

**“STEWARDSHIP OF GOD’S GIFT OF END OF LIFE:  
DEATH AND BURIAL: WITNESS TO THE RESURRECTION.”**

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**Scripture Texts: John 19:38-42**

**Introduction.**

Today marks the beginning of Holy Week, clearly the most important week in human history.

Tonight we will have a special service of nine lessons and hymns that will walk us through these five days of holy week from the Last Supper to the burial of Jesus. I urge you and your families to come, to set apart an hour to reflect on the profound events that led up to our salvation and the forgiveness of our sins. Make this evening a time to remember the greatest act done by the greatest being for the least worthy and least deserving beings.

I have chosen to break from the ordinary Palm Sunday text and focus on the end of Holy Week, and I have a specific purpose for doing so that I will address in a moment.

Jesus was born to die. Jesus came to earth to take on human flesh to be the ransom for our sins, so He could bear the eternal wrath of the Father for the sins of the world.

**John 19:38-42, Burial of Jesus.**

Jesus’ suffering began around nine in the morning but at noon there was a dramatic shift. A profound darkness engulfed the land for three hours. At three in the afternoon the veil in the temple was torn from top to bottom and Jesus breathed His last. The Roman Centurion who witnessed it all said, “Truly this was the Son of God.”

Soon after three on Friday afternoon a man named Joseph of Arimathea, appeared from the shadows. He was a wealthy man, a prominent person, of high standing in the Jewish high court, the Sanhedrin. We are told that what he did was courageous. He stepped forward to be identified with this crucified criminal.

If he had been quiet about Jesus before he seems now ready to be bold and public. He uses his wealth and position in the service of Christ, he puts them to the use for which God gave them to him in the first place. You don't see this very often.

With real courage, Joseph lets his true colors be known. When everyone else deserted and abandoned Jesus, he comes out for Jesus. He shows his love, respect and loyalty for Jesus. There is one thing he can do for Jesus, he has one thing he can give to Jesus, and he gives that.

He is not hindered by the risk to his status, nor is he hindered by rendering himself ceremonially unclean to keep the Passover by touching a dead body. His love for Jesus compels him even though Jesus is dead.

God has secret saints in places where we least expect to find them. Those who glorify Him in quiet, humble, unnoticed ways. What a reminder that God has a great army of loyal followers all over the world, many quietly serving and loving and giving. God keeps his remnant, like we heard last Sunday night, His seven thousand who had not bowed the knee to Baal.

If Joseph became bold while Christ was dead, how much more should we be bold when Christ is alive in heaven and interceding for us? Pray for moral and spiritual courage to be a Jesus follower. Take the risk of being identified with Jesus.

May we not succumb to fear, to lack of faith, to lack of trust, to weakness. May we not be among those who value their own life and own reputation more than following Jesus.

Resolve never to be ashamed of Jesus, never to hide your faith, never to shrink from worshipping Him. May we never be ashamed to be called followers of Jesus.

His actions may have ruined his reputation and favor with the High Priest Caiaphas and the Jewish council. But he is forever remembered with favor by God in His Word.

### **Burial of Christians.**

This text describes the most important funeral that ever took place in the world. From it we learn some things that apply to us and challenge us and our culture about the way we do funerals.

Among the many questions I am asked as a pastor, one of the increasingly more frequent is questions about cremation and burial, why do Christians bury their dead?

I confess to you I didn't give this issue careful attention twenty-six years ago when my brother died and was cremated. More recently with the deaths of my in-laws and my father I didn't have any say in those decisions. We don't know what we don't know, and we can't control what we can't control. What is past is past.

I am not naïve, I know this is a very personal subject and it hits home for some of us more than others. Whenever we talk about things that are personal, we can easily slip into becoming defensive. But let's be open to what the Spirit says through the Word.

If we are Christians, followers of Jesus, then the first place we should turn is to Scripture and see what guidance and instruction we can learn there. I started asking questions and examining it in the light of Scripture. Since doing that I have had my mind changed and my eyes opened to the growing influence cremation is having in our culture.

The question I want to answer in the time that remains is why do Christians bury their dead? Why is burial a clearly Christian act?

