

The Heart of the Gospel: Gethsemane to the Burial of Christ

Chapter 25: Christ Buried

Brian Schwertley

And now when the even was come, because it was the preparation, that is, the day before the sabbath, Joseph of Arimathaea, an honourable counsellor, which also waited for the kingdom of God, came, and went in boldly unto Pilate, and craved the body of Jesus. And Pilate marvelled if he were already dead: and calling unto him the centurion, he asked him whether he had been any while dead. And when he knew it of the centurion, he gave the body to Joseph. And he bought fine linen, and took him down, and wrapped him in the linen, and laid him in a sepulchre which was hewn out of a rock, and rolled a stone unto the door of the sepulchre. And Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses beheld where he was laid. (Mk. 15:42-47)

When the even was come, there came a rich man of Arimathaea, named Joseph, who also himself was Jesus' disciple: He went to Pilate, and begged the body of Jesus. Then Pilate commanded the body to be delivered. And when Joseph had taken the body, he wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn out in the rock: and he rolled a great stone to the door of the sepulchre, and departed. And there was Mary Magdalene, and the other Mary, sitting over against the sepulchre. (Mt. 27:57-61)

And, behold, there was a man named Joseph, a counsellor; and he was a good man, and a just: (The same had not consented to the counsel and deed of them;) he was of Arimathaea, a city of the Jews: who also himself waited for the kingdom of God. This man went unto Pilate, and begged the body of Jesus. And he took it down, and wrapped it in linen, and laid it in a sepulchre that was hewn in stone, wherein never man before was laid. And that day was the preparation, and the sabbath drew on. And the women also, which came with him from Galilee, followed after, and beheld the sepulchre, and how his body was laid. And they returned, and prepared spices and ointments; and rested the sabbath day according to the commandment. (Lk. 23:50-56)

And after this Joseph of Arimathaea, being a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, besought Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus: and Pilate gave him leave. He came therefore, and took the body of Jesus. And there came also Nicodemus, which at the first came to Jesus by night, and brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about an hundred pound weight. Then took they the body of Jesus, and wound it in linen clothes with the spices, as the manner of the Jews is to bury. Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden; and in the garden a new sepulchre, wherein was never man yet laid. There laid they Jesus therefore because of the Jews' preparation day; for the sepulchre was nigh at hand. (Jn. 19:38-42)

Introduction

The last event of Christ's humiliation recorded in the gospels is the burial of Jesus. As the death and the events surrounding it are amazing and important, the story of the burial of Christ is also marvelous. The sovereign hand of God is clearly seen in these events. While it looked as though the body of the Savior would be tossed into a pit or shallow grave with the two criminals, God had other plans. He providentially took care of His Son's dead body. "Come and see a

burial that conquered the grave, and buried it, a burial that beautified the grave and softened it for all believers.”¹

The burial of Jesus and the details surrounding it are recorded by all four evangelists. They describe the most important burial that ever took place in the history of mankind. While all men die and most are buried only Christ was buried as a substitute. Only the Redeemer entered the earth as the second Adam to become the first fruits of them that slept.

Joseph of Arimathea

The gospels all begin by introducing us to Joseph of Arimathea who is the main character in these events.² He is not mentioned prior to this point and thus the gospel writers give us a number of important details regarding who he was. Interestingly, each gospel author gives details not found among the other three writers.

All the gospels say that Joseph was from Arimathea (Mt. 27:57; Mk. 15:43; Lk. 23:51; Jn. 19:38). Luke identifies this town as “a city of the Jews” (23:51). This would place Arimathea in Judea rather than the region of Galilee which is identified as “Galilee of the Gentiles” (Mt. 4:15; cf. Jn. 4:47, 54). “The town of Arimathea has been identified with Ramathaim-zophim (1 Sam. 1:1), Rathamin (1 Macc. 11:34), and Ramathain (Joshua, Ant. 13.4.9...127), all of which are considered variant names for the same place (Fitmyer, *Luke 2:1526*). If this city has been rightly recognized, it is about twenty miles northwest of Jerusalem.”³

Matthew, writing to a predominantly Jewish audience, identifies Joseph of Arimathea as a rich man (27:53), knowing that Jews would make the obvious connection to Isaiah 53:9. Isaiah had prophesied that the enemies of the Messiah had assigned the Redeemer a grave with the wicked. But instead of a disgraceful burial, the suffering Servant would have an honorable burial with the rich. If Joseph of Arimathea had not acted decisively in this matter, the Romans would have either buried Jesus in a shallow grave with the criminals or discarded His body in Gehenna, the local garbage dump. Joseph’s tomb fulfilled Isaiah’s prophecy.

