

“The Burial of the Lord”
John 19:38-42
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Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn

Text Comment

- v.38 We learn in the other Gospels, all of which mention Joseph of Arimathea in connection with the burial of the Lord, that Joseph was a member of the Sanhedrin, as we know Nicodemus was. Luke tells us that he had not consented to the unjust treatment of Jesus by the Sanhedrin. We are also told that he was a rich man, which accounts for his having a garden tomb to make available for the burial of Jesus. Mark and Luke describe him as a man who was “looking for the kingdom of God.” Now, in John 12:42-43, John has hard words for some who believed in Jesus but who wouldn’t confess him openly for fear of the Jews. But, here, whatever may have been his timidity before, Joseph comes into the clear with a brave and public act, an identification with Jesus at the very point when it would have seemed pointless to risk such an identification. Why expose yourself to the contempt of your peers when your leader has just died so ignominiously? What is to be gained by that? But, when the other disciples had fled, these men came out into the open in their allegiance to Jesus at just the time they had nothing to gain from doing so. Perhaps Joseph himself felt that he had paid too little honor to Jesus during his life and now should discharge the debt he had not paid when he should have. Ordinarily men executed for sedition, as Jesus was, at least technically, would have been buried in the burial site reserved for criminals located outside the city. It was, perhaps, because Joseph was a member of the Sanhedrin and had that extra pull, that Pilate agreed to let him have the body.
- v.39 The NIV somewhat overstates the weight. It would be closer to 65 pounds, apparently. That is a lot of spices, but others were treated similarly in the period. When the Rabbi Gamaliel was buried 20 years later, more than 80 pounds were employed. These were rich men, of course, and the spices Nicodemus bought would have been carried by his servants.
- v.40 The Jews did not embalm dead bodies as, for example, the Egyptians did. The spices were used to mask the smell as the body began to decompose.
- v.41 The proximity of the tomb was important because the Sabbath was about to begin and the work of burial needed to be completed beforehand. The fact that Providence provided a brand new tomb would be important three days later when at the resurrection there were no complications created by the presence of other bodies in the tomb.

The Scripture tells us that the Lord Jesus Christ, our Savior, was made like us in every way. He was in every way a true and authentic human being, apart from sin, and he lived a real human life, a life such as we must live ourselves. And, then, he died. His death, to be sure, was like no other human death in one way – it served to redeem the people of God, a people no man can number, and grant them entrance into eternal life. But, in its physical nature it was as any other

human death. As a result of the trauma he had suffered, the dehydration, perhaps the asphyxiation that resulted from the position of the body on the cross, and, no doubt, as a result of the tremendous stress placed upon his body by the emotional agony through which he passed there – an agony no human being has ever really understood – his heart gave out and he died. The breath departed from his body, his brain ceased all its functions, everything came to a complete and final stop.

And, then, some good men, friends of his, buried him in that same way they would have buried any man or woman they loved and admired as they had come to love and admire Jesus of Nazareth.

Through the ages the wicked and the godly alike had been buried in much the same way, in tombs cut out of rock or in holes dug out of the ground, just as most are still buried today.

Nearly 2,000 years before, the great Abraham had died after 175 years of fruitful life. And he too had been buried, indeed, like Jesus, in a rock tomb. And we read of Abraham, that, when he died, “he was gathered to his people. His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah near Mamre, in the field of Ephron, son of Zohar the Hittite.” [Gen. 25:8-9] “He was gathered to his people...” is certainly a reference, as the finest recent commentator on Genesis says, “to the soul of Abraham being reunited with his dead relatives in the afterlife.” [Wenham, ii, 160] In other words, Abraham’s soul went immediately to heaven, as his body was laid to rest in the ground.

