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## Sermon Summary #52

### The Burial of Jesus: Proof of Death and Prelude to Life Mark 15:42-47; John 19:31-42

On several occasions in the past three weeks, as we've looked at the crucifixion of Jesus, I've made reference to both the similarities and the contrasts between ancient forms of capital punishment and our modern approach to the issue. Today, every effort is made to sanitize the execution of a criminal. Elaborate steps are taken to ensure that his or her death be as painless and inoffensive as possible.

When the Supreme Court of the United States first banned capital punishment, part of the reason for that decision was that it was deemed to be "cruel and unusual." The crucifixion of a condemned man under Roman law, on the other hand, was deliberately cruel and unusual. It was intentionally both torturous and humiliating. Crucifixion was chosen as punishment for slaves and social outcasts not because it was a quick and efficient way to dispose of unwanted persons or threats to the peace of the state. Crucifixion was chosen because it did more than crush and destroy a man's body. It also brought shame, ridicule, and public humiliation to his name.

One might think, then, that the death of a crucified victim terminated his humiliation. Unfortunately, this was not the case. Roman law demanded that the victim be deprived of any and all honors in death: he was allowed no funeral, no eulogy, no public mourning or expressions of sorrow on the part of friends or family.

Today, thousands of dollars are often spent to provide the deceased with a beautiful casket, made of the most expensive of materials and lined with soft linen or even silk. Following the death of an important or influential figure, the flag of the United States is lowered to half staff. If you are attending a sporting event or concert, they may pause for a moment of silence in honor of the deceased. The picture of the individual appears in the newspaper together with an often lengthy biography and account of his/her accomplishments in life. And of course the funeral procession can extend for miles with dozens of vehicles, driving with headlights on and under the supervision of a police escort.

Nothing of the sort ever happened in the first century following the death of a man by crucifixion. Instead of a casket or even a simple pine box, or for that matter the turning over of the body for cremation, the Romans added one final insult by leaving the body on the cross either to rot or to be eaten by predatory birds and scavenger dogs. What little remained of the corpse was forbidden formal burial, the body often being cast into the valley of Hinnom, a perpetually smoldering dung heap outside the city on which the corpses of crucified victims were mercilessly tossed. Jesus, however, was spared this final indignity.

You might wonder why I'm taking an entire sermon to talk about the burial of the body of Jesus. Is it really all that important?

To answer that question, listen to what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:1-4. Here he lays before us the essence of the gospel.

But why is the fact of Jesus' burial so important to the gospel? The answer is in the subtitle to my message today. There I describe the burial of Jesus as **the proof of his death and the prelude to resurrection life**. Here's what I mean by that.

We've come to expect skeptics of Christianity to deny the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. There's nothing new in that. But that some would also try to argue that he never actually died in the first place is truly remarkable. But it gets them the same result: after all, if he didn't die on the cross, he obviously didn't rise from the dead three days later.

The idea behind the “swoon” theory is that Jesus didn’t die on the cross, he only lost consciousness. He passed out. He “swooned.” He was then placed in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea where the cool air from the stone walls later revived him.

Needless to say, the “swoon” theory would require that several people be guilty of the most unimaginable incompetence or outright stupidity. It would require us to believe that the Roman military guard not only failed in their orders to execute Jesus but then also failed to determine if he was in fact dead. Either of these acts of incompetence would have guaranteed their execution as well. It would also require us to believe that the Jewish leaders were duped by his alleged death and then failed to discover the deception later on.

The “swoon” theory would also require us to believe that after enduring the agony of Gethsemane, several trials all through the night, a savage beating ordered by the Sanhedrin, a crown of thorns and being beaten on the head with a rod, the horrors of a Roman scourging, a spear in the side, massive loss of blood, three days in the tomb without medical attention, that Jesus then removed the stone from in front of the tomb, overpowered the armed guards stationed there, somehow convinced his disciples that he had conquered death and the grave, and then lived out his life in obscurity only to die of natural causes at some later time. If you have enough faith to believe that, more power to you!

Thus, one of the reasons why the NT authors emphasize the burial of Jesus is to emphatically declare that he really died. This was no illusion or deception or sleight of hand. He suffered and died and was buried.

