the worn surfaces. Sand it down. Then I could start building. Measuring. Cutting. Assembling. Staining. I took great care in each step because the whole process was important. It mattered to me that this be done right.

That's how we are told that Joseph handled the dead body of Jesus. With great care. Painstaking detail. Joseph treats Jesus with honor. He honors the dead. He honors Christ by giving him a proper burial.

That's something that we can learn from. If we want to honor Christ, we need to learn to honor death.

For the most part, we understand this. Funerals are serious affairs. We wear black. We speak quietly. Something has happened. We change our behavior to honor that sadness.

That's why Joseph acts with great care. His actions proclaim that this death is real. This is not a game. The pain is real. Jesus has died.

Growing up I used to watch *Batman*. Not the new movies, but the old TV show with Adam West starring as Batman. Almost every episode followed a predictable pattern. Batman would try to save the day. He would get himself into trouble. There would be some situation from which it seemed he could never escape. Then, he'd miraculously escape and save the day.

I remember one episode where a bad guy had caught Batman. Batman was tied up with chains and hung over a pot of acid. The bad guy pressed a button that was going to lower Batman into the acid. Then the bad guy walked out of the room.

I'm thinking, why did you walk away? If you really want to kill Batman, just stick around for one minute and make sure that he really drops into the acid. Why are all these bad guys so stupid?

But of course, Batman figured out a way to loosen the chains. Just in time, he escapes the acid and catches up to the bad guy who is completely surprised that his plan didn't work. And Batman saves the day.

Now, imagine if Batman did nothing. He stayed in his chains. He was lowered into the acid. And he dies. The scene cuts to the bad guy driving off with the money. And the credits roll.

That's what has just happened in Jerusalem. Jesus was trying to save the day. He got himself into trouble. He faced a situation that it seemed like he could never escape from. And he didn't. He died on that cross.

Joseph of Arimathea was a disciple. He saw the man he had hoped would change the world die on a Roman cross. Jesus was dead. He honored that death. Joseph gave up his incredibly expensive tomb. How many tombs do you think there were carved into the side of rock cliffs? He put the humiliated body of a failed Messiah into his own family tomb.

Pain and death generally make us feel uncomfortable. We'd rather not face it. When something difficult happens in our life or the lives of the people around us, many of us are tempted to simply keep going—plan more activities, fill up the schedule, start a new hobby, etc. We like to pretend that nothing has really happened.

We like to think that things from our childhood can just go undealt with. If we keep busy, our anxiety will go away. Those challenges in our marriage will get better naturally over time. That sadness I feel is my fault. I can fix it if I try harder.

We do this to ourselves. We do this to each other. But that's not honoring death. It's not taking pain seriously.

Joseph could have just kept going. After all, he was on the council. The council members were probably right about Jesus. Now Jesus is dead. Let's just move on. But Joseph doesn't take the easy way out. He stops. He admits that something monumental has happened. Joseph honors Christ by honoring his death.

You can honor Christ by honoring the pain and death in your own life. Pain and death won't just go away. Face them. Look at them. Go there. You can start by admitting that nothing will ever be the same.

## The Two Women

As Joseph of Arimathea sacrificed his tomb for the body of Jesus, we heard about two other characters looking on.

**Matthew 27:61:**

**Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb.**

In contrast to Joseph, we know these two women pretty well by now. Mary Magdalene has been with Jesus for a long time. The other Mary is almost certainly the mother of James and John. Both of these women were mentioned only a few verses ago as being at the cross.

Now they were devastated that Jesus was dead. I think they were in shock. They were mourning.

What must they have been thinking and feeling?

There is no indication in any of the Gospels that any person who followed Jesus believed him when he said that he would rise from the dead. Matthew records

three different times where Jesus was explicit. He said he would die, be buried, and then rise on the third day. In the next few sentences, we'll see that even his enemies knew about this prediction.