Mark and Luke tell us that Joseph was a member of the council or the Sanhedrin, as was Nicodemus (Mk. 15:43; Lk. 23:50). Thus, he had a significant social standing in Jerusalem. This explains why Pilate was so willing to listen to him and cooperate with his request. Mark says that Joseph was an “honorable counselor” (15:43). The word “honorable” (*euschemon*) means prominent, reputable, of high standing. Joseph was a prominent member of the great Sanhedrin. He was a distinguished, highly respected member of the council whose word carried great weight among the members. This implies that he had served in the Sanhedrin many years and was a heavyweight in knowledge, wisdom and justice.

Luke identifies him as “a good and just man” who had not consented to the decision and actions of the Sanhedrin regarding the arrest, trial and conviction of Jesus (23:50-51). Joseph was an honest, wise, godly Jew who refused to cooperate with the corrupt, apostate and unjust decisions of the Jewish leadership. Given the fact that the decision of the council against Christ

¹ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:1204.

² “[T]he very name JOSEPH reminds us of a type. *Joseph* was the name of him who supported the patriarch Jacob his father, when living, and magnificently buried him when dead [Gen. 50]. A *Joseph* also had the charge of watching over Jesus in infancy, and of training him up in the days of youth. Now another *Joseph* is entrusted with the care of his burial when dead” (Herman Witsius, *The Apostles’ Creed*, 2:119-120).

³ Craig A. Evans, *Mark 8:27-16:20*, 518. “In any case, Joseph was now settled at Jerusalem with his family, since he possessed here a burial place, but only recently, because the sepulcher had not been used” (Frederic Louis Godet, *Commentary on John’s Gospel*, 957).

was unanimous, we can surmise that either Joseph refused to attend these proceedings or given his fair and just manner he was purposefully kept in the dark about the arrest and trial until the desired verdict was achieved. Given the fact that Joseph was a secret disciple for fear of the Jews (Jn. 19:38), his non-attendance at the trial makes perfect sense. If he attended the trial he would have been in a situation that would force him to take a stand for Christ or publicly deny Him.

Mark and Luke say that Joseph of Arimathea “waited for the kingdom of God” (Mk. 15:43; Lk. 23:51). This identification indicates that Joseph was a godly man, like Simeon (“Simeon...was just and devout, waiting for the Consolation of Israel.” [Lk. 2:25]), and likely had been listening to the teaching of John the Baptist (Mt. 3:2) and Jesus. “Every pious Jew would pray regularly in the synagogue for the coming of God’s kingdom.”⁴ In any case, his theology or eschatological expectations were in harmony with Christ’s own teachings (cf. Mt. 11:4-6, 12).

Matthew and John identify Joseph of Arimathea as “a disciple of Jesus” (Jn. 19:38; Mt. 27:57). Matthew’s account literally reads “who also himself was discipled to Jesus.” “He had recognized in Jesus elements that lifted Him above all other rabbis and teachers.”⁵ Joseph believed in our Lord’s teachings and probably gathered around Him in Jerusalem to listen to Him when He could. But John says that he kept his views secret because he feared the Jews (19:38). Joseph, prior to his coming to Pilate, had purposely lived his life in such a way as to avoid being known as a disciple of Christ.

Joseph’s Fear of the Jews

In order to understand how remarkable and commendable it was that Joseph of Arimathea asked for and buried Christ, we must examine the fear that kept him from publicly confessing the Savior. This fear was rooted in a number of things.

First, Joseph of Arimathea knew that if he had publicly taken a stand for the Redeemer he would have been excommunicated. We know this from other portions of the gospels. John says that the parents of the healed man who was born blind “feared the Jews, for the Jews had agreed already that if anyone confessed that He was the Christ, he would be put out of the synagogue” (9:22). This fear kept a number of the rulers in line. “Nevertheless even among the rulers many believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they did not confess Him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God” (Jn. 12:42-43; cf. 7:13).

The punishment of excommunication in the days of our Lord was a very heavy one. It meant exclusion from the synagogue and temple worship and also a ban on any fellowship or contact with other Jews. Although the death penalty at that time was not permitted under Roman law, a total separation from the covenant community would have meant complete social and economic isolation. Those who desired to follow Christ and confess Him before men had to come to terms with the dread of being cut off from Israel. For them it was equivalent to being cast out of the visible church, one’s own nation, one’s own culture and heritage.

