

Matthew 28:4

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And for fear of him the keepers did shake, and became as dead men.

Analysis

And for fear of him the keepers did shake, and became as dead men. The Roman guards stationed at the tomb experienced overwhelming terror at the angel's appearance. The phrase 'did shake' (ἐσείσθησαν/eseisthēsan) uses the same root as 'earthquake' (σεισμός/seismos) in verse 2—they were shaken both by the earth's trembling and by fear. This was no mere startlement but complete terror before supernatural power.

'Became as dead men' (ἐγενήθησαν ὡς νεκροί/egenēthēsan hōs nekroi) indicates they fell unconscious or were paralyzed with fear, like corpses themselves. The irony is profound: those sent to guard a dead man became like dead men themselves when confronted with the Living One's triumph. The guards meant to prevent resurrection became witnesses to it, though they later suppressed the truth for money (Matthew 28:11-15).

This parallels other biblical instances where sinful humans encounter divine holiness: Isaiah crying 'Woe is me' (Isaiah 6:5), Daniel left without strength (Daniel 10:8), John falling as dead at Christ's feet (Revelation 1:17). The presence of holy God or His messengers exposes human weakness and unworthiness.

Yet notice the contrast: the guards collapsed in fear while the women who came in faith received the message 'Fear not' (verse 5). Fear of God's judgment versus reverential awe that receives His grace—two responses to divine power, depending on one's relationship to God through Christ.

Historical Context

Roman soldiers were trained to face death without flinching, maintaining discipline under extreme conditions. For battle-hardened guards to collapse in terror reveals the overwhelming nature of this supernatural manifestation. These were not superstitious peasants but professional soldiers.

The guards had been stationed specifically to prevent disciples from stealing the body (Matthew 27:64-66). Pilate had granted the Jewish leaders' request for security, providing Roman soldiers or temple guards (the text allows either interpretation). Their presence made any natural explanation of the empty tomb impossible—neither disciples nor anyone else could have moved the body past armed guards.

After witnessing these events, some guards reported to the chief priests rather than their Roman commander (verse 11), suggesting they may have been temple guards under Jewish authority. The chief priests then bribed them to claim the disciples stole the body while they slept (Matthew 28:12-13)—an absurd story, since sleeping guards could not know who took the body, and Roman soldiers faced execution for sleeping on duty.

This attempted cover-up paradoxically confirms the resurrection: Jewish authorities never produced the body or offered plausible alternative explanations. They resorted to bribery and impossible claims because the truth—resurrection—was undeniable but unacceptable to their unbelief.

Related Passages

1 John 4:8 — God is love

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

Study Questions

1. How does the guards' reaction to angelic glory illustrate humanity's inability to stand before God apart from Christ's mediation and righteousness?
2. What does the guards' later decision to accept bribes and suppress truth teach us about the human heart's resistance to divine revelation when it threatens our interests?
3. Why is the guards' testimony to the resurrection significant even though they ultimately rejected and concealed what they witnessed?

Interlinear Text

ἀπὸ	δὲ	τοῦ	φόβου	αὐτοῦ	ἐσείσθησαν	οἱ	τηροῦντες
for	And	G3588	fear	of him	did shake	G3588	the keepers
G575	G1161		G5401	G846	G4579		G5083
καὶ	ἐγένοντο	ὥσεί	νεκροί				
and	became	as	dead				
G2532	G1096	G5616	G3498				

Additional Cross-References

Revelation 1:17 (Parallel theme): And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as dead. And he laid his right hand upon me, saying unto me, Fear not; I am the first and the last:

Matthew 28:11 (Parallel theme): Now when they were going, behold, some of the watch came into the city, and shewed unto the chief priests all the things that were done.

Daniel 10:7 (Parallel theme): And I Daniel alone saw the vision: for the men that were with me saw not the vision; but a great quaking fell upon them, so that they fled to hide themselves.

Acts 16:29 (Parallel theme): Then he called for a light, and sprang in, and came trembling, and fell down before Paul and Silas,

Psalms 48:6 (Parallel theme): Fear took hold upon them there, and pain, as of a woman in travail.

Job 4:14 (Parallel theme): Fear came upon me, and trembling, which made all my bones to shake.

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