

John 19:38–42
Seeing in Jesus' burial the promise of resurrection

Introduction

We've followed Jesus, now, from His arrest in the garden, to His trial before Annas the Jewish high priest, to His trial before Pilate the Roman governor, and then to His crucifixion, and finally to His death, and what happened to His body after He died. We keep seeing—at every step along the way—the true glory and kingship of Jesus and also the overruling sovereignty and providence of God in the unfolding of our salvation. This morning, John tells us what happened to the body of Jesus *after* He was taken down from the cross. He tells us this in order that we might see even in Jesus' burial the promise of His resurrection – and also of our own.

I. John 19:38 — Now after these things Joseph of Arimathea, being a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because of his 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.

Matthew tells us that Joseph was “a rich man... who himself had also become a *disciple* of Jesus” (Mat. 27:57). Luke tells us that Joseph was “a Council member [a member of the Sanhedrin], *a good and righteous man* (he had not consented to their counsel and action)... who was *waiting for the kingdom of God*” (Lk. 23:50-51; cf. Mk. 15:43). Only John tells us that Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, “but *secretly* because of his *fear* of the Jews.”

In chapter seven, John tells us that the crowds were debating about Jesus, “yet no one was speaking openly about Him **for fear of the Jews**” (7:12-13). In chapter nine, the parents of the blind man who had been healed by Jesus passed off the questions of the religious leadership to their son “**because they feared the Jews**” (9:18-22). In chapter twenty, the grieving disciples will be hiding out behind closed doors “**for fear of the Jews**” (20:19). We read in chapter twelve:

➤ John 12:42–43 — Nevertheless many even of the rulers believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they were not confessing Him, for fear that they would be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the glory of men rather than the glory of God.

When John tells us that Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because of his fear of the Jews, does he mean for us to put Joseph in the same category as these rulers who loved the glory of men rather than the glory of God? While the rulers are said to have “believed” in Jesus, they're never called “disciples” of Jesus. But Joseph is. These Jewish rulers have rejected Jesus not because they think He's a fraud (they don't), but because their fundamental, determining love is for the praise and glory that comes from men rather than the praise and glory that comes from God (cf. 2:23-25; 5:41-44). But we can't say the same thing of Joseph.

Joseph's “fear of the Jews” was a failing on his part. He was unwilling to confess Christ openly apparently because of what it might mean for his standing among the Jewish leadership and maybe even for his membership on the Sanhedrin. Maybe Joseph had “good motives.” Maybe he couldn't see yet how far gone were his colleagues on the Council. Maybe, too, Joseph couldn't

yet comprehend how he might have to make a choice between being a spiritual leader of God's (old) covenant people and being a disciple of the Messiah. Joseph was a "good and righteous man"; a disciple of Jesus who was "waiting for the kingdom of God." He had refused to go along with the Council's plan to put Jesus to death. And yet until now, because of his fear of the Jews he couldn't bring himself to follow Jesus openly. *Until now.*

By coming to Pilate and asking permission to take away the body of Jesus (to give Him an honorable burial), Joseph risks the displeasure both of Pilate and of the Jews. Those crucified for sedition were normally not allowed—by the Romans—any burial at all, much less an honorable burial. And yet Joseph asks the Roman governor, who still has his career to think about, if he can give a man crucified for sedition an honorable burial. Joseph's Jewish colleagues have already asked that the bodies be taken away, doubtless intending that they be buried in the common grave assigned for criminals. Certainly, the Jews would never have entertained the idea of giving an honorable burial to a man whom they had put to death for blasphemy. And yet Joseph undermines the plan of his fellow council members by requesting permission to give Jesus just such an honorable burial.

Why? Why would Joseph risk everything *now* (cf. Mk. 15:43)—now that Jesus has already died? Apparently, it's *because* of the death of Jesus—and the circumstances surrounding His death—that Joseph has become all the more convinced of the true glory of Jesus (cf. Ridderbos). Could Joseph have explained this to himself? No, he couldn't. At least not fully. Could he have any inkling of the coming resurrection? Not at all. And yet rather than convince him that Jesus was a pretender and a fraud, it's the death of Jesus that finally brings Joseph out of hiding. It's the death of Jesus that finally convinces Joseph it's more important to be known as one who was a disciple of Jesus than it is to maintain his standing among his fellow Jews or even to avoid the displeasure of the Roman governor. Humanly speaking, what could possibly be more unexpected than this?

