

THE HOUR OF BURIAL

Matt. 27:57-66 - *"When the even was come, there came a rich man of Arimathea, named Joseph, who himself was Jesus' disciple: he went to Pilate, and begged the body of Jesus. Then Pilate commanded the body to be delivered. And when Joseph had taken the body, he wrapped it in clean linen cloth, and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn out in rock: and rolled a great stone to the door of the sepulchre, and departed. And there was Mary Magdalene, and the other Mary, sitting over against the sepulchre. Now the next day, that followed the day of preparation, the chief priests and Pharisees came together unto Pilate, saying, Sir, we remember that that deceiver said, while he was yet alive, After three days I will rise again. Command therefore that the sepulchre be made sure until the third day, lest his disciples come by night, and steal him away, and say unto the people, He is risen from the dead: so the last error shall be worse than the first. Pilate said unto them, Ye have watch: go your way, make it as sure as ye can. So they went, and made the sepulchre sure, sealing the stone, and setting a watch. "*

The Hour of Burial

The hour of death for Jesus is here. His last words on the cross were, "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit." When Jesus cried these words with a loud voice, He showed His willingness to die, for He had yet much strength and power within Himself. He could lay down his life or take it again. The words of Luke 23:46, "He gave up the ghost," shows us again that Jesus' death was a voluntary act on His part.

All other people at the hour of death must look back upon a life of sin and wasted hours. Jesus' death ended the only perfect life of holiness. Can any other life be remotely compared with the life which Jesus lived, that life in which He accomplished the salvation of the whole world? Truly, it is fitting and proper that we reverently set-aside this day for contemplating the death and burial of Jesus Christ, our Savior. Death itself is frightful and horrible, but the Lord's death is a thing of beauty-so peaceful, so comforting, so reassuring, so calm. Jesus fell asleep in the arms of His Father as a little child would do. It was such a simple death; there were no long and tearful prayers as we are wont to utter, but eight simple words. Jesus began His sufferings in Gethsemane with the word, "Father," and He ended His sufferings on the cross with the word "Father." He was not afraid to face His Father, for He had perfectly fulfilled the Father's will. He had no words of bitterness or reproach for His Father because of the terrible ordeal He had just passed through. His is also a model of death for us. In death we need not to worry at all about the body. The important thing is that our souls are in God's keeping. Luther prayed these words three times and then fell asleep in Jesus. May all of us have time to pray these words when the our of our death arrives.

With these few remarks on the death of our Lord, we now come to the hour of burial. Jesus put His soul into the hands of His Father, and His body was placed into the hands of His friends. Let us consider:

The Hour of Burial

1. A Strange Burial by Friends

Our text tells us "Win that evening was come," that is, sometime between three and six o'clock in the afternoon of Good Friday, most likely in the earlier part of these three hours.

Almost everything in the burial of Jesus has a strangeness about it. We begin with the strangest part of all--the fact that Jesus was now dead. It is comparatively easy for the unbelievers to believe in the death of Jesus, for to them He is only a man. To them He is perhaps even a good man, a wise man, but only a man. All men die, and so Jesus had to die. Simple enough. But for the believer is very hard to believe in the death of Jesus, because we must sing, "O sorrow dread! God's Son Is Dead!" Of course, we believe in the death of Jesus Christ with all our hearts, but we dare not dwell too long on the great mystery that He is the only begotten Son of the living God who is now cold and lifeless, waiting to be buried. We never tried to answer the question, "how could God's Son die?" We simply believe it.

There is something else that is strange about the death of Jesus. He was a holy man, without sin. But according to the Bible, death is the wages of sin. Only sinners should die, and for a sinless person there can be no death. Yet the holy Jesus died. Here, however, we know the answer. He who knew no sin was made sin for us. Therefore He suffered death as the penalty for our sins.

We note some other unusual facts. We never heard of Joseph of Arimathea before this. We never knew that he was a friend of Jesus and accepted Him as the promised Messiah. Scripture tells us that Joseph was a "disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews." Now, when the cause of Jesus seemed the lowest in the triumph of the enemies seemed the highest, then Joseph openly showed his faith in Christ, but now without fear of the Jews. Truly, God works in a mysterious way. Who would expect help from such a person at such a time? A strange turn of events indeed. Even the Apostles declined to come out of hiding in this dark hour! Here's a curious coincidence. We find a man by the name of Joseph at the beginning of the life of Christ, and we find another Joseph at the end of His life. "One Joseph was appointed by God to be guardian of Christ's body in the virgin womb, and another Joseph was the guardian of His body in the virgin tomb, and each Joseph is called a 'just' man and holy Scripture."