Then, secondly, the burial is there to serve as a prelude to resurrection life. During the time Jesus was in the grave, his disciples suffered great emotional and spiritual turmoil. Doubts about who Jesus really was began to plague their thinking. Fears that it had all been for nothing gripped their hearts. Their hopes and dreams for God’s kingdom on earth, now shattered and in pieces.

If nothing else, the burial of Jesus is the prelude, the preparation, the platform if you will for the glorious display of resurrection power when God raised him from the dead. **Without the reality of the burial, both the death of Jesus as the final payment for human sin and the bodily resurrection of Jesus as the defeat of Satan and the consummation of God’s saving work would be in question.**

So let’s turn our attention to what the gospel writers have to say about this event.

We know from John’s gospel, chapter 19, that the Jews were determined that no crucified victims be left hanging on a cross on a Sabbath day. So they went to the governor, Pontius Pilate, and asked that the legs of Jesus and the two thieves crucified next to him be broken. In this way their deaths would come quickly and their bodies could be removed before Sabbath began. You will recall from what I said two weeks ago, that the primary way a crucified man stayed alive was by pulling with his arms and pushing himself up the vertical beam in order to keep his chest cavity open so that he could breathe. Breaking the legs, as painful and horrific as it may seem, actually proved merciful as it hastened the death of the victim.

John 19:31 indicates that this particular Sabbath was a “high day” because it just so happened that it was also Passover. The annual Passover occasionally fell on a Sabbath even as for us Christmas occasionally falls on a Sunday (as it will this year!). Therefore, this was an especially holy and highly regarded Sabbath day.

As I mentioned before, Roman custom was to leave the bodies of crucified victims on the cross as a public warning, i.e., as a deterrent to crime. But according to Jewish tradition (Deut. 21:22-23) the bodies of all executed criminals could not be left exposed in public after sundown. In addition, sundown on this day was the beginning of the Sabbath and therefore extra precautions had to be taken lest the bodies of Jesus and the two thieves profane the land. This is the motivation behind the request of the Jewish leaders.

What **remarkable hypocrisy** on the part of the Jewish leaders. They had no qualms or concerns about murdering the Lord of the Sabbath, but they were religiously meticulous in making sure that their Sabbath day observance not be profaned by having his body still hanging on the cross!

When the soldiers arrived, they proceeded to break the legs of the other two victims, but when they came to do the same to Jesus, they realized he had already died. Jesus' death had undoubtedly been accelerated because of the severe abuse to which he had earlier been subjected.

In spite of the fact that he was dead, according to v. 34 one soldier "pierced his side with a spear." Why? Perhaps it was a customary practical step designed to make certain he was dead. Then again, it may be regarded as an act of unjustified barbarism. Regardless of intent, it was ordained of God as the fulfillment of prophecy (v. 37).

What is the significance of the "blood and water" (v. 34) that flowed out of his side? Many contend that under extreme circumstances the heart ruptures, causing blood to spill into the pericardium surrounding the heart where it mixes with the lymphatic fluid. This is what was released by the spear wound. It is not the cause of death, however, but the *fact* that Christ died that concerns John. The apostle was an eyewitness and reports the blood and water to stress that Jesus really died (vs. docetism).

Once again we see God orchestrating events in order that Scripture might be fulfilled. When the soldiers parceled out Jesus' clothes they had no idea they were acting in fulfillment of what had been prophesied centuries before (Psalm 22:18). Here again, the piercing of his side was in fulfillment of what God had spoken through the prophet Zechariah (12:10).

We now return to Mark 15 and take note of **the principal characters** involved. The request for the body of Jesus would normally have come from some member of his family or from his disciples. However, *Mary, his mother*, was no doubt emotionally exhausted, if not devastated, by the course of the day's events, and every indication is that John, the only disciple left at Calvary, would have taken her home to care for her even as Jesus requested of him.

Nowhere do we read of the *brothers or sisters* of Jesus, and it is most likely that they were still in unbelief concerning his messianic claims. Most agree that *Peter*, broken by shame, was hiding in John's house in hopeless dejection. We don't know what happened to *the remaining nine disciples*, but most likely they retreated to Bethany following Jesus' arrest in Gethsemane.