Second, Joseph’s confession would have resulted in his being cast out of the Sanhedrin. His honor, prestige and livelihood would all be lost. Everything that he had worked for his whole life was at stake. Joseph of Arimathea had to decide whether he would take up his cross and follow Christ or whether he would be praised by men; whether he would be rich and popular or

⁴ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 666.

⁵ James Morison, *A Practical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew*, 606.

relatively poor and hated by his own friends, relatives and co-workers. Joseph had to count the cost of what it really meant to be a Christian.

What was true for Joseph of Arimathea is true for every one of us. The Bible makes it very clear that there really is no such thing as a secret Christian. Jesus said, "I say to you, whoever confesses Me before men, him the Son of Man also will confess before the angels of God. But he who denies Me before men will be denied before the angels of God" (Lk. 12:8-9; cf. Mt. 10:32; Mk. 8:38). Paul said, "If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved" (Rom. 10:9). Our Lord told the disciples that they would be hated by all for His name's sake (Mt. 10:39). Jesus also said, "He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me" (Mt. 10:39). The person who does not take up a life of sacrifice, self-denial and even pain due to hardship and persecution in order to follow Jesus is not worthy of the name Christian (Mt. 10:38). The Savior put it very bluntly when He said, "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell" (Mt. 10:28). It is one thing to know that Jesus is the Christ in an intellectual-historical sense and quite another to trust in the Mediator, looking to Him with saving faith. Saving faith does not display an indifference to public confession and godly living, but instead heartily embraces them. True faith is always accompanied by good works or evidences of faith (Jas. 2:14-20).

There are many in America today who view being a Christian as a secret or private matter. In our pluralistic culture it is even considered inappropriate to discuss religious matters like the sacrifice and Lordship of Christ. After all, we are told, we should not offend the religious sensibilities of others. But, such a view is certainly not condoned in Scripture. Joseph is presented as a man who realized that he had missed a great opportunity to be close to Christ and finally takes a stand after our Lord is dead.

The lesson here is that there are times when men must choose between the praise of God and the praise of men. In our anti-Christian culture believers are openly ridiculed, mocked and laughed at as fanatics and fools. Christians who are immature or new to the faith may be tempted at home, work or school to be secret disciples. But those who attempt to be incognito believers are not only violating the biblical imperatives relating to public confession and not placing one's lamp under a basket (Mt. 5:15), but also are placing themselves in great temptation. Sanctification can only progress when professing Christians take the offensive against sin and the world. A person who is truly regenerate cannot remain a secret Christian for very long. "What you lose by unfaithful wrapping of your convictions in a napkin and burying them in the ground is the joyful use of the convictions, the deeper hold of the truth by which you live, and before which you bow, and the true fellowship with the Master whom you acknowledge and confess."⁶

The person who says he believes in Christ, yet continues to remain a secret Christian for a long period of time, simply has no reason to believe that his faith or profession is genuine. Such a person is more concerned about what the world thinks than what God thinks. His regard for the praise of men demonstrates that his love of Christ is not as important as the opinion of unbelievers. The person who really loves Jesus will take a stand for Him when the opportunity arises. If we really believe in Christ and understand the Scriptures, then we should not care what unbelievers think. Joseph of Arimathea had much more to lose than any of us, yet he seized the opportunity to demonstrate his love of the Savior.

⁶ Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions on Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 7, part 3, 288.

Another lesson is that we need to examine ourselves and make sure that a love of money and material things does not cause us to be timid or deficient in the confession of our faith in word or deed. The professing Christian who acts worldly, dishonestly or in a compromising way to seal a business deal and make money is a spiritual coward. The person who says he is a disciple, but refuses to keep our Lord's commandments is not a Christian. "Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world" (1 Jn. 2:15-16). Are you ready to suffer, become poor and be forsaken by all if God calls upon you to do so in order to publicly take a stand for Christ? Those who do so will have great rewards in heaven.