Almost equally surprising is that Pilate gives Nicodemus his permission. When the Jews asked Pilate that the legs of the crucified might be broken and their bodies taken away, John never told us that Pilate granted their request. It's simply assumed. But when Joseph asks permission to take away the body of Jesus, John is careful to state explicitly, "And Pilate granted permission." That *Joseph* should *ask* for *this* permission and that *Pilate* should *grant this* permission is yet another sign pointing us to the overruling providence of God — and ultimately to the unfolding of our salvation.

No sooner have we learned that Joseph came and took away Jesus' body than we're introduced to another man who was there with him.

II. John 19:39 — And Nicodemus, who had first come to [Jesus] by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about one hundred litras [70-75 pounds].

We remember Nicodemus from all the way back in chapter three. He was a ruler of the Jews (3:1), and therefore probably also a member of the Council with Joseph. But here John identifies him specifically as the one who had first come to Jesus *by night* (3:2). He seems to be drawing our attention to a similarity with Joseph. Nicodemus was also a good and righteous man. In

chapter seven, when the Pharisees were accusing Jesus of being an imposter Nicodemus said to them:

- John 7:51 — “Does our Law judge a man unless it first hears from him and knows what he is doing?”

Nicodemus believed that Jesus had come from God as a teacher (cf. 3:2). Nicodemus was waiting, just like Joseph was, for the kingdom of God. We can conclude this because of what Jesus said to Nicodemus:

- John 3:3 — “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

But Nicodemus was not yet able to understand, or even to accept the things that Jesus was saying (cf. 3:10-12). The Nicodemus who came to Jesus by night was not yet a disciple of Jesus. And if at some point along the way Nicodemus did become a disciple of Jesus, as seems certain, it also seems certain that he, too, must have been one secretly “for fear of the Jews” (cf. 7:51-52). So the Nicodemus who “first” came to Jesus secretly by night, now comes to Jesus publicly in the light of day, bringing a mixture of spices weighing 100 litras (70-75 pounds) for the burial of Jesus.

And once again, we have to ask: Why would Nicodemus risk everything *now*—now that Jesus has already died? And once again, it’s as a result of the death of Jesus—and the circumstances surrounding His death—that Nicodemus has become all the more convinced of the true glory of Jesus. Jesus’ words to him at their first meeting must have been etched in his mind:

- John 3:13-15 — “No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.”

Did Nicodemus understand yet? Could he explain what was happening? No. Did he have any inkling of the coming resurrection? No. And yet rather than convince him that Jesus was a pretender and a fraud, it’s the death of Jesus that finally convinces Nicodemus it’s more important to be known as one who was a disciple of Jesus than it is to maintain his standing among his fellow Jews.

Even as the declared disciples of Jesus (the “eleven”) are all going into hiding (20:19), it’s these two secret disciples of Jesus who are now, for the first time, declaring themselves openly by coming forward to care for the body of Jesus. Humanly speaking, what could possibly be more unexpected than this?

III. John 19:40 — So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen wrappings with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews.

It was no easy or pleasant task to take a broken and bloodied body down from a cross and then to transport that body even a short distance to a tomb. Most likely, Joseph brought servants along

who would have helped with this task. Likewise, we shouldn't imagine Nicodemus carrying 75 pounds of spices all by himself. Either he brought the spices on a horse or some other pack animal, or else he also brought servants with him. This isn't a covert operation. It's a coordinated effort carried out in plain sight of all who were passing by. This is as powerful a way as possible for Joseph and Nicodemus to declare themselves openly as disciples of Jesus. And again, that they do so now, when Jesus has already died, is perhaps one of the most humanly unexpected things that could have happened.

