



He Was Buried

John 19:38-42

- 1. By a Secret Disciple (verse 38)**
- 2. By the Teacher of Israel (verse 39)**
- 3. According to Jewish Custom (verse 40)**
- 4. In a Garden Tomb (verses 41-42)**

I was at a funeral yesterday at the Red Brick Church in Stillman Valley. For those of you who know Phil, his mother, Shirley, passed away four weeks ago. She was 101 years old.

In light of our text this morning, it got me thinking about our burial customs here in the United States. Today, when somebody dies, if the death was expected from an illness or old age, we notify a funeral home, and a representative will come and transport the body. But if the death was unexpected or suspicious, the police are called and the coroner comes in to investigate. At any rate, the body of the deceased is stored in a morgue, awaiting the decision of what comes next.

Then, depending upon the wishes of the family, the body is given to science, or cremated, or embalmed to preserve and present the body at a funeral. Talk begins about a funeral or “celebration of life.” In some cases, there is no funeral at all. But where there is a funeral, all sorts of questions need to be answered. When will it be? Do we have enough time for family and friends to travel? Where will it be held? In a church building? In a funeral home? What sort of format will take place? A visitation? A service? A graveside service? Will there be military honors? Who will speak?

There are different practices around the world today. I have been to Nepal on missions trips on many occasions. What I have seen among the Hindus is typical. The men carry the body of a loved one who has passed away. The body has been washed by family members and close friends, clothed in white, and covered with an orange blanket and flower garlands.

In Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal, they will walk the body down to Pashupatinath, a Hindu temple by the Bagmati River, where the body will be placed on a funeral pyre and burned. The ashes will then be scattered into the holy river. From the time of death until the ashes are in the river is certainly less than 24 hours, and often less. The reason is that the fire enables a complete detachment of the spirit from the body, releasing it to return to earth in a different form. They want to do this as soon as possible. Generally in Hindu cultures, there is no formal funeral beyond the ceremonies of viewing and cremating the body. There is, however, a specific time of mourning for a week or two, where the family resists regular daily activities and worldly enjoyment, ending with a formal ceremony to mourn the dead.

Now, in the days of Jesus, the customs were different still. Burial was required as soon as possible after death, certainly before sundown if possible. Before burial, the body would be washed and anointed with spices and perfumes. The body would then be wrapped tightly in linen strips or a linen shroud. The reason for the spices was to offset the smell of decomposition.

The bodies weren't buried in the ground and covered with dirt. Rather, they were placed in a tomb, which was essentially a cave that could be covered with a stone. In the tomb, the body would be left alone for a year, after which time all that would remain would be the bones. After the year, the bones would be collected and placed in an ossuary box, wide enough for a skull and long enough for a femur. This ossuary box would then be buried with a little ceremony a year after the initial burial.

Now, all of this is background to our text this morning, in which we will see Jesus buried after his death. The title of my message this morning is simply this: "He Was Buried." The title gives a wink to the Apostles' Creed that we have been reciting during this season of Lent. When speaking of Jesus, the Creed says of him, "who was born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried."

The burial of Jesus was significant enough to include in the Apostles' Creed as something important for us to believe. It's not merely good enough to believe that Jesus died. It was important that he was buried as well. Jesus was not some superhero who momentarily fell, only to have life spark back into him a moment later. He was really, truly dead. He was dead enough to be buried. This stands in contrast to others in Scripture who appeared to be dead but were not, such as Paul,

who was stoned outside Derbe and left for dead but rose up. Another was Eutychus, who fell from a window and was "taken up dead" (Acts 20:9). Paul raised him up immediately, saying "his life is in him" (Acts 20:10). There is some uncertainty whether or not Eutychus was dead or not.

But this was not the case of Jesus. He died. He was buried. The burial is the confirmation of the death.

Note how important the burial of Jesus is. Paul writes,

1 Corinthians 15:3-4

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.