We aren't told that anyone actually believed him. No one said right after he died, "Don't worry, he'll come back in three days." When Jesus did rise, no one said, "There you are, I've been expecting you." Everyone scattered. Everyone mourned. And everyone was surprised when he actually rose from the dead.

As far as we can tell, Joseph of Arimathea was burying a dead body that he fully expected would stay dead. Mary and Mary were at the tomb, grieving the final death of the man whom they had hoped would be their Savior.

For the disciples, Jesus was dead. The mission was over.

Sit there for a moment. Stay in that place. Jesus is dead. Batman has been lowered into the acid, and nothing miraculous happened to save him. See the tomb from the eyes of Mary Magdalene who had seen seven demons rebuked by Jesus. Mary, the mother of James and John who had staked the hopes of her life and her sons on this man. This Jesus whom they had given up everything to follow was dead.

We need to read this story and stay with it here. We know how it ends. We know that Jesus will rise three days later. But these people didn't. We need to sit with Mary and Mary across from that tomb and feel the weight of the tragedy that Jesus is dead.

Some of you can't do that. You want to remind me that Jesus is risen. That he isn't dead. Why mourn when we can celebrate?

But the resurrection means nothing without the crucifixion. We can't celebrate until we grieve. We have to cry over the death of Jesus if we're going dance for his resurrection. We need to learn to grieve.

Have you ever been going through something difficult and shared it with someone only to hear them say something incredibly unhelpful such as "Well, it could be worse." Or, "I'm sure God has a plan."

Those things might be true, but even in the midst of God's sovereignty and love and eternal hope, there is a time to grieve.

When we grieve the death of Jesus, we make way for our own grief. When we learn to sit with the pain of Jesus in a tomb, we learn how to face our own suffering. We can't suffer if we can't grieve. And we can't really follow Jesus if we don't know how to suffer well.

To follow Jesus is to be willing to suffer. And there is no suffering without grief.

I was a Boy Scout growing up, and I used to receive a magazine called *Boys Life*. It's still being published. I remember almost every issue had an advertisement for a kit that you could buy that would help you build your own hovercraft. All you needed was a vacuum cleaner and some spare parts, and you could build a hovercraft.

I had fantasies about building a hovercraft. I would ride it to school. Park it on the roof of the building. It would be amazing. Skimming across the world on a cushion of air.

That's how a lot of Christians think that we are supposed to go through life. They think that we can suffer without grieving. We just skim across life on a cushion of Jesus so that nothing ever really bothers us. Some people even think the Bible tells us to do that. We're supposed to have joy in all circumstances, and that means we should never be sad.

That thought is a terrible misunderstanding of the Bible, and it has done a lot of damage in the body of Christ. Not even Jesus skimmed across life without being affected by the sharp edges of this broken world. He wept. He went off by himself in frustration and exhaustion. He desperately wished his life path could be different. He raged in anger and brooded in sadness.

A few weeks ago our Women's Ministry had a retreat on the topic of forgiveness. Corrie Gustafson, our Pastor to Women, was kind enough to let me listen to the message on the topic of lament that she shared at that retreat. It was excellent. She gave practical skills for helping people learn to lament: to speak our grief and work through it.

We have to learn to grieve because it turns out that something powerful happens on Saturday. Jesus dies on Friday, and he rises on Sunday. But God works in mysterious ways on Saturday. We honor death, and we learn to grieve, not just because it's a good thing to do, but because God works in our grief.

Our grief is an invitation. When we go there, God goes with us. Christ is there with us in our pain and

death. Something happens in that place. I think it's where healing begins. Sunday will come, but healing begins on Saturday.

Some of us have a lot to learn from the members of our community who are on the road to recovery. That path forces you to face the pain and death in your life. Listen to this quote from a woman who lost two children and coped with the pain for years with an eating disorder.