Such was the experience of the Lord Jesus as we know from his own testimony. “Today you shall be with me in Paradise,” the Lord told the thief on the cross next to his who had, in that last moment of his life, put his faith in Jesus. So for Jesus, as for Abraham, death had meant a parting of the soul from the body. His soul had gone to heaven, his body to the tomb in the garden. Just as Paul said it would be for us, for every believer in Jesus Christ at the moment of death, so it was for Jesus himself, “to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord.” What that entrance into heaven must have been for the Lord Jesus, even without his body, bringing with him his last convert, the conquest of his final moments of life, we can only very dimly imagine.

But, what is clear, is that the Lord’s burial represented not the last stage of his humiliation, but the first stage of his exaltation, the beginning of his triumph, his vindication. That triumph and vindication was known, at that moment, only in heaven, not on earth; but, at the moment he died on the cross, the Lord was alive in heavenly glory and what must have been an infinitely boundless joy; he was there in heaven at the very moment that those two dear men were so carefully and reverently laying his body in that garden tomb. At the very moment that his enemies were basking in the thought that they had finally got rid of their nemesis, he was being hailed in heaven as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. And Sunday morning the silence on earth would be broken and the news of his triumph brought to mankind.

But meantime earth must wait to learn what heaven already knows! And, as the New Testament, in the remainder of its pages will make a large point of saying, what was true in the Lord’s case, will be true for everyone who trusts in him. His death is the pattern for our own, the meaning of

his burial the meaning of our own, the nature of those waiting days, the nature of the days that we too must wait between death and resurrection will mean for us what they meant for him. Paul will put it plainly, just as we were crucified with him and dead with him, so we were buried with him, as we rise together with him. Because we were “in him,” because all that he did he did for us, in our place, on our behalf, we can see ourselves in him and in each successive stage of his life and death. We can see ourselves in his righteous life, because that righteous and holy life was lived for us, that it might become ours, might be imputed to or reckoned to us, when we believe on Jesus Christ. His death was our death because he died in our place and on our behalf, suffering in our stead the righteous verdict of God’s holy justice against our sins. And, so, his burial was for us, the separation of soul from body, because, in him, by faith in him, the same burial, with its same meaning – a soul in heaven, a body waiting, resting in the grace in anticipation of things to come – will become our experience when we die. This is a great mystery, but it is also an absolute certainty.

I confess to you that earlier in my Christian life, while I knew this to be true, it was not a truth that wielded great power and influence in my heart and mind. I was glad to know that, in Christ, to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord, and that it is better by far to be in heaven, even without one’s body. But death was primarily an idea to me, a rather vague idea. Oh, I don’t say that there were not some nights when I would lie awake as a young man and feel a cold shudder at the thought that I must die. But, by and large, death was far removed from me and the idea that I was buried in Christ in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life was largely theoretical comfort to me.

But, not any longer. I have stood at too many graves over these past years, the graves of infants, some never even born; the graves of the elderly; and the graves of adults who died, so it seemed to me at the time, far too soon. Two members of my immediate family – my Father and my sister – now lie in graves in St. Louis, Mo., and a brother-in-law also died, at 42 years of age. I have stood at their graves and now the thought of my own death and burial does not seem so far away. Alexander Whyte, who had lost an infant son and then, years later, his twenty-three-year-old son, Robert, in action in the First World War, said that he used to go into the Dean Cemetery in Edinburgh, where his infant son was buried, and stand at that grave and try to visualize his own headstone next to it, the name of Alexander Whyte inscribed on it. “I imagine myself here,” he said, “when my days for preaching Christ are over.”

I have walked through virtually every cemetery in the area through these past 23 years and presided at the graves of scores of people. Tuesday will see me at still one more. And now it seems to me a thing marvelous beyond the power of words to describe that our Lord Jesus was also buried, that he also descended into the grave, and, by doing so, sanctified the graves of all who would die believing in his name. By being buried, carrying us and our salvation with him into the grave as it were, and then rising again, he imparted to every Christian the certain hope that his or her grave would be as the Savior’s was: joy unspeakable and full of glory for the soul, and rest for the body in anticipation of the Great Day.