According to Paul, the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus were of "first importance." All three were prophesied of the Messiah. Isaiah 53 prophesied of his death. Psalm 16 prophesied both of his burial and of his resurrection.

So, let's read what John records for us about the burial of Jesus Christ.

John 19:38-42

After these things Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus, and Pilate gave him permission. So he came and took away his body. Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight. So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews. 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. So because of the Jewish day of Preparation, since the tomb was close at hand, they laid Jesus there.

By way of outline, I have four observations about the burial of Jesus. He was buried,

1. By a Secret Disciple (verse 38)

John 19:38

After these things Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus, and Pilate gave him permission. So he came and took away his body.

That's how John chooses to identify Joseph of Arimathea in verse 38. All of the gospel accounts mention him. Matthew 27:57 describes him as a "rich man." Mark 15:43 tells us that he was a "respected member of the council, who was also himself looking for the kingdom of God." Luke 23:50-51 also tells us that "he was a member of the council," but adds that he was "a good and righteous man, who had not consented to their decision and action; and he was looking for the kingdom of God." John describes him as a "secret disciple."

When you put all of these things together, you get a picture of Joseph of Arimathea. He was a godly man who was part of the religious elite. He was in the religious council that condemned Jesus to death, but he wasn't in agreement that this was the good and right thing to do. Yet he remained silent during the proceedings, as he was a "secret disciple."

John had already alluded to the existence of such men.

John 12:42-43

Nevertheless, many even of the authorities believed in him, but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.

Joseph of Arimathea was surely one of these "authorities" who "believed in him," fearing what that belief would cost him. To confess Jesus, Joseph would lose his status as a Pharisee. To confess Jesus, Joseph would lose his influence. To confess Jesus, Joseph would be "put out of the synagogue," which was everything for the Jewish people. The synagogue was the center of all social life. To confess Jesus, Joseph would lose his friends and his reputation.

Now, though Joseph of Arimathea had feared the Jews, the time of fear was over. Asking Pilate for the body of Jesus was his "coming out" as a disciple of Jesus. He may have been a "secret disciple," but in taking away the body of Jesus, he was secret no more. He used his clout as a rich and influential member of the religious

council to publicly speak with Pilate and to care for the body of Jesus.

The Jews didn't often care for the bodies of criminals who were crucified. They were often left for the vultures to eat. But Joseph of Arimathea showed his care for Jesus by making sure that his body was not mistreated. It was prophesied of the Messiah in Isaiah 53:9 that he would be "with a rich man in his death." Joseph of Arimathea was that man.

Before we move on, I want to say a word or two about being a "secret disciple." When John describes Joseph with these words, he isn't commending this as an acceptable category of Christians, as if you have "public disciples" and "secret disciples." Jesus made this clear:

Luke 9:26

For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.

John mentions Joseph being a "secret disciple" whose time had come to go public and identify with Jesus. At this point, Joseph didn't care if he would be put out of the synagogue. At this point, Joseph didn't care about his reputation. He wanted to follow the Lord, not the fear of men.

It may just be that there are some of you here this morning who are "secret disciples" as well. Those at your work don't know that you follow Jesus. Those in your family don't know that you follow Jesus. Your neighbors and your friends don't know that you follow Jesus. It's time to come out. It's time to speak up. It's time to pay the social price of being a follower of Jesus, as Joseph of Arimathea did.

In some ways, being a secret disciple is like the believer who has trusted in Christ but has not yet taken the step of baptism. You believe, but you have not yet gone public. Baptism is the act of going public, declaring before all that you belong to Jesus.

But he's not the only one who helped to bury Jesus. We also see Nicodemus to be one of those as well. Jesus was buried,

2. By the Teacher of Israel (verse 39)

John 19:39

Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight.

This is how Jesus identified Nicodemus during their conversation, as recorded in John 3. Do you remember the discussion? Nicodemus, a man of the Pharisees and a ruler of the Jews, came to Jesus by night. He said to Jesus, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him” (John 3:2).

