

THE BURIAL

John 19:31-42

Have you thought at all about what you want for your funeral, or how you want to be buried? Most people avoid this consideration until and unless they are making a will and their attorney insists they give it some thought.

“In July 1994 Brian Kelly, who lived in suburban Detroit, suffered complications from surgery on his intestines. Knowing he was soon to die, Kelly told his family what he wanted done with his remains. His request was unusual, but his family granted it.

“Kelly’s boss, Mary McCavit, at Independence Professional Fireworks shop in Osseo, Michigan, rolled up Kelly’s ashes in a twelve-inch-round fireworks shell. On Friday, August 12, at a convention of fireworks technicians near Pittsburgh, they shot that shell into the sky. It trailed two silvery comet tails as it ascended into the night sky, and then it exploded into red and green stars.

“If you want to go out in a glorious display, you have to admit, that is pretty spectacular.”¹

Well, our glorious Lord did not go out in a spectacular display, but was hastily buried in a borrowed grave. Today we will learn the details of His burial.

John 19:31-42 NAS:

³¹ *Then the **Jews**, because it was the day of preparation, so that the bodies would not remain on the cross on the **Sabbath** (for that Sabbath was a high day), asked Pilate that their legs might be broken, and that they might be taken away.*

³² *So the soldiers came, and broke the legs of the first man and of the other who was crucified with Him;*

³³ *but coming to **Jesus**, when they saw that He was already dead, they did not break His legs.*

³⁴ *But one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately blood and water came out.*

³⁵ *And he who has seen has testified, and his testimony is true; and he*

¹ Larson, Craig Brian, ed., *Contemporary Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers, & Writers*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996, p. 208.

knows that he is telling the truth, so that you also may believe.

³⁶ *For these things came to pass to fulfill the Scripture, "Not a bone of Him shall be broken."*

³⁷ *And again another Scripture says, "They shall look on Him whom they pierced."*

³⁸ *After these things **Joseph of Arimathea**, being a disciple of Jesus, but a secret one for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus; and Pilate granted permission. So he came and took away His body.*

³⁹ ***Nicodemus**, who had first come to Him by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds weight.*

⁴⁰ *So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen wrappings with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews.*

⁴¹ *Now in the place where He was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid.*

⁴² *Therefore because of the Jewish day of preparation, since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.*

Now we will take a closer look at the passage, beginning with John 19:31-34:

³¹ *Then the Jews, because it was the day of preparation, so that the bodies would not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), asked Pilate that their legs might be broken, and that they might be taken away.*

³² *So the soldiers came, and broke the legs of the first man and of the other who was crucified with Him;*

³³ *but coming to **Jesus**, when they saw that He was already dead, they did not break His legs.*

³⁴ *But one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately blood and water came out.*

According to the Jewish Law (Deuteronomy 21:22-23) a body was not to remain exposed on a tree (or cross) overnight and certainly not over a Sabbath. A person executed in such a manner was under God's curse and his body if left exposed would defile the land (Deuteronomy 21:23; Galatians 3:13).²

Deuteronomy 21:22-23 NLT:

²² *"If someone has committed a crime worthy of death and is executed and hung on a tree,*

²³ *the body must not remain hanging from the tree overnight. You must bury the body that same day, for anyone who is hung is cursed in the sight of God. In this way, you will prevent the defilement of the land the Lord your God is giving you as your special possession.*

² Carson, D. A.: *New Bible Commentary : 21st Century Edition. 4th ed.* Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., USA : Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, S. Dt 21:22.

Everyone who hangs on a tree is cursed. The hanging referred to here, which included being nailed to a post, was the public display of a body after the execution or death itself. Such a practice was intended to heap shame on the victim even after his death, by showing that he was under God's curse for breaking a law of God that was worthy of the death penalty. The law, however, only allowed the person to hang on the tree until sundown because the body would by that time begin to decay and become "cursed." While every dead body was considered *unclean*, the body that had been hanged would also become cursed and thereby capable of bringing defilement on the whole land if allowed to hang overnight. The cursed body could therefore defile the entire nation as it would rot and fall to the ground. The curse on the murderer would then defile all the people. The curse applied to the criminal would carry over to the community and the land as a whole.