It should give us serious pause to consider God's people have always buried their dead, and from the beginning of time cremation was only a pagan practice. This continues in the NT.

You can actually chart the progress of Christianity across Europe by the rise of burial and the decline of cremation. Those who believed in and followed Jesus turned from Roman cremation to Christian burial, often with considerable sacrifice.

Across history, cremation is pagan and burial Christian. As the Gospel spread the world followed the church. The church of Jesus Christ has been united in this belief and practice until only the past 60 years. But today as Christianity declines in Europe and the US the church is starting to follow the world. We can see this today in the US. The states with the least cremation are the states with the greatest religious commitment (Miss. Alabama) and the states with the most cremation are the most liberal states (WA, OR).

## *Scripture.*

God purposefully and carefully recorded in His Word the details of the burials of Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, Leah, Rachel, Joseph and Moses. All the patriarchs made burial a priority. This priority runs throughout Scripture.

Abraham went to considerable effort and expense to secure a place to bury his wife's body. Jacob gave clear instructions to his sons that when he died in Egypt they were to carry his body to Israel to be buried. The same was done for Joseph.

God Himself personally buried Moses. God could have done several things with his body, but He buried him on Mt. Moab (Deut. 34). This example alone is cause for serious reflection. It presents us with a serious precedent for all future practice. Burial is God's will for His people.

When John the Baptist was killed by Herod, his disciples took his body to be buried (Matt. 14:12). When Stephen was stoned to death "devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him" (Acts 8:2). Godly people honor the bodies of the dead.

No saint anywhere in Scripture ever chose to be cremated. By contrast all references in Scripture to the burning of bodies are associated with curse and judgment. The lack of a burial in Scripture is connected to extreme judgment. Burning is a violent desecration of the body.

Most supremely we have the example of Jesus who as our confession of faith states, "was crucified, dead and buried, and on the third day He rose again from the dead."

The ritual of burial was ordained by God from the beginning to look forward to the resurrection of our bodies. Burial is done to honor the body which will one day be raised in immortality.

When I stand next to an open grave, I say every time a Christian is buried we are proclaiming to the world, Jesus is victorious over sin and death and the grave, that Christ is risen, and so shall we be raised with Him. That victory is proclaimed every time a Christian is buried.

Each tombstone cries out, "All will rise again!" "Until the Resurrection."

When it is time to commit the body to the ground I declare what we are doing is in the sure and certain hope of resurrection to eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ, rejoicing in God's mercy and looking ever to the unfailing love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

And then I pray: Almighty God, by the death of your son, Jesus Christ, you have taken away the sting of death; by His rest in the tomb, you have sanctified the graves of the saints and by His glorious resurrection you have brought life and immortality to light. We thank you for that victory over death and the grave which He has obtained for us and for all who sleep in Him.

Christian burial is our testimony to the world, our bearing witness to the resurrection. When our bodies are buried, it is our last opportunity to be salt and light in a dark and dying world.

### ***Theology of the body.***

Theologically cremation is contrary to the teaching of Scripture regarding the body. We know that our bodies are created by God and that we are created in the image of God. We are created body and soul, both of which are eternal. Our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit.

**I Corinthians 6:19–20** Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.

Our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit. Christ died to purchase us, including the purchase of our bodies, for himself. Therefore our bodies do not belong to us to use as we please, but rather as he pleases. Therefore, we should use our bodies to put the glory of God on display.

But the greatest thing about the human body is that the eternal Son of God was incarnate in a human body and will have one forever. He “became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14).

The body is honored by the Son of God to dwell in, to die in, to rise in and to ascend in. Today Jesus sits at the right hand of God in heaven, and represents us to the Father, in His glorified human body.

When He comes again in His body He will “transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself” (Philippians 3:21). This was a profound statement about the dignity and glory of the human body.

It is our body which will be raised from the dead and ascend into heaven and be reunited with our souls and in which we will live for all eternity.

**Romans 8:11** If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.

All of this points to why pagans burn their dead. They don't believe in any life after death, they don't believe the body is worth honoring, it is dead, it is nothing, it can be discarded like any other used up or dead thing. Cremation only makes sense if you reject important Christian truths concerning the body and death and the resurrection.