*Four* people are left to care for the body of Jesus. All four gospels mention *Joseph of Arimathea*; Matthew and Mark mention *Mary Magdalene and another Mary*; and John mentions *Nicodemus*. Two other women, named Joanna and Susanna, were probably there to help. I want to focus on Joseph and Nicodemus.

***Joseph of Arimathea*** - The four gospels tell us several things about this man:

- (1) He was from Arimathea. Scholars don't know for certain where this was.
- (2) He was rich (Mt. 27:57; he was owner of a garden and a tomb close at hand).
- (3) He was looking for the kingdom of God (Mk. 15:43). This may indicate that like the old man Simeon mentioned in Luke's gospel, he was living in anticipation of the coming Messiah.
- (4) He had become a disciple of Jesus, but a secret one because he feared the Jews (Jn. 19:38). He had probably heard Jesus preach on numerous occasions and watched him minister to the sick and demonized. Fear and self-protection and timidity had kept him quiet about his devotion to Jesus, but all such hesitation now gives way to a remarkable act of courage.
- (5) He ended his secrecy, came out of hiding, and mustered courage to ask Pilate for the body (Mk. 15:38). The *ironic* thing is that many who had openly followed Jesus before his death are now in hiding, and some such as Joseph who had been in hiding now openly come forward to make known their love and allegiance.

(6) He was a prominent and highly respected member of the Sanhedrin (Mk. 15:43). This probably explains why Pilate was inclined to entrust him with the body.

(7) Finally, Luke tells us (23:50) that he was a good and righteous man who had not consented to the action of the Sanhedrin in condemning Jesus. So whatever fear he may have had before, he sticks his neck way out in defending Jesus in the presence of the entire Sanhedrin and then again by asking Pilate for his body.

Although the text says he removed the body, purchased the linen, and buried Jesus, he must have had help. He could not have removed the body, far less rolled the stone over the tomb, by himself. He undoubtedly had servants. Nicodemus was also there to help.

*Nicodemus.* John tells us that Joseph had help from Nicodemus. You will recall that Nicodemus was a Pharisee who had come to Jesus at night. It was in conversation with Nicodemus that Jesus uttered those most important words, "unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."

A brief word about *Pilate* is in order. Knowing from experience that the death of one crucified normally took two to three days, he was surprised when Josephus requested the body (Mk. 15:44-45). To release the body of someone convicted of treason, and to a non-relative at that, was unusual. Many suspect this indicates Pilate still had reservations about the guilt of Jesus.

Try to envision what it must have been like for Joseph and Nicodemus to remove the body of Jesus from the cross and to prepare it for burial.

**First, it must have been emotionally overwhelming to remove his body from the cross.**

Joseph and Nicodemus would have stood at the foot of the cross as a soldier leaned a ladder against it and climbed upward. There he extracted the nails, tossing the five-inch spikes to the side to be used later to impale yet another victim. He then gently lowers the body into the waiting arms of Joseph and Nicodemus: "Careful now," says Joseph. "Easy does it."

Perhaps Joseph knelt down on blood-drenched soil, cradling the head of Jesus in his lap. Removing the crown of thorns brutally embedded in his brow would have been especially traumatic. Joseph worked gently, as no doubt he had many times before when removing a splinter from a child's finger. With a soft wet cloth he cleans the blood from Jesus' face.

Joseph casts a glance at Nicodemus, who is shaking his head in dismay and disbelief, his own tears now falling on the lifeless body of the crucified King.

As Joseph brushes back off the face of Jesus the hair matted and tangled by sweat and blood, the questions must have raced through his mind: "Is this *really* the Messiah? How can it be? Is it worth the risk to take responsibility for his body? What have we gotten ourselves into?" Or were they simply overcome with grief at seeing and carrying the body of their Lord and Master?

Perhaps they paused only briefly as they gazed on his body, their minds reflecting back on his years of loving service; their eyes running up and down this now broken, limp body.

his *hands* . . . which healed and held and helped, now torn and cramped;

his *eyes* . . . which blazed and wept and forgave and gleamed with the joy of the Holy Spirit, now shut tightly in death;

his *lips* . . . which spoke of love, life, hope, truth, faith, now parched and broken;

his *side* . . . at which so many had walked and found comfort, now brutally pierced;

his *back* . . . that offered to carry the burdens of weary sinners, now lacerated to shreds;

his *knees* . . . on which he had knelt to pray for others and to wash the disciples' feet, now bruised and battered;

his *feet* . . . on which he had walked to minister, which had carried him to the lost and needy, now torn and twisted.