John tells us (19:39) that Nicodemus assisted in the burial of Jesus. We heard of Nicodemus before, when he met with Jesus at night, for perhaps the same reason as Joseph, "for fear of the Jews." But we had forgotten about Nicodemus. Suddenly, he too shows up in the darkest hour. At this time of seemingly lost cause, when they had nothing to gain and everything to lose, the Lord strengthened the courage of these two timid disciples, and they were the very few who owned the cause of Jesus now. It is surprising, to say the least, to read of these two men at this time.

The consent of Pilate was necessary before Jesus' his body could be buried. Had Joseph not beg for the body of Jesus, it no doubt would have been thrown into a shallow grave near the cross. However before Pilate gave his permission, he carefully questioned the centurion in charge of the execution to satisfy himself beyond doubt that Jesus was truly dead. The early death of Jesus amazed Pilate. But the centurion assured him that Jesus was dead when the soldiers came to break the legs of the three men on a cross. No doubt, the centurion also told Pilate of the spear which was thrust into the side of Jesus. The death of Jesus, then, is a firmly established fact. No one could live after the side was pierced in such a manner.

We come to another strange thing about the burial of Jesus. All the spices and ointments which were used to preserve the body were to prove useless as far as the body of Jesus was concerned. Unknowingly, Joseph and Nicodemus were performing a labor of love unnecessarily. For the Apostle Paul tells us in Acts 13: 36, 37: "for David... Was laid into his father's, and saw corruption: but he, whom God raised again, so no corruption."

After carefully removing the body from across and reverently wrapping it in a clean linen, Joseph did the Lord Jesus still another service of love. He gave his own tomb to Jesus. It had never seen decay before and it would not see it now. Thus was fulfilled the prophecy in Isaiah 53:7, "he made his grave with the rich in his death." The Savior died as He had lived, and poverty. He did not even possess a grave; He was placed in a borrowed tomb. But even here we note a strange coincidence. Born in a manger, having nothing, His if you

clothes taken by the soldiers, His mother placed into the care of John-suddenly, when it was all over, He was the richest of men and death.

As we have seen, the purpose of the trial and crucifixion of Jesus was to disgrace Him. Logically, the end of Christ should have been to be buried in disgrace in a shallow criminals grave. But instead, He was given a very honorable burial by reverent and respectful friends. Almost everything in the burial of our Lord takes a new and unexpected turn. The number of mourners at the funeral of the Savior could be counted on the fingers of one hand, just a few of the faithful women. Where were the hundreds of people who He helped and healed? There were multitudes of people in Jerusalem for the Passover. Could none come to shed a tear for Him who did so much for Israel? We are witnessing some very peculiar things.

We are certainly grateful to these few friends of Jesus forgiving Him a decent and honorable burial. We are thankful to Joseph for hewing to tomb out of rock and lending it to the Lord. Above all, we are truly grateful to our Savior for purifying the grave. He died in our stead; He went into the grave to overcome the last enemy, death itself. He has taken away the sting of death; since His death, our debt has become just a sleep. If death is only a sleep, it is nothing to fear. If death is a sleep, we shall surely a wake again. Asleep in Jesus! How beautiful! Death, something unnatural and horrible and terrible, now becomes for the believers in Christ a thing of beauty also. Asleep in Jesus! May that be written over are tombstones!

2. A Strange Watch by Enemies

We have seen strange things in the burial of Jesus. As we look a little closer at Jesus' burial, we note also strange things being done by His enemies, particularly their strange watch.

We do not know exactly when the chief priests and Pharisees came to Pilate. It was, as our text states, "the next day, that followed the day of preparation." But we cannot set the time or hour of the next day when they came with their strange request. Pilate gave permission for the burial of our Lord, and he gave permission for the watch over the tomb. The Apostles' Creed could almost read like this: "suffered, crucified, dead, buried, and the watch was set, under Pontius Pilate." Pilate, the politician, was still trying to please everyone. But if his religious convictions were "What is truth?" As he told Jesus, then he must have smiled at the earnest request of Joseph, and he must have been amused at the fears of the Jews. Is it not strange that God used a heathen man like Pilate to regulate and govern so many important events in the history of our Lord?