D. A. Carson comments, "This law lies behind the statement in Galatians 3:13 that Christ took upon himself the curse of the law due to all people because of sin. The manner of his execution, therefore, was awful not only because of its pain, but also because of its shame."³ To expose the body for any length of time after death would be to hold it up to public shame and ridicule. A greater curse than this could hardly be imagined.⁴

These comments about hanging also refer to people like Absalom, who was accidentally killed when his long hair got caught in tree branches and hanged him. It may seem odd that such a law is mentioned in Deuteronomy because the form of capital punishment which was used in Israel was **stoning**. Israel never used hanging as a form of capital punishment. So what this really means is that a person who was put to death by stoning was then afterwards hung on a tree.⁵ Such shame would apply only to criminals of the worst kind to let it be known in public view that they had died for breaking God's Law. This was to be a warning to others of the severe penalty for such a crime. The body was to be taken down from the tree by nightfall and buried.⁶

Probably Moses did not realize, and certainly the children of Israel did not realize, the full significance of this law. In Galatians 3:13, Paul applies this law to Christ. After His arrest and trial, Jesus was delivered into the hands of the Romans for execution. He was crucified on a Roman cross, sometimes called a tree. Paul says that when Christ was hanging there on that tree (cross), He was taking our sins and the curse of God which we would have suffered for our sins. We would be the ones cursed and prevented from entering Heaven, because no one who had broken God's Law could receive salvation. But Jesus was willing to become a curse for us to redeem us from the curse of sin. He redeemed us from the penalty of sin, and He has bought our pardon. How? Because He

³ Carson, D. A.: *New Bible Commentary : 21st Century Edition. 4th ed.* Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., USA : Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, S. Dt 21:22.

⁴ Eugene H. Merrill, *New American Commentary – Volume 4: Deuteronomy*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1994), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 295.

⁵ Gen 40:19, 22; Josh 10:26; 2 Sam 4:12; 21:12.

⁶ J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible with J. Vernon McGee*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1983), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "Chapter 21".

was made a curse for us.⁷

After a crucifixion the Romans usually left the dead body to the beasts of prey. This lack of proper burial was the final humiliation in a crucifixion. But Jews removed exposed bodies for the reasons we have already indicated.⁸

Jewish burial customs did not involve mummification or embalming, which took out the blood and body organs. Their normal process was to wash a body and cover it with cloth and aromatic oils or spices. Jesus' body was placed in a new tomb in a private garden, not in a cemetery. Matthew wrote that this was Joseph's "*own new tomb that he had cut out of the rock*" (Matthew 27:60). Isaiah prophesied that the Messiah, the suffering Servant, though despised and rejected by men, would be with the rich in His death (Isa. 53:9). Also, in Jesus' burial He identified with believers who will die and be buried.⁹

Joseph and Nicodemus' act of love and respect for the body of Jesus was for them dangerous, costly, and without any personal gain. The service of Christians for Christ should be equally courageous and sacrificial, for their labor is not in vain (1 Corinthians 15:58).¹⁰

With what we have just learned as a background, we think it appropriate that we not continue in John 19 without first turning to Galatians chapter 3.

Galatians 3:1, 10-14 NLT:

¹ *Oh, foolish Galatians! Who has cast an evil spell on you? For the meaning of Jesus Christ's death was made as clear to you as if you had seen a picture of his death on the cross.*

¹⁰ *But those who depend on the law to make them right with God are under his curse, for the Scriptures say, "Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the commands that are written in God's Book of the Law."¹¹ So it is clear that no one can be made right with God by trying to keep the law. For the Scriptures say, "It is through faith that a righteous person has life."*

¹² *This way of faith is very different from **the way of law**, which says, "It is through obeying the law that a person has life."*

¹³ *But Christ has rescued us from the curse pronounced by the law. When he was hung on the cross, he took upon himself the curse for our wrongdoing. For it is written in the Scriptures, "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree."*

¹⁴ *Through Christ Jesus, God has blessed the Gentiles with the same blessing he promised to Abraham, so that we who are believers might*

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Walvoord, John F. ; Zuck, Roy B. ; Dallas Theological Seminary: *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures*. Wheaton, IL : Victor Books, 1983-c1985, S. 2:341.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

receive the promised Holy Spirit through faith.