### ***Objections.***

There are usually two common issues raised around this topic, “what about” kinds of questions.

***First, what about*** people who die in terrible tragedies, plane crashes, at sea, explosions, fires, war, etc? Besides that over hundreds of years don't bodies disintegrate into nothing, so what difference does it make?

We don't bury because we think it makes it easier for an omnipotent God to raise our bodies. God is God. The resurrection of OT saints will be no more a challenge than those who died last week. The resurrection is not threatened by any degree of decomposition.

We bury because it is what God's people in Scripture and history have always done to bear witness to the Gospel and the dignity God has given to our bodies.

***Second, what about the cost issues.*** American funerals can be expensive. We don't object to spending as much or more on a wedding or a big family vacation, why all of a sudden is it an issue at death? Why do people complain about funeral costs but not wedding costs?

You know some things never change. When Mary anointed Jesus with costly perfume the disciples “were indignant” with her, they thought the anointing was a big waste of money? But get this! Jesus rebuked them. He said they shouldn’t “bother” the dear woman because she had done a “good deed.” Remember what else He said? “For when she poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial. Truly I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be spoken of in memory of her.” (Matthew 26:6-13).

Consider how Scripture commends the women who came to the tomb to honor Jesus’ body.

When Joseph and Nicodemus buried Jesus’ body, they went to considerable risk and expense, 75 pounds of myrrh, aloe and spices. And a new, freshly hewn tomb. They are commended.

Burial has always been the way godly people care for and honor their dead. The reverence, the honor, the respect we show to the body of loved ones who have died is pleasing to the Lord.

Our primary concern isn’t money. Where our treasure is, there his heart will be also. We should never complain or apologize for spending money on loved ones’ funerals. It’s our public confession of love, for our loved one and for our Lord.

But for some people a funeral might be a real hardship. How can we honor God and the body and our faith and testimony regarding the resurrection? One solution when there is a real need is to ask for help from the church benevolence fund. That would be a beautiful use of those funds. Our Deacons should be aware of each death and insure that no one is kept from honoring the Lord and their loved one with a Christian burial because of money.

Many people say cremation is just a practical matter, just a financial decision in the face of rising funeral costs. They say it isn’t a religious matter. But that is because most of us have not actually thought about it and what the difference is between cremation and burial and why Christians through the centuries always buried their dead. The way we honor the dead is a religious matter, the way we use our money is a religious matter. How do we glorify God?

Our bodies are bought by the blood of Jesus Christ, they are not destined for destruction but for resurrection glory. Paul speaks of burial as sowing the seed of the body into the ground where it will sprout forth in the glorious resurrection of the body.

**I Corinthians 15:42-44** It is sown a perishable body, it is raised an imperishable body; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.

“Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints” (Psalm 116:15), and precious, also, are the bodies of those saints.

I have just opened up a big issue and have barely scratched the surface. I have many resources to help with further understand, and am available to talk more.

### **Conclusion.**

John 19 is the most wonderful, glorious, profoundly life-changing funeral ever conducted. What deep humiliation for the Son of God to take on our flesh, to suffer, die, and be buried in a cold, dark, solitary tomb. What love, what steadfast love. And what love by Joseph and Nicodemus.

No believer in the Lord Jesus Christ need ever fear the grave ever. Our own Lord and Savior laid in one, and came out victorious. Our being laid to rest in a grave is our testimony and witness to the resurrection. The grave could not keep Jesus and it will not keep us.

**I Corinthians 15:54-57** “Death is swallowed up in victory.” 55 “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?”

56 The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. 57 But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

### **Prayer:**

Today we sing Hosanna, Hosanna in the highest. We rejoice both in what you suffered for us and we rejoice in the victory you gained for us. In the light of both, help us to endure our hardships in a way that glorifies the Father and accomplishes great good for us and those around us. Strengthen our faith, increase our hope, deepen our love, embolden our courage, fill us with your Spirit that we may imitate Christ, in whose name alone we pray. Amen.