### **Second, we take note of the preparation of the body for burial.**

Evidently, Joseph obtained a large linen cloth from the market in which to wrap the body, Nicodemus provided the supply of dry spices to pack around the body to act as a partial and temporary anti-putrefacient, while the women agreed to return to the tomb at the first possible moment after the Sabbath was over to anoint the body properly.

There is considerable debate about the precise nature of the burial cloths which cannot detain us here. Clearly, though, the burial of Jesus was unusual because of the time pressure with the Sabbath fast approaching. There was no time to wash the body or to procure ointments; no garment with which to dress the corpse. We are told that "they bound it (the body) in linen cloths with spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews" (John 19:40). Presumably the jaw and wrists and ankles were bound together, the body was wrapped in a large sheet with the spices around it, with the women committed to return after the Sabbath to anoint him as best they could.

### **Third, there was the tomb itself.**

The tomb of the wealthy in those days was constructed with two chambers, an outer room into which one could easily walk, and an inner room, the entrance into which would have been through a rectangular doorway about 2ft. high. This explains why the disciples had to "stoop down" to see where the body had once lain.

The entrance to the outer chamber of the tomb would have been sealed with a stone, either a boulder rolled directly into the entrance, or possibly a disc-shaped stone, about a yard in diameter, like a millstone, which was placed in a wide slot cut into the rock. Since the groove into which the stone fitted sloped toward the doorway, it could easily be rolled into place; but to roll the stone backwards would require the strength of several men . . . or only one angel!

In conclusion, were the story to have ended here, we would be of all people most to be pitied. It matters little how he died or why he died if he remained dead. It matters little who was involved or why or what they felt, if his body stayed in the tomb. All that we have seen of the death of Jesus is of significance to us, indeed, eternal importance, only because he rose again to bodily life, having conquered both sin and death. Apart from the resurrection, his death matters no more to us than that of the two thieves between whom he was crucified.

Lessons:

There is again tremendous irony in the fact that the only people left to care for the body of Jesus were **two Pharisees** who had kept silent because of their fear, together with a small group of women. *Where are the disciples?* Where are those who loudly proclaimed their love and loyalty? They are nowhere to be found. But what we do find is that a handful who once lived in the shadows and remained silent, now step forward in remarkable courage and boldness.

If one looks at the disciples only on the day of Christ's crucifixion, and passes judgment on the reality of their faith based on how they acted then, the conclusion might be that they did not truly love him. But we would be wrong!

If one looks at Joseph and Nicodemus at any time during the course of Jesus' earthly ministry, and passes judgment on the reality of their faith based on how they acted then, the conclusion might be that they did not truly love him. But we would be wrong!

The faith of the disciples quickly gave place to fear, whereas the fear of Joseph and Nicodemus quickly gave place to faith. The commitment of the disciples momentarily turned to cowardice, and the cowardice of Joseph and Nicodemus eventually turned to courage. Perhaps the important lesson for us to learn is to be slow to pass judgment on the state of another's soul. Time will tell.

Let us also not overlook that these were not merely men. Joseph and Nicodemus were **Pharisees!** Think of all those whom Jesus had set free from a variety of conditions: lepers, paralytics, the demonized. Yet here are two men who appeared respectable, who looked to be successful, who were highly regarded and honored in public. These men were delivered from their own sort of bondage and slavery: **religion.** Jesus saved prostitutes. Jesus cleansed lepers. Jesus raised dead people back to life. Jesus restored sight to the blind. Jesus brought forgiveness to tax collectors. But nothing he did can quite compare with the way in which he set free those trapped in religion.

Think about all that Jesus had said to the Pharisees, the names and descriptive terms he had used of them: Hypocrites! Blind guides! White-washed tombs! Brood of vipers!

Over time, by the grace of almighty God, Joseph and Nicodemus came to see the truth of what he said. *They had grown weary of the religious rules and the oppressive regulations and unbearable burdens and impossible expectations that religion imposed on the human soul. They had grown weary of the endless hours of arguing over meaningless details in their religious traditions. Their eyes had been opened and they saw Jesus for who he really was: the man who is God!*