Joseph Publicly Takes a Stand for Christ

We have seen that Joseph had a great deal to lose if he publicly committed himself to the Nazarene. Consequently, for a time, he was unwilling to confess the Savior before men. This refusal to come out of the closet cannot be defended biblically; but, during the course of time the Holy Spirit was doing a work upon his heart. Perhaps it was the unjust trial, the brutal treatment of Jesus and the crucifixion itself that God used to convict Joseph. Calvin attributes this radical change of behavior to the efficacy of our Lord's death:

They bring their spices to embalm the body of Christ; but they would never have done so, if they had not been perfumed with the sweet savour of his death. This shows the truth of what Christ had said, *Unless a grain of corn die, it remaineth alone; but when it is dead, it bringeth forth much fruit*, (John xii.24.) For here we have a striking proof that his death was more quickening than his life; and so great was the efficacy of that sweet savour which the death of Christ conveyed to the minds of those two men, that it quickly extinguished all the passions belonging to the flesh. So long as ambition and the love of money reigned in them, the grace of Christ had no charms for them; but now they begin to disrelish the whole world.⁷

Although the fear of men caused Joseph not to render the devotion, honor and service to Christ that He deserved while He was alive, the Spirit of God overcame that fear, made Joseph a new man and caused him to assist the dead Redeemer with a love, dedication and service that is striking. The man who was once timid and afraid now serves Jesus with a boldness that is unsurpassed. There are a number of things that Joseph did to reveal his faith and devotion to Jesus.

First, he summoned the courage to go to Pilate to request the body of Christ (Mt. 27:58; Mk. 15:43; Lk. 23:52; Jn. 19:38). Mark says that he "boldly went in unto Pilate" (15:43). Joseph probably first approached the centurion and told him that he would seek permission to assume responsibility for the body of the Redeemer. The centurion who had just proclaimed the Nazarene the Son of God was eager to cooperate with the desire to give the Mediator an honorable burial. As a member of the Sanhedrin, Joseph knew the Roman regulations regarding the disposal of the body of a man condemned to death and thus knew he had to go directly to the governor to get permission.⁸

⁷ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 2:244.

⁸ "There is a well-documented Roman reluctance to release to their families and friends the bodies of traitors (see conveniently Brown, *CBQ* 50 [1988] 234-36): there was an understandable fear that such criminals might be imitated as martyr/heroes; the denial of a decent burial was considered likely to reduce the incidence of such

Joseph's decision to go to Pilate was courageous because: (1) The Redeemer had been convicted of high treason by the Roman state. Because Joseph was not a relative of Jesus, it would be assumed that he was a supporter of the Lord's teachings and movement. Joseph was opening up his life to investigation and possible arrest. Pilate, however, knowing that our Lord was innocent and probably feeling somewhat angry at the Jews for using him to kill a righteous Man, gave the body over to Joseph. (Mark notes that Pilate was so surprised that Christ was already deceased that he inquired of the centurion as to how long He had been dead [15:44].)

(2) By coming forward to ask for the body of Jesus, Joseph was publicly acknowledging that he was a friend and disciple of Christ. He knew that his acts of devotion toward the Savior would lead to the end of his political career and persecution by the Sanhedrin and the Pharisees. The threats and intimidation of the Jewish leadership had caused all the disciples to flee for their lives. Even John and the women who watched from afar off did not have the courage or procedural knowledge to step forward and claim our Lord's body. When Joseph's services were needed he made his attachment to Christ known. When God placed Joseph in a position to demonstrate his faithfulness to the Redeemer, he seized the opportunity. He now feared God in such a way that he no longer feared what men could do to him. Jesus became everything to him and the cares of this world wilted into nothing in his sight. "The conduct of Joseph deserves our praise and admiration, and his name will be held in honor by the Church of Christ, in consequence of it, as long as the world stands."⁹

Second, Joseph humbled himself in order to carry out his act of devotion to Jesus. Men who are rich, powerful members of the civil government are not known for their humility. But Joseph exposed himself to ritual uncleanness and the contempt of the people in order to honor our Lord's body. When he went to Pilate to ask for Christ's corpse, he became ritually unclean upon entering the governor's residence. Then Joseph, perhaps with the help of the soldiers, took the Savior down from the cross. The cross was lowered and laid upon the blood-stained earth. The crown of thorns was carefully removed and the cruel iron spikes were drawn out. The touching of a dead body also made Joseph ceremonially unclean; the Jews would have been repulsed by Joseph's actions. It was considered a very disgraceful thing "to receive from the hand of the executioner the body of a crucified man."¹⁰ But Joseph did not care what the people thought, for his heart was saturated with love for Christ. A strong faith and devotion toward the Savior shuts off the arrogant, foolish, unbelieving murmurings of the wicked. "So does trial elicit faith, and the wind, which quenches the feeble flame that plays around the outside, fan into brightness the fire that burns deep within, though for a time unseen. Joseph of Arimathea, now no longer a secret disciple, but bold in the avowal of his reverent love, would show to the Dead body of His Master all veneration."¹¹