John 3:3-10

Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” Jesus answered him, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?”

Jesus derided Nicodemus as being a man of learning, an expert in the Scriptures, a teacher of the law to Israel, and yet ignorant of one of the most basic truths of the kingdom of God: “Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3).

This is the message for all of us as well. You cannot see the kingdom of God unless God does a work in your heart and causes you to be born again. That is, “enlightened.” That is, “awakened.” That is, “given new life.” That is, “changed from the inside out.”

Have you experienced the new birth? Do you know what it is to have a heart that once resisted God, but now is drawn to him? I exhort you this morning to believe in Jesus. Cry out to him in faith! Plead with him for mercy. Ask the Lord to do what you cannot do for yourself: to open your eyes to the truth, to change your heart, to give you life in him. This is the promise of the gospel. This is the reason why John wrote his gospel: “that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son

of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31).

On that night when Nicodemus visited Jesus, he left the conversation unbelieving.

John mentions Nicodemus three times in his gospel. The first is in John 3. The second mention is in John 7. When the officers failed to arrest Jesus and were questioned by the Pharisees, Nicodemus spoke up: “Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?” (John 7:51). He was immediately shot down as the Pharisees said, "Are you from Galilee too? Search and see that no prophet arises from Galilee” (John 7:52). His question to his fellow Pharisees show that he was beginning to inch toward an open defense of Jesus.

The third mention of Nicodemus in the Bible comes here in chapter 19. And it is a full coming out. By this point, something had changed. It may well have been the crucifixion that changed him. As Jesus had said to him:

John 3:14-15

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

Perhaps at this point it became crystal clear to Nicodemus. He would have recalled Numbers 21, where the Israelites were bitten by snakes in the wilderness. All they had to do was look to the bronze serpent that Moses had lifted up on a pole, and they would be healed. That image on a pole looks remarkably like a man upon a cross. And Jesus himself had said to Nicodemus that night, “So must the Son of Man be lifted up.” Jesus had been lifted up on a cross, just like the serpent in the wilderness. What Jesus had said to Nicodemus on that dark night was now clear: Jesus was lifted up to die as the sacrifice for our sins, and he will give eternal life to all who believe in him. This teacher of Israel had come to see Jesus for who he truly is, and had come to help in burying him.

What Joseph and Nicodemus did here was deeply countercultural. The Pharisees avoided tax collectors and sinners; they refused to look at them; they crossed to the other side of the road. And here was Jesus, a condemned criminal, a blasphemer in their eyes. Yet these two men went right in and cared for him. This is reminiscent of what I have seen in India and Nepal: when a Christian goes and serves those of the lowest caste, it is shocking and beautiful at the same time. It turns heads. That is exactly what Joseph and Nicodemus were doing here as they cared for the body of Jesus.

Myrrh and aloes were common spices used to anoint dead bodies. They would help to offset the unpleasant odor of a decaying body. If you have ever been around a decaying animal, you can appreciate the help that these spices would bring.

Nicodemus brought a lot of spices. Verse 39 says he came

John 19:39b

... bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight.

One of the household tasks that I dread about as much as any is getting salt for our water softener. It requires going to Farm and Fleet, loading the salt onto a heavy-duty shopping cart, wheeling it out to our van, placing it into the trunk, and then driving home and bringing the bags downstairs. I dread it because of how heavy the bags are. The salt bags are 40 pounds each, and they have nice handles so I can take one in each hand as I walk down the stairs. That is roughly the amount of spices that Nicodemus brought to the tomb — about seventy-five pounds, almost two of those bags.