*I don't mind the grief anymore—it is a sign of endless love and a richness, undying hope. I'm learning that grief is part of the beautiful mess that is life. It is part of aching, mending, and becoming whole again when part of you is gone.* ([www.recoverywarriors.com/embracing-grief](http://www.recoverywarriors.com/embracing-grief))<sup>1</sup>

Grief is part of the process of becoming whole again. There is no redemption without pain. If we don't learn to grieve, we'll find ourselves acting like the next people in our story.

## Second Request

The story jumps now to the next day. This would have been the Sabbath day. A day when no one was supposed to be working. A day when you weren't supposed to be convening a council to form an evil plot against the Savior of the world. Nonetheless, this is what happens.

### Matthew 27:62-66:

**The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate 63 and said, "Sir, we remember how that impostor said, while he was still alive, 'After three days I will rise.' 64 Therefore order the tomb to be made secure until the third day, lest his disciples go and steal him away and tell the people, 'He has risen from the dead,' and the last fraud will be worse than the first." 65 Pilate said to them, "You have a guard of soldiers. Go, make it as secure as you can." 66 So they went and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone and setting a guard.**

Everyone had heard Jesus' prediction that he was going to be executed but that he would rise again after three days. Imagine the chief priests going to bed after the crucifixion, pleased that they had finally stopped Jesus. Then someone remembered this prediction and thought, "Oh no, this could ruin everything."

So they scramble together and they make their way back to Pilate who I'm sure wasn't happy to see them



again. The priests ask him to post Roman soldiers at the tomb. Jesus is dead. They want to make sure that he stays dead.

Just like Joseph of Arimathea, the chief priests make their request of Pilate. Just like the previous story, Pilate responds. But his response is different. Pilate ordered the body of Jesus to be given to Joseph. The priests ask Pilate to order guards to be posted, but Pilate doesn't agree. No orders are given. Instead, he shrugs off the priests. Pilate tells them, "You have your own soldiers. You make the tomb secure." He is tired of being used as a weapon against Jesus. Go guard the tomb yourself.

Think about these priests and Pharisees. Powerful men breaking their own laws about Sabbath because they are still worried about a man they have already executed. It's a sad picture. They are worried, defensive, paranoid, and demanding. They are doing what they have always done—frantically trying their best to manipulate the situation around them to protect their own self-interests.

Just like us. Don't we do that? Don't we go to great lengths to avoid pain?

A friend of mine in college told me a story about rollerblading as a kid. Her parents were insistent that she always wear her wrist guards whenever she went out on her rollerblades. You know the ones: they have stiff plates strapped alongside your wrists, so you don't break your wrist if you fall on them.

One day my friend had forgotten her wrist guards. As she was rollerblading, she hit something and started to fall forward. She put out her hands like we all would have done. But then she remembered that she didn't have her wrist guards on. So she pulled her hands back and fell flat on the ground with her face absorbing the full impact. Gravel and dirt and concrete smashed her face.

We'll go to great lengths to avoid pain. But sometimes doing so only makes things worse.

Jesus is dead. The disciples aren't planning to steal the body and fake a resurrection. They are scattered and afraid and devastated. But still the priests scramble frantically on the Sabbath to protect themselves.

Do you recognize that feeling? Have you felt it? I know I have. I know that feeling of worrying that something is going to happen that will cause me pain and feeling like I need to do something to stop it. I need to protect myself. I won't be able to handle it. I can't let that thing happen that I'm terrified of.

So I manage it. I control the situation. I shift into the kind of overdrive that we see in these priests and Pharisees. And it only makes things worse.

Don't do this. Don't try to manage the pain of a buried Jesus. If you do, you are cutting yourself off from what God wants to do in your life. Sit at the tomb. Don't manage pain.

I'll throw in a caveat that there are situations in which you need to escape. If someone is hurting you or abusing you or constantly treating you terribly, you need to talk to someone. If you're not sure whether to run, then ask someone their view. It can get hard to see things clearly when we are in the middle of a situation.