John tells us that binding a body in linen wrappings with spices was the burial custom of the Jews (cf. Mk. 16:1; Lk. 24:1), but one hundred litras of mixed spices was not at all customary. This was a mark of the highest honor reserved only for people of rank and position, and impossible, anyway, for the average Jew. It would have been unprecedented and even practically unimaginable for this amount of spice to be lavished on a victim of crucifixion. But if the spices are unprecedented, so also is the tomb itself.

IV. John 19:41 — 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.

On the first day of the week, when Mary Magdalene sees Jesus in the garden, she will suppose Him to be the gardener (Jn. 20:15). It would seem, then, that this is the garden of a wealthy man — a man who could afford to keep a gardener. We assume that the tomb within the garden may belong to Joseph because Joseph is the one who asks permission to bury Jesus. Matthew tells us explicitly that the tomb was Joseph's "own new tomb which he had hewn out in the rock" (meaning, "which his servants had hewn out in the rock"; Mat. 27:57, 60). So this is the tomb of a very wealthy man situated in the garden of a very wealthy man — a tomb that no average Jew could ever have afforded.

It would have been unprecedented and even practically unimaginable for the body of a crucified man to be given such an honorable burial — a man put to death on charges of both sedition and blasphemy. Add to this that the two men who come forward to provide this burial and to care for the body of Jesus have only now found the courage to declare themselves openly. And then add to this that Pilate himself grants his permission. Everything about this scene is wholly unexpected. And so, by faith, what we see is not just a set of random circumstances, but rather another sign pointing us to the overruling providence of God — and ultimately to the unfolding of our salvation.

That John means for us to see this becomes even more obvious when he emphasizes that this was a new tomb, a tomb "in which no one had yet been laid" (cf. Lk. 23:53). This reminds us of the donkey's colt that was brought to Jesus for His entry into Jerusalem *on which no one had ever sat* (Mk. 11:2; Lk. 19:30). The point in both of these cases is that the colt and the tomb have been set apart and reserved by God for a holy purpose. Joseph may have hewn out this tomb for himself and his family, but in fact it is God who has prepared this tomb for Jesus. And it is God who has prepared and set apart Joseph and Nicodemus for the need of this moment. It's in this light that we go on now to read in verse forty-two:

V. John 19:42 — Therefore because of the Jewish day of Preparation, since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

This isn't to say that Jesus being laid in this tomb was just the result of circumstance. Instead, we see that it's God's overruling purpose at work in and behind all the human explanations. "Therefore because of the Jewish day of Preparation [because it was Friday afternoon and the Sabbath was about to begin at sundown], since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there."

VI. A Biblical "theology" of burial

So what does it all mean? Why does God Himself see to it that the body of Jesus is provided with such an honorable burial?

Perhaps the first thing we need to understand is that our bodies are essential to our true and full humanity. They're not an afterthought. God didn't create Adam as a spirit or a soul and then add a body later. God first prepared the body, and then He breathed into that body the breath of life. In fact, the Genesis account says it like this:

- Genesis 2:7 — Then Yahweh God *formed man of dust from the ground* and breathed into *his nostrils* the breath of life; and so *the man became* a living being.

It's impossible to suppose from this verse that our body is something secondary or somehow incidental to what it means to be human. But today, many in the church have fallen prey to the dualistic teaching of an ancient heresy called Gnosticism, which was itself rooted in the pagan Greek philosophy of Plato. We may not be Gnostics or Platonists, but we've imbibed some of the ideas that are fundamental to these heretical teachings – especially the idea of a body-spirit (material-immaterial) dualism where the material body is incidental at best — merely a shell that can be discarded without any negative impact upon our true humanity. But this makes nonsense not only of the biblical doctrine of creation, but also of the biblical doctrine of the incarnation and redemption. The eternal Word became flesh because this was to become truly and fully human (cf. Jn. 1:14; Heb. 2:14). The eternal Word became flesh in order that He might redeem us as whole persons, body and soul (Mat. 20:28; Rom. 8:22-23; 1 Thess. 5:23). It's because our bodies are essential to our true and full humanity that we can see how without the resurrection of the body, we can never have any true or full redemption. Apart from the resurrection of the body, there can quite literally be no salvation.

