

"THE SIGNIFICANCE OF JESUS' BURIAL"

I. Introduction

- A. Our Lord's suffering and death on the cross marked the climax of what is referred to as his estate of humiliation.
- B. The humiliation of Christ was an essential component of his mediatory work as the Redeemer of God's elect.
- C. As our Westminster Shorter Catechism expresses it, "Christ, as our Redeemer, executeth the offices of a prophet, of a priest, and of a king, both in his estate of humiliation and exaltation." [WSC 23]
- D. Christ's estate of humiliation began with his incarnation in the womb of the Virgin Mary, and it ended with his burial in the grave of Joseph of Arimathea.
- E. The burial of Christ was the last component of his humiliation, and it is also the bridge to his estate of exaltation.
- F. As we study this passage about Christ's burial today, we will see that this is not merely a matter of historical detail, but that there is much about Christ's burial that is worthy of our reflection.

II. Emergence of a Righteous Remnant

- A. The first thing that we will consider about Christ's burial is how it brought about the emergence of a righteous remnant among God's covenant people of old.
 - 1. Though Israel's religious leaders had rejected Jesus and condemned him to death as a blasphemer, there were some in Israel whose faith in Jesus persisted, even after he breathed his last breath on the cross.

2. One such person was Joseph of Arimathea, which was a town believed to have been about five miles to the north of Jerusalem.
 3. Joseph was a member of the counsel, the Sanhedrin, but he did not agree with their decision to condemn Jesus.
 4. Luke calls our attention to Joseph's godly character by describing him as "a good and righteous man," who was "looking for the kingdom of God."
 5. That description reminds us of what Luke said about Zechariah, Elizabeth, Simeon, and Anna in the opening chapters of this Gospel.
 6. Like them, Joseph had saving faith, and he was waiting for the arrival of the Messiah and his kingdom.
 7. Joseph believed in Jesus and received him as the Christ, which means he would have been devastated by Jesus' death.
- B. The Romans usually left the bodies of crucified criminals on their crosses, letting the corpses decompose and be subject to carrion birds and other scavengers.
1. In this way, they took full advantage of the deterrent effect of crucifixion.
 2. Whenever people would pass by the remains of someone who had been crucified, they would feel compelled to make sure that they did not come to the same gruesome end.
 3. While this was Rome's normal practice, in Judea they probably had to moderate it to some degree.
 4. Burial was an important aspect of Jewish piety.
 5. This is attested throughout the Old Testament, as well as in other ancient Jewish writings.

6. We are told about a number of burials in the accounts of the patriarchs in the book of Genesis.
 7. At the time of the exodus, Moses made sure to take the bones of Joseph with him when he led the Israelites out of Egypt, even though Joseph had been dead for over four hundred years.
 8. King David made it a point to recover the bones of Saul and Jonathan after they had been stolen, and he did this even though Saul had tried to kill him on numerous occasions.
 9. The first century Jewish historian Josephus said that a pious Jew was obligated to provide a decent burial even for his enemies.
 10. It is clear that burial was very important to the Jewish people.
 11. For this reason, in Israel the Romans probably buried the bodies of the crucified in a mass grave instead of letting them rot on their crosses.
- C. Joseph of Arimathea wanted to make sure that that did not happen to Jesus' body.
1. We do not know very much about Joseph.
 2. In addition to the information provided by Luke, the other Evangelists tell us that Joseph was wealthy.
 3. They also say that Joseph was a follower of Christ, although he initially kept his discipleship secret out of fear.
 4. But after Jesus' death, he casts his fear aside and acts with great courage.
 5. He asks Pilate to give him Jesus' body in order that he might bury him.
 6. It was risky for Joseph to do this.

7. Remember, Jesus was executed as a revolutionary.
 8. The reason why his disciples abandoned him when he was arrested was because they were afraid that they might be executed as well.
 9. By asking for Jesus' body, Joseph was publicly identifying himself with Jesus.
 10. He could not be certain that Pilate would not arrest him, and perhaps even have him put to death as one of Jesus' followers.
 11. Moreover, Joseph's request would have set his fellow council members against him, since he was identifying himself with a man whom they had condemned.
 12. Joseph was risking a great deal in asking for Jesus' body.
 13. His faith was emboldened by what his Savior has done for him.
 14. The more you meditate upon how wide and long and high and deep is the love of God in Christ, the bolder you will be in your witness and in your faithfulness to the Lord.
- D. The other part of the believing remnant whom Luke mentions are the group of women who had followed Jesus from Galilee.
1. We learn from Mark that this group included Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of Jesus, and Salome, the mother of Jesus' disciples James and John.
 2. While all of the men among Jesus' disciples had fled out of fear (with the exception of John), these women were too devoted to Christ to abandon his body.
 3. They followed Joseph and watched him as he took the body, wrapped it in a shroud, and laid it in his tomb.
 4. Then the women returned to the place where they were staying, and there they prepared the spices and perfumes that were used to

slow the process of decomposition and to cover the unpleasant odor that it produced.

- E. Luke also says that the women rested on the Sabbath, which was still Saturday at this point in redemptive history.
1. It is worth noting that this was the last Sabbath that was ever celebrated under the old covenant.
 2. At least it was the last one whose celebration was warranted.
 3. As Jesus' body rested in the tomb on that last Saturday Sabbath, the old Sabbath sign was brought to its point of fulfillment.
 4. The Sabbath points to the end-times rest that is the goal of history.
 5. By his death, Jesus secured that rest for his people.
 6. Through faith in him, we gain access to the eternal Sabbath of the new creation.
 7. Nevertheless, we have not yet entered into the full enjoyment of that eternal Sabbath rest.
 8. This is why the early church retained the Sabbath sign but moved it from the last day of the week to the first day of the week.
 9. The church did this because of its recognition that Christ's resurrection on a Sunday was the epochal event that marked the inauguration of the new creation.
 10. We see this in this statement from the second-century apologist Justin Martyr: "We all hold this common gathering on Sunday, since it is the first day, on which God transforming darkness and matter made the universe, and Jesus Christ our Saviour rose from the dead on the same day."

