

Dead and Buried: Blood and Water

John 19:31-42

Pastor Jason Van Bommel

³¹ Since it was the day of Preparation, and so that the bodies would not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), the Jews 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, and of the other who had been crucified with him. ³³ But when they came to Jesus and 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 at once there came out blood and water. ³⁵ He who saw it has borne witness—his testimony is true, and he knows that he is telling the truth—that you also may believe. ³⁶ For these things took place that the Scripture might be fulfilled: “Not one of his bones will be broken.” ³⁷ And again another Scripture says, “They will look on him whom they have pierced.”

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. ³⁹ Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus^[e] by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds^[f] in weight. 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. 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 So because of the Jewish day of Preparation, since the tomb was close at hand, they laid Jesus there.

John 19:31-42, ESV

“Dead and Buried”

The phrase “dead and buried” is used to refer to things you think are completely finished or are about to be completely finished. But every once in a while “dead and buried” doesn’t mean truly finished. Earlier this week, I read the remarkable story of Margaret Erskine, the mother of Ralph Erskine. Here’s how the story goes, as written by Simontta Carr:

Ralph Erskine (1685-1752) was born ten years after his mother Margaret was pronounced dead. The pronouncement had been mistaken, but she would have indeed been dead if a greedy sexton had not laid his eyes on her precious ring. Under cover of night, the sexton disinterred her body. Finding the ring too tight to pull off, he took out a knife and began to cut off her finger. The sudden feeling of pain woke up Margaret, who sat up in her coffin. The sexton ran away in fright, and she walked home to her astonished husband.

Of course, in the case of Margaret Erskine, dead and buried was not-quite-dead and buried mistakenly. Being mistaken for dead when you're only mostly dead is not something that only happens in *The Princess Bride* but it has happened a number of times. So, when the Gospel of Jesus Christ was first spreading in the ancient Roman world, many skeptics responded to the proclamation of the resurrection with this dismissal: Jesus obviously didn't really die on the cross. He was only mostly dead.

John gives us explicit eye-witness details to dispel this false notion and to also prove not only that Jesus was truly dead but also that every detail of the death and burial of Jesus was according to Scripture.

A. Breaking the Legs & Counting the Bones

Right after Jesus is dead, John tells us that the Jewish leadership goes to Pilate to request that the legs of the crucified men be broken to hasten their death. They wanted to do this so that the dead bodies would not remain on the crosses overnight into the Sabbath day. The Sabbath that came during the Passover festival was a high holy day, an especially sacred Sabbath, and a body hanging on a tree was considered cursed under the Mosaic Law. This comes from Deuteronomy 21:

And if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God. You shall not defile your land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance. (vv. 22-23, ESV)

The ESV translates this phrase as “a hanged man is cursed by God,” but to be hung on a tree could also refer to someone who was thrown on a gibbet - that is, impaled on a giant spike. Crucifixion had not yet been invented when the Law of Moses was given, but it falls into the same category. Paul picks up on this curse in Galatians 3:13, when he writes, “*Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree”*”

We should think again of the brutally immoral legalistic scruples of the Jewish religious leaders. Earlier in the morning, they did not want to enter Pilate's palace, lest they be defiled and unable to participate in the Passover Sabbath. Now they want the legs of the crucified men broken so their bodies will not defile the land. But they were conspiring to put an innocent

man to death, and now they are requesting Pilate to perform a practice known as crurifragium in the name of religious purity.

If crucifixion is a particularly brutal way to kill someone, crurifragium makes the death even more physically horrendous. The body of a man who had been crucified was excavated by archaeologists in Northern Jerusalem in 1970. The man had evidence that his hands and feet had been pierced by giant nails, but also one of his legs was broken and the other was completely crushed. This evidence confirms what John reports and what has been known to be the practice of Roman crucifixion.