But for many of us, we need to stop trying to manage all the world around us. We need to learn to face the pain and walk through it.

The priests and Pharisees were afraid that the disciples would tell people, "He has risen from the dead." They are doing everything they can do to make sure that doesn't happen. The irony is that this exact phrase shows up in the next chapter. In Matthew 28:7, the angel in the empty tomb says to those same two women, "Go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead."

This is what we will say next week as we celebrate Easter: "He is risen." This is the phrase that the early church rallied around as they kindled their new faith: "He is risen." This is the Good News of the Gospel: "He is risen." What the priests feared the worst was exactly what happened. Their worst fears were realized.

We are convinced that there are some things we can't handle. We'll never recover if we don't get that job. I'll never be the same if my marriage falls apart. I'll be destroyed if I never get pregnant. I can't live with that kind of pain. I am not strong enough.

How do we stop managing our pain? How do we handle the worst possible thing happening?

This is where we need to remember the rest of the story. We might not be able to handle it, but God can. Our God has demonstrated that even when the worst possible thing happens, he can bring life from death.

We might be living in Saturday. But unlike the disciples, we know that Sunday is coming. When we put our faith in Jesus, we know that death is not the end. Even

when the worst happens, you will be okay. That will not be the end. God can raise the dead.

This doesn't mean we don't grieve. We don't smile at our pain and death. It's exactly the opposite. The hope of Jesus means that we truly grieve. We can handle the pain of death because we know that we won't be overcome by it. Jesus has declared victory over sin, pain, and death. So we can feel the sadness. We can sit at the tomb. We can enter into pain.

In 1 Thessalonians 4:13, Paul says, "we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope." We don't grieve like those who have no hope. But we do grieve. We just grieve differently. We grieve with hope. We can allow God to work through grief because we know it isn't the final word.

Do you know that? Do you believe in Jesus? If not, this is a great time to face into that. Come to the one who forgives your sins. Come to the one who gives you everlasting life. Come to the Savior who loves enough to die on a cross. Believe in Jesus, and we'll baptize you next week on Easter.

We can face death. We can handle pain. We don't have to manage it because we have hope.

## Conclusion

We aren't born knowing how to grieve. Our bodies are designed to help us to avoid pain. It's a skill that we learn to respond well to pain and death.

I didn't know how to do that as a sixteen-year-old. It's okay that I couldn't stop smiling. I didn't understand my emotions. It didn't mean that I was a terrible person or didn't love my grandmother. I was just confused.

That's okay. Pain is confusing. It doesn't follow a pattern. We need to learn how to deal with death. We need to learn how to grieve. Our story this morning helps us do that with three examples.

There isn't an easy answer to dealing with pain and death. There's no tried and true path to follow. But our stories this morning show us three different examples.

The powerful Joseph of Arimathea takes action. He sacrifices his own privilege and status to put a criminal in his own tomb. He acknowledges that something terrible has happened.

The powerful priests and Pharisees take action too. But they manipulate. They are frantic to escape the situation, protect themselves, and control every possible outcome. They do their best to avoid death.

And in the middle, two women mourn quietly. Sitting at the tomb crying silent tears.

Can you find yourself somewhere in there? What do you do with your pain? Do you have the hope of Jesus?

Christians are the most equipped of anyone in the world to truly handle pain. We can enter into deep grief and mourning because we know that it isn't the end.

We can sit there. We can face pain. We can face death. In fact, we can willingly enter into suffering for the sake of others because we know that this isn't the end of the story. But for now, it's where we find ourselves. Deal with death. Stay at the tomb. It's not Easter yet. But Easter is coming.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Annie Cornell, "I Tried To Run From My Grief. Here's Why I'm Now Choosing To Embrace It," *Recovery Warriors / Soul + Art*, September 28, 2017. <https://www.recoverywarriors.com/embracing-grief/>