Third, Joseph's faith was now so strong that he honored Christ when He was dead; when from a human standpoint, it looked as though the Nazarene's work was a failure. When Jesus

imitation. As Joseph made his request, three things counted in his favor: (i) in provincial justice administered to those without Roman citizenship, the governor was largely free of formal imperial legal constraint (see at 23:1-5), so Pilate would feel free to follow his own judgment; (ii) as a member of the Sanhedrin, and not at all part of Jesus' retinue, Joseph would seem to be a good risk; and, of most importance, (iii) Pilate had little fear of unfortunate consequences in a situation where: (a) he was not convinced that there ever was any capital culpability; (b) the Jewish leadership was firmly against the "offender" and his movement; and (c) the volatile public had failed at the crucial moment to support this apparently popular figure." (John Nolland, *Luke 18:35-24:53*, 1164).

⁹ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3:381.

¹⁰ John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark and Luke*, 3:332.

¹¹ Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, 2:616.

was alive and was working amazing signs and was preaching the most spiritual and profound of sermons, Joseph did not outwardly commit himself to the Redeemer. But now that He was dead, he publicly took action to serve Him. This proves that a strong faith trusts in God and does great things even when knowledge is incomplete. There is no evidence that anyone, including Joseph, was expecting Jesus to rise from the dead. But Joseph's love and devotion overcame that which was lacking in his knowledge. Joseph's faith in the person and teaching of Christ was not lessened by the reproach of the cross. He knew the Savior was who He claimed to be and would cling to Him in love no matter what the consequences to his own personal fame or fortune. His behavior sets a wonderful example to believers of every age.

Fourth, Joseph went to great personal expense to care for the body of Jesus. Joseph gave our Lord his own tomb that was hewn out of solid rock and had never been used (Mt. 27:60; Lk. 23:53; Jn. 19:41). "A tomb cut out of solid rock would have been particularly expensive. This tomb into which Joseph placed the body of Jesus was..., 'his new tomb,' one that he had recently prepared.... A new tomb would obviously have contained no other body, thereby obviating the possibility of a later confusion of bodies."¹² He also prepared by procuring a linen cloth (burial shroud) to wrap Christ's body after he was taken down from the cross (Mk. 15:46). Matthew says that the cloth was "clean" (27:59) and uses a word (*kathara*) that could indicate that the material was not only clean but white.

John's gospel indicates that Joseph had help from a friend who had also been a secret disciple. "And Nicodemus who at first came to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds" (19:39). This is the same Nicodemus of John 3 and 7:50. Clearly Joseph and Nicodemus had some sort of prior arrangement to take care of our Lord's burial. Joseph would provide the tomb, which he already owned and was nearby, as well as the linen; Nicodemus would bring the costly spices used in wrapping the body. Nicodemus would not normally have had such a large quantity of spices on hand. Therefore, he probably went into the city and procured them while Joseph bought the grave clothes. The suffering and death of Christ had the same effect on both men. Both were publicly and courageously drawn to the Savior.

The amount of spices that Nicodemus brought to prepare the Redeemer's body was staggering. "One hundred *litrai* is equivalent of 65.45 pounds."¹³ Obviously, Nicodemus was enormously wealthy and wanted to demonstrate his love for Jesus by giving him a burial fit for a king. The spices that he purchased were so heavy that he either had to have them delivered to the site or brought them on a mule or a cart. The myrrh used for burial was in powdered form, which was very expensive. "It was made of the aromatic gum resin, exuding from the grey odorous bark of the *Balsamo-dendron myrrha*; it was also used extensively by the Egyptians for burial purposes. Mixed with Myrrh was aloe, the Hebrew *ashalim*, a powdered wood, most highly prized for the delicate odor which it releases when the wood decays."¹⁴

Jesus Lovingly Prepared for Burial

Now that Joseph and Nicodemus had the materials they needed on site, they began to carefully prepare the body of Christ for burial. Normally the first thing to be done would be to wash the dead body with water. This would have been difficult and time-consuming in the case

¹² Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-18*, 858-859.

¹³ George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 359.