The Old Testament saints could not benefit from the light of the incarnation, but they did have the light of creation, and the example of Enoch and Elijah who did not die but were taken up bodily into heaven (Gen. 4:24; 2 Kgs. 2:11-12), as well as the example of some who were raised bodily from the dead (1 Kgs. 17:17-24; 2 Kgs. 4:18-27; 13:20-21). Add to this the fact that they didn't have to deal yet with the rise of gnostic heresies and we should be able to understand how they could believe in a resurrection of the body unto everlasting life long before they could understand how this resurrection would be made possible (Gen. 47:29-31; 50:24-26; Jn. 11:24; Rom. 4:13; Heb. 11:8-16, 24-26, 35-40; cf. the OT expression, "slept with his fathers," referring not to "soul sleep" but to the sleep of the body in the grave; 1 Kgs. 2:10).

It's only in the light of these things that we can understand and appreciate the Old Testament emphasis on the treatment of the body after death, and specifically on the burial of the body (cf. Eccl. 6:3; Acts 8:2). The body wasn't just the empty shell of a person who had gone away; the body remained essential to that person's true and full humanity even if, for a time, that person was now separated from his or her body. This didn't mean that the resurrection was now dependent upon the proper preservation and burial of the body. The Old Testament saints were well aware of the realities of decomposition ("For you are dust, and to dust you shall return"; Gen. 3:19) and of deaths by burning and drowning and dismemberment. The point was rather the general principle of how a person's body should be treated after death in the light of that body being essential to his or her humanity, and so also (for the righteous) in the light of the hope of resurrection.

This helps us to see why the hanging of a dead body from a tree was a sign that that person was cursed of God (Deut. 21:22-23). This also helps us to understand the significance of the burning of a body after a person had been put to death for certain capital offenses (Lev. 20:14; 21:9; cf. Gen. 38:24).^{*} Just like the hanging of a body after death, so also the burning of the body after death signified that that person was cursed of God. In the Old Testament, another sign of God's curse and judgment upon His people was that they would have no one to bury their dead bodies, but would instead be left exposed to the elements and to scavenging birds and beasts. In Jeremiah this is referred to as a "donkey's burial" (Jer. 22:19).

- Jeremiah 36:30 (1 Kgs. 14:1; 16:4; 21:23-24; 2 Kgs. 9:9-10) — Therefore thus says Yahweh concerning Jehoiakim king of Judah, "He shall have no one to sit on the throne of David, and **his dead body shall be cast out to the heat of the day and the frost of the night.**"
- Jeremiah 14:16 (Ps. 79:1-3; Isa. 14:18-20; Jer. 8:1-2; 16:4, 6; cf. Rev. 11:7-10) — "The people also to whom they are prophesying will be thrown out into the streets of Jerusalem because of the famine and the sword; **and there will be no one to bury them**—neither them, nor their wives, nor their sons, nor their daughters—for I will pour out their own evil on them."

If this "donkey's burial" could be a sign that a person was cursed of God (though obviously not in every situation; cf. Rev. 11:7-10; Jer. 26:20-23), then a proper and honorable burial was often a sign of God's favor (though, again, obviously not in every situation; cf. Job 21:29-34). The wickedness of three of the kings of Judah is witnessed to when it is said that were "buried... in the city of David, *but not in the tombs of the kings*" (2 Chron. 21:20; cf. 24:25; 28:27).[†] Normally, an assassinated king would not be granted an honorable burial, but when Ahaziah, the king of Judah, was assassinated, we're told that "they... buried him. For they said, 'He is the son of Jehoshaphat, who sought Yahweh with all his heart'" (2 Chron. 22:9). Jehoiada was a priest, not a king, and yet we're told that he was "buried... in the city of David among the kings,

^{*} When the men of Jabesh-gilead stole the mutilated (and likely partly decomposed and ravaged) bodies of Saul and his three sons from the Philistines and burned their bodies (1 Sam. 31:8-12), they did this probably to "remedy the disfigurement of the bodies and rescue the bones for burial" (Hertzberg, quoted Dale Ralph Davis). In any case, the pressing need and primary goal was clearly a proper burial (1 Sam. 31:13). In Amos chapter 2, Moab is condemned because he burned the bones of the king of Edom to lime (Amos 2:1).