III. Confirmation of Jesus' Death

- A. Another reason why Jesus' burial is significant is because it publicly demonstrated that he really died.
1. You may be familiar with what is sometimes referred to as the "swoon theory," which was at one time put forth by skeptics as an alternate explanation for Christ's empty tomb.
 2. These skeptics contended that Jesus did not really die on the cross but only swooned, and that he was revived as he lay in the tomb.
 3. Well, this theory is so implausible that there is virtually no serious support for it today.
 4. There is simply no getting around the fact that Jesus died on the cross.
 5. Roman executioners were experts in carrying out their work.
 6. They had lots of practice.
 7. A soldier who bungled an execution was subject to the death penalty himself.
 8. Furthermore, Jesus simply would not have been able to survive after being subjected to the torture of the scourging, the crucifixion, and the soldier's spear thrust that produced a flow of blood and water from his side.
 9. Further, the body was totally encased in winding sheets.
 10. Lastly, a half-dead man could not have moved the stone, overcome the guards, and persuaded people that he had not merely escaped death but had risen victoriously from the dead.
- B. The fact that Jesus was really dead meant that something would have to be done with his body.
1. Joseph's actions ensured that Jesus was given an honorable burial.

2. In the Gospel according to John, it says that Joseph, with the help of Nicodemus, anointed Jesus' body with 75 pounds of spices, which was the amount used for a king.
 3. Moreover, the rock tomb in which Joseph laid Jesus was quite costly, and this was the first body that was ever laid in it.
 4. The fact that Jesus' body received this kind of care made his burial into a sort of prologue to his exaltation.
 5. Once our Savior completed the work that he had been sent to accomplish, God providentially ensured that his body was treated with honor.
- C. One application that we can derive from this has to do with the manner in which we bury our dead.
1. Even though a corpse is a body that has been separated from its soul, it is to be treated with dignity because it is still a human being.
 2. This is underscored in verse 53, where the corpse of Jesus is referred to by the pronoun "him."
 3. Luke tells us that Joseph "laid *him* in a tomb cut in stone."
 4. It was still Jesus, even though Jesus' human soul had been separated from it.
 5. It is especially fitting for us as Christians to bury our dead with dignity and honor.
 6. After all, we know that the dead in Christ will not remain dead, but will arise in glory at the last day.

IV. Assurance That Our Mediator Has Subdued the Grave

- A. We turn now to the third point of our outline: Jesus' burial is significant because it assures us that our Mediator has subdued the grave.

1. Have you ever wondered why Jesus had to experience burial?
 2. Why was it not enough for him to die for our sins?
 3. Why did he have to continue in the state of death for three days?
 4. Why was he not immediately resurrected once he had paid the penalty for our sins on the cross?
 5. The burial of Christ is a core Christian belief.
 6. It is included in the Apostle Paul's creedal statement near the beginning of 1 Corinthians 15.
 7. It is included in the Apostles' Creed and in the Nicene Creed.
 8. The reason why it was necessary for Jesus not only to die, but also to be buried was because he could only remove the sting of death by enduring death in its entirety.
 9. He had to be buried because burial is what happens to us after we die.
- B. Burial marks the final separation of the deceased from this life.
1. No matter how unwilling people are to face up to the reality of death, the presence of a corpse forces them to do so.
 2. Listen to these thoughts from the Dutch preacher Klaas Schilder: "The grave is an amen which the human being knows he must utter when death comes... Every funeral is a beginning of that process by which our glamour fades, the impression which we have made on others wanes, and our personality loses its power of self-explanation and self-revelation... The burial... is a stripping of our power overagainst the world, a confirmation of our having departed out of time, or having lost our hold on time." [Schilder, *Christ Crucified*, 554, 555]

3. We bury corpses because they have to be removed from the world of the living.
 4. In Israel, a corpse was both ceremonially unclean and literally unclean.
 5. The latter is true in every culture.
 6. Burial is a matter of public health.
 7. The corpse has to be put away.
 8. The fact that we have to do this testifies to the devastating effect that sin has had upon our race.
 9. We were created as divine image-bearers.
 10. Yet because of sin we are subjected to the repulsiveness of death and decay.
 11. Jesus had to be buried because the grave was the final indignity that he had to suffer in order to secure our salvation.
- C. What a comfort it is for us as Christians to know that our Savior has already been to the grave and that he has conquered it for us.
1. Apart from Christ, the grave is like an inescapable set of jaws that drag people down into utter disgrace.
 2. But if you belong to Christ, the grave is transformed to a place where your body will sleep for awhile until it is awakened and remade and reunited with your soul at Christ's return.
 3. The burial of Christ assures the Christian that he or she has no reason to fear the grave.
 4. In the words of theologian Louis Berkhof, Jesus' burial "serves to remove the terrors of the grave for the redeemed and to sanctify the

grave for them." [*Systematic Theology*, 340]

5. If you are a Christian, the grave will not be able separate you from your Savior.
6. As it says in our Shorter Catechism, "The souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness, and do immediately pass into glory; and their bodies, being still united to Christ, do rest in their graves, till the resurrection." [WSC 37]
7. Jesus' grave could not keep hold of him.
8. Neither will your grave be able to keep hold of you.
9. When Jesus summons you to come forth from your grave, your body will rise up, and you will joyfully greet your Lord and Savior, and you will enter into the eternal Sabbath rest of the new creation.