¹⁴ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John's Gospel*, 1327-1328.

of our Lord who was covered in spittle, dried blood, sweat and dirt. Because they were in a hurry they would have had to bring some water, or perhaps they secured the Roman soldiers' sour wine for this purpose. Although none of the gospels mention the washing of the body, it was such an "important part of the burial ritual (even permitted on the Sabbath, *m. Sab.* 23:5) that it is unlikely to have been omitted however great the hurry."¹⁵

After the body was washed, it would be carefully wrapped with cloth. "Among clothing that belongs to us, Christ put on even the grave-clothes, to make them easy to us, and to enable us to call them our wedding-clothes."¹⁶ The synoptics indicate that a large square of cloth was used while John speaks of "linen cloths" or "wrappings." This, of course, is not a contradiction for both descriptions are true. On the body itself and in between each layer of cloth a generous amount of myrrh and aloes would be sprinkled or poured over the body. Some of Jesus' female followers from Galilee also "prepared spices and ointments" (Lk. 23:56) in order to "anoint" Christ (Mk. 16:1) the day after the Sabbath. Either these women were unaware of the amount of spices used by Joseph and Nicodemus or, more probably, the haste involved in preparing our Lord for burial due to the nearness of the Sabbath meant that the burial formalities were not completed to their satisfaction.

The Jewish process was very different than Egyptian methods which involved removing the bodily organs and fluids and then replacing them with an embalming mixture which would mummify the body. This process took many days. The Jews cleansed and covered the body with clean linens, spices and ointments in order to freshen it and stave off the smell of decay. A biblical worldview caused the Jews to show respect to their dead; thus, John notes that what Joseph and Nicodemus did was customary among the Jews. They did not mutilate the body like the Egyptians or burn the body like various pagan peoples:

The Jews, as Tacitus (*Hist.* 5.5) indicates, were averse to cremating the corpse, as was frequently the practice of the Greeks (cf. Sophocles, *Electra* 1136-1139; for inhumation, Thul 1, 134, 6; Plato *Phedo* 115E) and of the Romans who in Cicero's day used both methods (*De leg* 2, 22, 56). The seeming exception in the burning of the bodies of Saul and his sons (1 Sam. 31:11-13) prob. was an emergency measure lest the Philistines molest the bodies, for the same men buried their bones. Early Bible legislation required that those guilty of sexual immorality (Lev. 20:14 [incest]; 21:9 [the daughter of a priest who becomes a prostitute]) and those under a curse as Achan and his family (*Josh.* 7:15, 25) were to be burned.¹⁷

Until quite recently virtually all Christian denominations were opposed to cremation. Like the Old Covenant church, they viewed the dignified treatment of the dead body as consistent with the future resurrection of the body and considered burning (which is viewed as associated with judgment) as inconsistent. Matthew Henry's application is noteworthy:

In conformity to this example, we ought to have regard to the dead bodies of Christians; not to enshrine and adore their relics, no, not those of the most eminent saints and martyrs (nothing like that was done to the dead body of Christ himself), but carefully to deposit them, the dust in the dust, as those who believe that the dead bodies of the saints are still united to Christ and designed for glory and immortality at the last day. The resurrection of the saints will be in virtue

¹⁵ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 668.

¹⁶ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:1205.

¹⁷ W. H. Mare, "Burial," in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 1:672.

of Christ's resurrection, and therefore in burying them we should have an eye to Christ's burial, for he being dead, thus speaketh.¹⁸

The Savior Entombed

As the gospel writers describe the burial of Jesus, they give us a number of details that are significant. First, our Lord was placed not in His own grave, but in another man's tomb. Therefore, the life of poverty that was part of His humiliation attended the Redeemer even unto His death and burial. When Christ came into the world He was born into a cradle which was not his own. When He ministered to the people he had nowhere of his own to lie down to sleep (Mt. 8:20). When He died, it was the generosity of a rich man that supplied Him with a sepulcher. Interestingly, "Twice was Jesus Christ rich in the days of His poverty. Once, immediately after His birth, when the wise men from the East offered Him gold, and frankincense, and myrrh; and now, after His ignominious death, when a rich man buries him, and a distinguished man provides spices to anoint Him. Yea, a rich Joseph has taken the place of that poor Joseph who stood by the manger."¹⁹

Second, the tomb was a new tomb (Mt. 27:60) where a dead body had never been laid (Lk. 23:54; Jn. 19:41). God did not want His Son to be put into a place of corruption. Jesus "was not a common person, and therefore must not mix with common dust. He that was born from a virgin-womb must rise from a virgin-tomb."²⁰ Further, hewn tombs were usually designed for more than one person—a husband and wife or even a whole family. The fact that it was a new sepulcher where no person had ever been laid prevents any suspicion of any other body arising instead of Christ. It also eliminates any idea that Jesus was raised by virtue of some great saint buried there before Him, as occurred when a dead man touched Elisha's bones (2 Kg. 13:21).