Now we will get back to John 19. Breaking a victim's legs while they were hanging on a cross caused death to occur fairly quickly by shock, loss of blood, and an inability to breathe (the chest cavity would bear the pressure of the body's weight after the legs were broken). Without this procedure, a person could live for many hours or even days. The procedure was performed on the two thieves on each side of Jesus.¹¹

Jesus had already died so His legs were not broken. But just to make sure, a soldier pierced Jesus' side with a spear. The result was a sudden flow of blood and water. This clearly indicates that Jesus was a real human being who died a real human death. It is entirely possible that the spear struck the stomach and the heart, which accounted for the flow. This is also proof beyond a doubt that Jesus did really die. Some folks like to claim that Jesus did not really die on the cross and that He was buried alive and therefore did not rise from the dead.

John 19:35-37 NAS:

³⁵ *And he who has seen has testified, and his testimony is true; and he knows that he is telling the truth, so that you also may believe.*

³⁶ *For these things came to pass to fulfill the Scripture, "Not a bone of Him shall be broken."*

³⁷ *And again another Scripture says, "They shall look on Him whom they pierced."*

You might be wondering why so much attention is being given to all these details of Jesus' death, some of which seem morbid.

In verse 35 John asserts these things are true and that he was an eyewitness to them. In addition, he cites the events fulfillment of prophecy in the Scripture. John was an actual eyewitness to the Crucifixion. The value of his testimony is that it enables others to understand the facts and also their significance (John 20:31; 21:24). John explained that by piercing Jesus' side rather than breaking His legs, two specific prophecies or types were fulfilled: 1) Jesus, as the true Passover Lamb, did not have any of His bones . . . broken (Exodus 12:46; Numbers 9:12; Psalm 34:20) and, 2) people in the future will look on the pierced One (Zechariah 12:10; Revelation 1:7).¹²

God knew that down through the centuries critics would debunk Jesus' resurrection. One of the arguments used against the resurrection is that Jesus didn't really die. So here we have the record that even the Roman soldiers knew that Jesus was dead so they did not have to break His legs. But just to be sure a soldier thrust the sword into Jesus' side. Even if He had not already been dead,

¹¹ Walvoord, John F. ; Zuck, Roy B. ; Dallas Theological Seminary: The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures. Wheaton, IL : Victor Books, 1983-c1985, S. 2:340

¹² Walvoord, John F. ; Zuck, Roy B. ; Dallas Theological Seminary: The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures. Wheaton, IL : Victor Books, 1983-c1985, S. 2:340

the extreme loss of blood would have made the death certain.

Furthermore, by giving all the details of the burial, John also confirmed that everyone who was on the scene and who was caring for the body knew they were wrapping and laying to rest a corpse. So let us now look at those details.

John 19:38-42 NAS:

³⁸ *After these things **Joseph of Arimathea**, being a disciple of Jesus, but a secret one for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus; and Pilate granted permission. So he came and took away His body.*

³⁹ ***Nicodemus**, who had first come to Him by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds weight.*

⁴⁰ *So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen wrappings with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews.*

⁴¹ *Now in the place where He was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid.*

⁴² *Therefore because of the Jewish day of preparation, since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.*