[†] In addition to David and Solomon, the burial location of all the kings of Judah (the fifteen kings whose death is recorded) and six of the kings of Israel (Baasha, Omri, Ahab, Jehu, Jehoahaz, Jehoash) is specifically noted by the author of Kings and/or the Chronicler.

because he had done what is good in Israel and [had done good] to God and His house” (2 Chron. 24:15-16).

We can especially see the contrast between the “donkey’s burial” as a sign of God’s curse and a proper and honorable burial as a sign of God’s favor in 1 Kings 14.

- 1 Kings 14:11–13 — “**Anyone belonging to Jeroboam who dies in the city the dogs will eat. And he who dies in the field the birds of the sky will eat;** for Yahweh has spoken it.’ But you [wife of Jeroboam], arise, go to your house. When your feet enter the city the child [the son of Jeroboam] will die. **And all Israel shall mourn for him and bury him, for he alone of Jeroboam’s family will come to the grave, because in him something good was found toward Yahweh, the God of Israel.**”

Perhaps the most powerful Old Testament example of the burial of the body as a sign of God’s love and favor is to be seen in Deuteronomy 34.

- Deuteronomy 34:5–6 — So Moses the servant of Yahweh died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of Yahweh. And He [Yahweh] buried [Moses] in the valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor; but no man knows his burial place to this day.

Why does *God* bother to bury the *body* of Moses if Moses himself is now with God—and if no one else will ever know the place of Moses’ burial? The answer is because Moses was God’s righteous servant. Because the body of Moses was essential to Moses’ true humanity, therefore, God’s burial of Moses’ body was the sign of His intention to one day raise Moses up from the dead. In like manner, throughout the Old Testament a proper burial was, for the believer, a recognition that the body is essential to our humanity as God’s creation and therefore a powerful expression of faith that one day the dead would be raised to everlasting life.

Conclusion

Returning now to John, what do we *see* in this most unlikely and unexpected burial of Jesus? A man charged with blasphemy and crucified on charges of sedition, now buried not in a common grave for criminals, but in the garden tomb of a rich man at lavish expense. The two men who come forward to provide this burial and to care for the body of Jesus having only now found the courage to declare themselves openly, even as the rest of Jesus’ disciples are going into hiding. Pilate himself granting permission for the burial of Jesus. And the tomb being a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid.

What do we see in these things? We see in God’s provision for the honorable burial of the body of Jesus the continued unfolding of our salvation (cf. Jn. 12:7; Mat. 26:12). We see, by faith, that this Jesus who was crucified is the holy one of God in whom there is no sin (Heb. 4:15; 1 Jn. 3:5). The prophet Isaiah wrote of the coming suffering Servant:

- Isaiah 53:9 — His grave was assigned with wicked men [we know by virtue of His crucifixion], yet He was with a rich man in His death, [and *why* was He with a rich man in His death?—] ***because He had done no violence, nor was there any deceit in His mouth.***

In the burial of the body of Jesus, God testifies to His love and favor for His righteous Servant — His beloved Son. And so the burial of Jesus also testifies to the fact that the faith and hope expressed in all the burials of all the righteous dead since the beginning of time is about to be fulfilled in Jesus. We see in the burial of the body of Jesus the promise and the guarantee of His resurrection. Therefore, we see even in the burial of our own bodies, and in the burial of all who have died in Christ, the promise that we will one day be raised up to live with Him (1 Thess. 4:16). And if this is so, then we also see in the burial of the *body* the sign that God will keep and guard our *souls* in His own presence and the presence of Jesus until the day of resurrection (cf. Lk. 23:43; 2 Cor. 5:6-8; Phil. 1:23).

- 1 Corinthians 15:55–58 — “O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR VICTORY? O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR STING?” Now the sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law; but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ! Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.