Third, the tomb was hewn out of solid rock (Mt. 27:60; Mk. 15:46; Lk. 23:53). "Jerusalem is encircled by soft limestone rock out of which caves can be quarried or exist naturally. The area outside the walls of Jerusalem has been described as a gigantic cemetery."²¹ These tombs would have one small tunnel as an entrance which would open into a room all carved out of the rock. On the walls of the tomb would be carved shelves or chambers for individual bodies. "It is clear that the tomb-chamber of Joseph's sepulcher did not contain a shaft or niche (*kok*) into which the body of Jesus was shoved endwise. In Palestine there are many graves of this character, but this was not one of them, for in that case the angels could not have been sitting at the foot end and at the head end!"²² Apparently, Joseph's sepulcher either had a declivity carved into the floor or a carved free-standing bench independent of the walls. Joseph was very rich and this possibility should not be ruled out. In the days of our Lord these tombs were closed off either by a large boulder or by a carved rolling stone placed in a channel cut in the rock for the movement of the stone. The large stones would prevent animals and grave robbers from entering the sepulcher. Joseph and Nicodemus would have had to have help in rolling the stone against the door of Jesus' tomb. This could have been provided by hired help or by disciples from Galilee that had observed the crucifixion. The fact that Christ's body was

¹⁸ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:1205.

¹⁹ Besser as quoted in J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts in the Gospels: John*, 3:386.

²⁰ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:1206.

²¹ Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 405.

²² William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of John*, 444.

placed in a tomb of solid rock dispels any idea that the disciples tunneled into the tomb to avoid the Roman guards and remove the Savior secretly.

Fourth, this tomb was very close to Golgotha (Jn. 19:41). John notes the importance of this close location because it was the day of preparation (i.e. Friday) and the Sabbath was about to begin. If the burial site had not been in close proximity to Calvary then it would have been virtually impossible for Joseph to get everything done that needed to be done for Christ's entombment. Once Jesus died at approximately 3:00 pm, Joseph had roughly three hours to go to Pilate and get permission for the body; purchase the linen wrapping material; make arrangements with Nicodemus to get the spices for the body; transport all the materials to Golgotha; wash the body; wrap it with the spices and then transport it to the tomb. When we keep in mind their modes of transportation and the fact that the city was crowded with pilgrims, the proximity of the tomb was crucial. The tomb's proximity to Calvary and Jerusalem was also important so that Jesus could rise from the dead "in the view of all his enemies, where they had the stone sealed and a guard to keep him in; whereas, had he been carried further off, the matter had been more obscure, and might have seemed more doubtful."²³

It is noteworthy that Christ's disciples took great care not to profane the Sabbath with unnecessary labor. The small amount of time that Joseph had to make arrangements and prepare the Savior's body did not cause him to put off the interment until the Sabbath day. They also worked diligently to get everything done before the Sabbath began so as not to intrude upon any of the Sabbath time. They regarded the Sabbath day as a time of holy rest and joy in God and did not want any preparation or sorrow to mar their worship. These godly men set a beautiful example to modern professing Christians who often profane the Sabbath day for trivial reasons.

Fifth, the tomb was in a garden (Jn. 19:41). This detail found only in John's gospel calls our attention to the fact that the sin and death that Adam brought upon the human race in the garden of Eden is expiated and conquered by the second Adam. "In the garden of Eden death and the grave first received their power, and now in a garden they are conquered, disarmed, and triumphed over. In a garden Christ began his passion, and in a garden he would rise and begin his exultation."²⁴ Man was created by God to live with Him in perfect fellowship in a lush garden. It is therefore appropriate that our Lord's burial and resurrection in a garden brings us paradise restored. Further, it is fitting that the Savior who suffered vicariously in the place of others should be buried in another man's tomb. Moreover, a lovely identifiable garden right outside the city next to the blood-stained ground of Calvary made the resurrection not only possible but provable. People in Jerusalem would come to know this location and would know that the tomb was empty. This historical event was such a thorn in the Jewish leadership's side that they bribed the soldiers to say that the disciples stole Jesus away during the night (Mt. 28:13).

Other Notable Doctrines and Applications

When examining the narratives regarding Joseph of Arimathea and the burial of Christ, there are certain important teachings and applications that stand out. First, one cannot help noticing God's special providential ordering of all these events. If God had not done a work upon Joseph's heart and he had not come forward at that precise time to request the body of Jesus in order to bury Him in his own tomb, the Scriptures would not have been fulfilled. Our Lord had prophesied, "For as Jonah was three days and nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son

²³ George Hutcheson, *John*, 410.