Crucifixion sometimes took days to kill a man. To speed the process, soldiers would take a large iron hammer and break the legs of the crucified man, which would either bring an instant painful death by sending the man into severe shock from the pain or would break his legs and make it impossible for him to push himself up to take a breath, thus hastening the suffocation, which was the most common cause of death for crucified men.

Yet when these soldiers came to Jesus, they could see he was already dead. They decided not to break his legs. John tells us this is in fulfillment of Scripture. But which Scripture? Scholars have debated over which one of three Old Testament verses best fits, but I think the answer is actually all three:

It shall be eaten in one house; you shall not take any of the flesh outside the house, and you shall not break any of its bones. – Exodus 12:46, ESV

*For dogs encompass me;
a company of evildoers encircles me;
they have pierced my hands and feet^[a]—
I can count all my bones—
they stare and gloat over me – Psalm 22:16-17, ESV*

*Many are the afflictions of the righteous,
but the LORD delivers him out of them all.
He keeps all his bones;
not one of them is broken. – Psalm 34:19-20*

One simple act of the soldiers, seemingly random, is actually a fulfillment of three different passages of Scripture. Jesus is our Passover Lamb and none of His bones were broken. He is the perfect embodiment and fulfillment of every line of Psalm 22 on the cross, as we've already seen. Finally, even in His death, Jesus is a righteous man being kept by God from having His bones broken in this brutal way.

B. Piercing the Side, Blood and Water Flows

These Roman soldiers are professional executioners. They have done this before. They know a man can appear dead and not really be dead, so they test their perception that Jesus has died by thrusting a spear into His side. When the soldier pulls his spear back out from Jesus' side, blood and water flowed. What's the significance of this detail of blood and water?

First of all, John assures us that he personally witnessed this flow of blood and water as evidence that Jesus really was dead. If Jesus had been alive, pure blood would have come out from a still-beating heart. Of course, some skeptics have questioned this detail of John's account, desperate to prove him wrong. They say blood and water would not flow out together but only blood.

However, tests performed on cadavers have shown that, if a chest is injured but without penetration of the chest cavity, as very well would have happened to Jesus, fluid does build up between the rib cage and the lungs and that, if the chest cavity were then pierced, this clear fluid would flow out with the blood.

Yet this blood and water which flowed from Jesus' side has symbolic significance as well. Some people have seen in the blood and water a symbolism of the sacraments, of the Lord's Supper and baptism. I don't think that's likely, because the Lord's Supper is never symbolized by just blood but always by bread and wine, body and blood.

More likely is the symbolism referenced in Augustus Toplady's great hymn, "Rock of Ages"

*Let the water and the blood
From Thy wounded side which flowed
Be of sin the double cure
Cleanse me of its guilt and power*

The blood and water here symbolize the two effects of Jesus' atoning death on the cross, which relates to the two problems sin creates for us. Sin makes us both guilty and defiled. Sin is both guilt and pollution. So, we need to be forgiven and cleansed. The blood symbolizes the forgiveness Jesus accomplished for us and the water symbolizes the cleansing from the defilement and pollution of sin. So, not only is our guilt taken away but our shameful filth is also cleansed.

John then tells us that not only was the non-breaking of Jesus' bones a fulfillment of Scripture but so was the piercing of His side. Here John references Zechariah 12:10, which refers to a last-days' time of repentance among the Israelites in Jerusalem with these words:

And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy, so that, when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn.

“They will look on Me” is the LORD, YaHWeH, speaking. “on Him whom they have pierced” is probably a reference to the shepherd figure spoken of in ch. 13, just a few verses later, a verse quoted in Matthew 26:31 in the Garden of Gethsemane:

*“Awake, O sword, against my shepherd,
against the man who stands next to me,”
declares the LORD of hosts.*

“Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.”

By the way, Zechariah 13 opens with this verse: *“On that day there shall be a fountain opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and uncleanness.”*

What does the fountain do? It cleanses from sin and uncleanness. That’s the double cure symbolized in the blood and water. Jesus’ death opens a fountain to cleanse us from sin and uncleanness.