It is in some ways a strange thing – I don’t deny it – that there must be this pause, this waiting between death and glory. The Lord had said on the cross, as we read in the previous paragraph of this chapter of John’s Gospel, as his life finally ebbed away in the cruelest pain and sorrow, he

had cried out, “It is finished!” But there was still more to come. There was no further price to be paid for our sins. *That* was finished. There was no more suffering for sin and guilt that he had to endure. *That* was finished. But the salvation of the world, the ingathering of the people of God, their vindication in the Last Judgment, the application of Christ’s mighty victory over sin and death to every child of God, *that* would take more time, much time as it has turned out. *That* was not finished!

Generations of God’s elect had to rise, one after another, the gospel had to be preached throughout the entire world, and, through the ages, the Spirit of God had to work faith in the hearts of countless men and women, boys and girls, one by one, uniting them to Jesus Christ and putting into their possession all that Christ had won for them. And while all of this was taking place, believers, generation after generation of them, died and were buried. The end could not come until all were gathered in, and the price of God’s concern that none be lost who will be saved was that preceding generations of saints must wait until all is fulfilled, must wait in their graves, must wait, as the poet has it,

wait till the holy horn is blown,
And all poor men are free.

The Christian grave is the living witness that God and Christ will lose none of their people. They will not call an end until all the sheep have heard Christ’s voice and followed him. This is the thought with which the author of the *Letter to the Hebrews* concludes his great chapter on faith. After mentioning so many heroes of faith from the ancient epoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Moses, and so on, all people, he says, who were made to wait for the consummation of all things, made to wait for their vindication before the world, made to wait for the better resurrection and the better country, he says, they wait still, and must.

“These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.”

And then he goes on to say that we are in the same situation. We must run the same race as they did and then must wait as they have had to wait, wait until all the people of God have been gathered in. Then, all of us together, all who have trusted in the Savior’s name, will receive the reward of our faith at once.

It is that necessity of our waiting that makes the Lord’s burial so precious and so important. Why is it so important that Christ was buried? That he be laid in a grave and not simply spring back to life when taken from the cross? Why, upon his death, when they took his body from the cross and laid it on the ground, did he not simply rise up again to new life? Why must there have been the three days in the grave? Well, there are certainly a number of reasons why. Surely, it had to be demonstrated before the world that Jesus was truly and certainly dead. There could be no doubt remaining about that. But, I think, the main reason that the Lord Jesus had to be buried was that *we are all to be buried* as well in due time. All but one generation of God’s people – the generation alive in the world when the Lord returns – will have gone down after him into the

grave. If you think this of no great importance now, your mind will change in due time! To know that Christ has gone there before you and to know that you will come out of there as he did, that is what makes the grave for a Christian a place of rest rather than a place of terror.

My mother showed me recently a *Mission to the World* missionary newsletter from Wesley Ulrich, for years a doctor at the Anoor TB hospital in Mafraq, Jordan. The Bedouins of the Middle East still suffer from tuberculosis and the missionary hospital there has long had a wonderful ministry combining medical care with Christian witness. In this particular newsletter, Dr. Ulrich told the story of one particular Bedouin man.

“The story of Talaq came to a close some three months ago. Talaq (or ‘Shooter’ in English) was in his 70’s when he first came to us some ten years ago. . . .as a young, married shepherd from near the Iraqi border many years ago he killed a man who was attempting to steal his sheep. He spent seven years in prison for his crime, lost his family, and wound up spending the next twenty years or so alone bearing a personal burden of immense guilt. He lived in a tent and tended a few sheep. Things then got worse – he contracted TB from who knows where and came to Anoor for treatment. It was here though that he heard about Jesus and how He forgives sins. One night the Lord Himself came to Talaq and forever took his guilt away. He was cured of his TB and hesitated not a whit in proclaiming his freedom in the Lord.