²⁴ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:1206.

of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Mt. 12:40). Note how God perfectly brought all the needed elements together. The man who came forward to claim and bury Christ just happened to: a) be rich in order to fulfill Isaiah 53:9; b) own a new tomb in which no one had ever been buried; c) own a sepulcher right next to Calvary so the body could be interred before the beginning of the Sabbath; and, d) have Nicodemus as a close friend so Jesus could receive the burial of a King. How many rich men do you think lived in Jerusalem that had a new, unoccupied sepulcher in a garden right next to Calvary? Joseph was probably the only one in the holy city who could fulfill all these conditions. Clearly, God controls everything that comes to pass, even all the seemingly insignificant small details.

Second, the burial of Jesus teaches us that the expiation of our sins is an accomplished fact. It demonstrates that our Lord really died. It shows that the foundation of our justification is laid and that our sins are buried with Him. It also is set forth in Scripture as the basis (along with our Lord’s suffering and death) of our sanctification. Paul says that “we were buried with Him through baptism into death” (Rom. 6:4); that “he who has died has been freed from sin” (Rom. 6:7). Christians are to regard their sins as being covered by the blood of Christ; their old life of sin, lust and service to the devil has been once and forever buried with Him. We now live lives unto God because we arose with our precious Savior (Rom. 6:8ff.). Our old man was put to death and now progressively is being mortified. Further, our Lord’s stay in the tomb was necessary for His resurrection and our future resurrection and glorification. “Pursuing death, so to speak, to the remotest corner and asylum of his fortress, he expelled him thence, and sanctified our sepulchers, that they might become pleasant resting-places for our bodies, until we awake ‘to behold God’s face in righteousness’ and to ‘be satisfied with his likeness.’”²⁵

Third, the burial of the Mediator is presented in Scripture as an important aspect of His humiliation. This is implied in a number of passages. Paul says that before Christ could ascend (glorification) He first had to descend “into the lower parts of the earth” (Eph. 4:9). Genesis teaches that man’s returning to dust is part of the punishment for sin (Gen. 3:19). As our Surety, Jesus had to endure the shame and humiliation of the grave. “Because his being buried was part of the wages of sin, it was an element in our Savior’s humiliation.”²⁶ The very purpose of the grave is to remove dead bodies, which decay, become putrid, cause disease and smell like filth, away from the living. The grave conceals that which is rotten and repulsive from humanity. The Psalmist says that even though God will not allow the Redeemer to see corruption, nevertheless, the grave is something to be rescued from. “For You will not leave My soul in Sheol, nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption” (16:10; cf. Ac. 2:27, 31; 13:34, 35). Burial is a descent, a going down into the earth into the darkness and dust of death. Being dead in the earth is, from a biblical standpoint, something negative and humiliating (e.g., Ps. 49:14).

Although the Mediator’s burial is an aspect of His humiliation, our Lord’s stay in the tomb under the power of death was a short one. “Because the penalty for sin had been fully paid, and the guilt of his people’s sin wholly cancelled. If Christ’s body had remained permanently under the power of death, it would have indicated that the penalty for sin had not been fully paid.”²⁷

Fourth, the type of burial that Jesus received and the honorable treatment of His dead body by the saints serve as a prelude to His glorification. The Redeemer’s body was not cast into

²⁵ Herman Witsius, *The Apostles’ Creed*, 2:135.

²⁶ Johannes G. Vos, *The Westminster Larger Catechism: A Commentary* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2002), 112.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

Gehenna or in a mass grave for criminals. Instead, the Savior received the burial of a rich man and a king. “[H]is burial was in many respects honourable, and ‘his sleep’ in the tomb ‘was sweet unto him’ [Jer. 31:26]; because he rested from his labours that were now accomplished, and anticipated the most excellent fruits which were immediately to follow.”²⁸ The Lord’s burial points us to His glorious victory. “And what saith Jesus to my soul from the grave? Fear not, ‘I have the keys of death and the grave, I will go with thee, and will surely bring thee up again from thence.’ And observe, my soul, as the grave could not detain thy Lord, thine Head, a prisoner; so neither can the grave, beyond the appointed time, detain any of his members.... ‘Oh death where is thy sting? Oh grave, where is thy victory? God be praised who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.’”²⁹

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²⁸ Herman Witsius, *The Apostles’ Creed*, 2:134.

²⁹ Robert Hawker, *The Poor Man’s Morning and Evening Portions*, 299, 300.