This may seem like a lot of spices, and it was far more than is normally used to anoint a body for burial. In fact, spices weren't even strictly necessary, as the body would be placed in the sealed tomb to decompose and the smell wouldn't reach anyone. But bringing so many spices to anoint the body of Jesus was an act of devotion on behalf of Nicodemus. This extravagant devotion calls to mind the woman who anointed Jesus with costly perfume, so expensive that Judas objected that it could have been sold for 300 denarii, a year's wages. To the outsider, it seemed wasteful. But such is worship. It is meant to be costly.

Thinking of costly worship, I'm reminded of David, when he bought the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite as the place where the altar of the LORD would be built. Araunah wanted to give it to David, but David insisted upon paying for it:

2 Samuel 24:24

“I will buy it from you for a price. I will not offer burnt offerings to the LORD my God that cost me nothing.”

The same was true for Nicodemus. He came with far more spices than were needed. Many have pointed out that Nicodemus must have been a rich man to

afford such a large quantity. But for Nicodemus, this was only the beginning of what it cost him. Like Joseph of Arimathea, tending to the body of Jesus would have cost Nicodemus everything. He would soon be cast out of the synagogue. He would lose his social standing, his reputation, and his job as the “teacher of Israel.” But he didn’t care, because he didn’t want to offer worship that cost him nothing.

This principle comes to us as well. We ought not to come with worship that costs us nothing. God is worthy of our worship, and he is worthy of all that worship costs us. Worship costs us Sunday morning. Worship costs us generosity with others. Worship costs us time that could be dedicated elsewhere. But true worship makes all such sacrifices with a smile on your face. I’m sure that Nicodemus was all too glad to bring these spices, for he had come to embrace Jesus.

Picture the team: Joseph of Arimathea carrying the body of Jesus, Nicodemus carrying the spices. These influential men, identifying themselves with Jesus at the time of his death, bringing the body of Jesus to the tomb and preparing it for burial. Which leads us to the third point. Jesus was buried,

3. According to Jewish Custom (verse 40)

John 19:40

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

As I said in the introduction, they would have first washed the body of Jesus, covered in blood as it was. Then they would have taken the spices and covered his body with them. Then they would have bound the body of Jesus tightly with the linen cloths, from head to toe, probably putting spices on the outside of the linen wrappings as well. They would have paid particular attention to the head, removing the crown of thorns and wrapping his head tightly so as to keep his mouth closed. Such was the burial custom of the Jews.

There is a beautiful symmetry here worth noting. When Jesus was born, he was wrapped in swaddling cloths (Luke 2:7). When he died, he was wrapped in linen cloths. Birth and death, bookended by the same wrapping. He who entered the world in humility departed it in the same.

Our last point comes in verses 41-42. Jesus was buried,

4. In a Garden Tomb (verses 41-42)

John 19:41-42

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. So because of the Jewish day of Preparation, since the tomb was close at hand, they laid Jesus there.

Here are a few observations about the tomb.

First, it was a brand new tomb. John says this in verse 41, "in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid." We read in Matthew 27:60 that it was actually the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, cut in the rock.

Joseph had gone to considerable expense to hew this tomb from solid rock, and he gave it willingly to Jesus. Little did he know that this was the only tomb in human history that would only be needed for three days, for soon Jesus would rise from the dead. This was the first and last grave rental in human history.

Second, this tomb was "close at hand" to the place of the crucifixion. This means that when the women came on Sunday to the tomb, they came to the right tomb. Some say that the resurrection was simply a misunderstanding of the women going to the wrong tomb. There was no mistaking this tomb. Jesus really rose, which we will celebrate next Sunday. But this Sunday, we are considering his death.

Here is one final observation: this tomb was in "a garden." Jesus was arrested in a garden (John 18:1). He was now crucified and buried in a garden. He would also rise again in a garden (John 20:15). These gardens are unnamed, giving us hints of the original garden that the Lord planted in Eden. Everything that was messed up in the garden of Eden would now be restored in this garden. This is the hope of the crucifixion of Jesus. He restores hope.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on March 29, 2026 by
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For more information see www.rockvalleybiblechurch.org.