We saw Talaq two or three times a year after that; he was always thin and quiet and always willing to tell others his story and victory over guilt through Jesus Christ. Late one morning as we were feverishly seeing patients in clinic, the ambulance from the eastern district of Ruwashid pulled in with an ‘emergency transfer.’ We couldn’t believe our eyes when we found it to be Talaq. For several days he had been battling pneumonia. Abu Steve, our senior male nurse, who was very close to him, cleaned him up, got him comfortable, fed and in bed. At 2 a.m. the next night, Anja, the nurse on duty, called to say Talaq had breathed his last. Abu Steve and I went immediately to the hospital, washed him and wrapped him in a clean white sheet in preparation for the funeral. We were glad that the Lord had brought him to the place where he, like Hagar, the matron of his heritage, could say, ‘I have seen Him who sees me.’ And, we have been privileged to see both the beginning and the end of his pilgrimage.” [Ulrichs in *Jordan – March 2001*]

Now we Christians read all of that with pleasure and of the good old man’s death as happy news. But, in fact, the story ends with the old man being wrapped in sheet, being prepared to be laid in a grave in the earth. Where is the victory, the happiness, the satisfaction in that? Talaq’s Muslim friends would not find triumph or victory in his burial. They would not regard his being laid in the ground as the triumphant end of his pilgrimage. Where can we find the certainty that it is and not for Talaq only, but for you and for me, for anyone who believes in Jesus Christ and walks with him in this world? I will tell you where you can find that certainty. Long ago, another man who had died was laid in a grave. Just like Talaq and just like every other Christian who has lived and died in this world. He was laid in a grave; *but three days later he came out of that grave alive*. Mortality had put on immortality. Or as Paul will put it in his great chapter on graves and the resurrection of the dead, in 1 Corinthians 15,

“For since death came through a man – he means Adam – the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits, then, when he comes, those who belong to him.”

The firstfruit, as you know, is that first appearance of fruit on the tree that assures the farmer that the tree will bear its customary harvest that year. Christ rising from the grave is the firstfruit, the assurance that the salvation of his people, that salvation he died on the cross to achieve, will not fail. They all will rise to live forever, just as he did.

And, ever since, those who trust in that man, the God-Man, Jesus Christ, have rightly had the confidence that their graves will be as his was: for the body, a place of temporary rest while we await the day of Christ's return, the resurrection of dead, and the entrance of the people of God into the world of endless and boundless joy.

“God my Redeemer lives,
And often from the skies
Looks down and watches all my dust
Till he shall bid it rise.”

Or, even better, Samuel Rutherford and Anna Cousin.

I shall sleep sound in Jesus,
Fill'd with his likeness rise,
To live and to adore Him,
To see Him with these eyes.
'Tween me and resurrection
But Paradise doth stand;
Then – then for glory dwelling
In Immanuel's land.

We are at no time more dull, more foolish, than when we do not realize how stupendous this fact, this certainty, this prospect really is. We are never more wise, more good, than when we live our lives each day in the active prospect – however long we must wait to see it – of our resurrection from the dead and our entrance into Immanuel's land.

See the Lord being laid in his tomb. See if you cannot see yourself being laid in the grave. Your loved ones gathered round. And, then, brothers and sisters, see if you cannot see yourself coming out of that grave again! See that every day, at least once a day – die daily and rise again daily – and see what a great difference it will make to your peace, your joy, your patience, and your determination to live so as to give glory to Jesus Christ.

And is there someone here who still cannot bear to think honestly and hard about his or her own grave? Here is the end of worries, the burial of your fears. If only you will trust yourself to the one who died, was buried, and rose again.

Earlier in this same Gospel we heard Jesus say, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and – and this is the point I am making this morning, this is what Christ has done to the grave by being laid in it and then coming out of it alive – whoever lives and believes in me will never die.” Believe this. It is the truest thing in all the world. To die, when death means ecstasy for the soul in Paradise and rest for the body in the grave – I say, if this is death, it is better to say the Christian never dies!