C. Buried in a Rich Man’s Tomb

Jesus is taken down from the cross and His body is treated in a most remarkable way. He is not thrown away, as happened to most victims of crucifixion, who were criminals. Rather, He is taken by two members of the Jewish Sanhedrin and buried lovingly, if hastily, in a rich man’s tomb.

Even this detail fulfills a specific point of Scripture, a seeming contradiction in Isaiah 53:9

*And they made his grave with the wicked
and with a rich man in his death,
although he had done no violence,
and there was no deceit in his mouth.*

Normally in the ancient world, the graves of the wicked and the graves of the rich were separate from each other. Someone could not have his grave with the wicked and with the rich. But Jesus died openly displayed on a criminal’s cross between two criminals. His grave was made with the wicked on Golgotha. But then He was taken down from Golgotha and buried in a rich man’s family tomb, in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea.

D. Wrapped and Anointed

When He was taken down, He was not just thrown into the rich man's tomb. His body was prepared for burial. Here John gives us more details not included in the other Gospels, details he would have known as an eye-witness of these things:

1. Nicodemus was involved in the burial of Jesus, probably in the anointing of Jesus body with the mixture of myrrh and aloes. Nicodemus is not just any member of the Sanhedrin. He was known as "the teacher of Israel" and would have had expert knowledge of the proper way to prepare the body for burial. Joseph of Arimathea, on the other hand, is identified most with his wealth, so perhaps it was his servants who supplied the labor necessary for this task to be done so quickly.
2. Myrrh was an expensive commodity in Jesus' day. When we hear of the gifts of the wise men at Christmas, we think of gold as being the truly costly gift and not so much is thought of myrrh and frankincense. But scholars estimate that the myrrh may have been the most valuable gift, as it was incredibly expensive. A 75-pound mixture of myrrh and aloes would have been an extremely costly anointing.
3. John also tells us that the burial place was right there where Jesus was crucified, in a garden: "*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.*" The area was apparently used as a rock quarry by Herod the Great when he built up the Temple Mound and expanded the Temple. Golgotha was a promontory that had less useful stone and so was left unquarried. The old rock quarry had been turned into a Garden and several of the caves, perhaps carved out by the quarrying of the stone, were turned into tombs. Into one of these newly cut unused graves, set aside for the wealthy of Jerusalem, Jesus was buried.

Every time I study the crucifixion of Jesus, I am again struck by incredible details and how every aspect was precisely foretold by Scripture and foreshadowed by earlier events in Israel's history and in Jesus' life. John is so careful and so precise in his recording of so many of these details. He wants us to see the definite and precise nature of the death of Christ. Why?

Well, as John will explain at the end of chapter 20:

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so 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 is writing with a purpose: He wants us to have a confident faith in Christ, to know that our faith has a firm grounding in who Jesus is and what He did, so that we may know that we have eternal life in His name.

None of the things that happened to Jesus were accidental. He was not a helpless victim of a conspiracy and circumstances beyond His control. As Jesus Himself said in John 10:17-18: *“For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father.”*

Jesus made full atonement for all of our sins and provides full purification from the pollution of sin. He cried out “It is finished” and blood and water flowed from His side.

Jesus really did conquer death. He was dead and buried, but He didn’t stay dead and buried. No one came and raised Him from the dead. He rose again by His own supreme authority. He defeated death and He controls death.

God is in control of everything. From the evil conspiring of the enemies of God to the generosity of wise men and Sanhedrin members, from the seemingly random acts of hardened Roman soldiers to the loving grief of a soul-pierced mother, God is in control of it all, and that means we can trust Him with it all.

The only right response for us in the light of such wonderful, unbelievable, powerful truth is to stop doubting and believe, to stop fighting and to surrender, to stop being anxious and to rest. Our salvation has been accomplished and God is in control. Believe. Receive. Worship. Rest. Rejoice.