Matthew alone reports that **Joseph of Arimathea** is both a disciple and a rich man (Matthew 27:57). Matthew could be making the point that it took a great deal of faith for a wealthy man like Joseph to risk losing some or all of that wealth because he was willing to identify himself as a friend and follower of Jesus. It is also reasonable to see here the fulfillment of the suffering servant passage in Isaiah 53:9 NAS: “*His grave was assigned with wicked men, Yet He was with a rich man in His death, Because He had done no violence, Nor was there any deceit in His mouth.*” Joseph was a member of the Sanhedrin (Luke 23:51), one who had not agreed to the plot to condemn Jesus and to have him crucified (Luke 23:51).¹³

Only he had *secretly* been a disciple of Jesus. He was afraid, thinking that if he should do anything for Jesus, the other members of the Sanhedrin would throw him out of the council, and not only from their council but even from the synagogue. (See John 7:13; 9:22; and 20:19.) Though a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish council, Joseph was “*a good and upright man who had not consented to their decision*” (Luke 23:50-51). But now as the result of Christ's atoning death and Joseph's love for him, this man has suddenly become very courageous. He goes to Pilate and requests the body of Jesus. Mark 15:43 stresses the boldness of this act. The boldness is evident especially in the fact that he acted in spite of knowing that his fellow members of the Sanhedrin would hear about it!¹⁴

As the linen bandages were wound around Jesus' body, the mixture of myrrh and aloes were carefully added to cover His body. These perfumes would help prevent the smell of

¹³ William Hendriksen, *Baker New Testament Commentary – Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1953), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 440-445.

¹⁴ Ibid.

a decaying body. That was the manner in which the Jews prepared their dead for burial. They did not *embalm* like the Egyptians, who removed the internal organs.¹⁵

The question has been raised about the whereabouts of Jesus' disciples at His crucifixion and burial. We read in Mark 14:50 that, "*they all left Him and fled*" after Christ was arrested in the garden. Those mentioned as being at the Cross were Christ's mother, John, several other women, the soldiers, and curious onlookers. We could speculate perhaps that the other disciples were somewhere in the back of the curious crowd, but Scripture does not say so. Mark's Gospel points out the contrast between Jesus' disciples, the faithful women, and the disciple John. They witness Jesus' death, burial, and eventually the empty tomb. The disciples, on the other hand, except for John, are nowhere to be seen.

Mark 15:43--16:2 NAS:

⁴³ *Joseph of Arimathea came, a prominent member of the Council, who himself was waiting for the kingdom of God; and he gathered up courage and went in before Pilate, and asked for the body of Jesus.*

⁴⁴ ***Pilate** wondered if He was dead by this time, and summoning the centurion, he questioned him as to whether He was already dead.*

⁴⁵ *And ascertaining this from the centurion, he granted the body to Joseph.*

⁴⁶ *Joseph bought a linen cloth, took Him down, wrapped Him in the linen cloth and laid Him in a tomb which had been hewn out in the rock; and he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb.*

⁴⁷ *Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses were looking on to see where He was laid.*

¹ *When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, bought spices, so that they might come and anoint Him.*

² *Very early on the first day of the week, they came to the tomb when the sun had risen.*

The only people who stuck by Jesus from the cross to the grave were John, Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus, and a group of faithful women. The other men were in hiding. Now this is nothing we should be critical of. If we were to face the fear of prison or death, without the power of the Holy Spirit to give us the courage to face it without fear, any of us might scatter to the place of nearest safety. Remember, the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon these men. Later, after Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came to them and each of them eventually died a martyr's death. Joseph and Nicodemus, however, must have acted together. They must have agreed together beforehand as to what each would do. Therefore they came thoroughly prepared to face whatever the fallout might be. Should we do any less?

When friends or coworkers challenge our faith or aspects of Jesus' ministry, do we take a loving but firm stand? Or do we shrink back, embarrassed to speak up for fear of what

¹⁵ Ibid.

those around us might think? In our current society, which puts so much emphasis on political correctness, it is becoming more and more difficult to speak up for various truths of the Scripture, including: Jesus is the one way to Heaven; God created the world and everything in it; marriage is between one man and one woman, and various sins specifically mentioned in the Bible. Yet, we must trust the Lord and speak whatever the Holy Spirit leads us to say. We dare not shrink back into silence.