Oddly enough the chief priests and Pharisees call Pilate "Sir!" They despised Pilate as a representative of a foreign rule over their land: they had only contempt for his spinelessness: his heathen religion and superstitions were an abhorrence in their eyes. And referring to Jesus, they call Him "that deceiver." Jesus was of their faith, their land, and a descendent of one of their greatest kings, a man who never yielded anything in religious convictions, a man who did many wonderful miracles among them, a man in whom could be found no guilt. Him they call not by name, but "that deceiver."

Sometime before His death, Jesus told the Jews, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up." During Jesus' trial before the Jewish Council, false witnesses twisted these words to mean that He could destroy the temple at Jerusalem and rebuild it in three days. The council new the real meaning of these words, but they made no effort to correct the false testimony. Instead, they welcomed it. Now that Jesus was dead, they feared these words of Jesus. They had understood Him perfectly when He spoke those words. They would kill Him, and after three days in the grave He would rise again from the dead. Seemingly, all at once, they have a strange insight into the true meaning of the Lord's words.

What a curious request they made of Pilate! They wanted a guard to prevent the disciples, of all people, from stealing the body of Jesus. The disciples steal the body? If they had first taken Jesus and had fled during

the trial, how could they ever get up enough courage to steal His body, reburial it, and little live for the rest of their days by saying that he rose from the dead? If they had failed Jesus during His Passover, and the Jews knew that they had, they certainly would fail Him now. This was a needless and useless precaution of the Pharisees.

But if they were placing a guard to fight against God, what folly! They remembered how Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead, and there must have been a deep seated fear of Jesus among them now. But they were going to continue with their plans, regardless of cost. Sometimes we reached the street of no returning. "So the last error shall be worst than the first." Again, with a strange insight, the chief priests realize that the claim of Jesus to be the Messiah was not nearly so dangerous and poisonous, from their viewpoint, as would be the claim that He rose from the dead. They saw things exactly as St. Paul did later, when he wrote, "If Christ be not raised, your faith is in vain (1 Cor. 15:17). The whole Christian faith rests on the fact of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. The chief priests clearly saw that, and tried to prevent it.

The stone was sealed perhaps with a stirring across it and wax at each end. By means of this device the slightest movement of the stone at the mouth of the tomb could be detected. The watch, or band of soldiers, was granted by Pilate. After the soldiers were given the order to guard the tomb, things settle down to the quiet of the Sabbath.

But the strange part of this watch by the enemies in the hour of burial is this: by their very precaution, the chief priests proved that Jesus was not a deceiver. They proved for us and the world that He really had died and that He really rose again. Even from their standpoint, their last error was worse than their former errors in regard to Jesus. By this strange watch over a dead body in a sealed tomb, they helped His cause immeasurably, instead of hindering it.

We thank you, Pilate, for granting this watch over the tomb. We thank you also, chief priests, for your careful and exacting precautions. You have strengthened our faith in two ways. First, as to the fact that Jesus was truly dead. You, Pilate, were satisfied that He was dead. You, chief priests, said, "that deceiver said, while yet alive." We accept that statement as an admission on your part that you are perfectly satisfied as to His genuine death. Secondly, we are perfectly satisfied that no one could break through the band of soldiers, roll away the stone, carry off the dead body, and bury it somewhere else in a secret grave. We are satisfied that He really rose from the dead, as He claimed He would.

Above all, we thank Thee, Lord Jesus, that Thou did go into death and did hallow the grave with Thy presence. We thank Thee, Lord Jesus, that through faith in Thy cross we may go to heaven and be with Thee and the Father and the Holy Ghost. We quietly await the coming of the hour of triumph when Thou wilt break the chains of death and the grave. Amen.

The Prayer

We are extremely grateful to Thee, O holy Jesus, not only for Thy bitter sufferings on the cross, but also that Thou didst overcome the last enemy, death. On this holy day we remember with thanks all that Thou hast done for us. Thou didst give Thy soul into the hands of Thy Father, and thy body was laid in the tomb. We now can cry out with Paul, "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" Through Thy death, dear Savior we are victors. O heavenly father, grant that when our last hours shall come, we too may be able to say with Jesus, "Father, into Thy hands I commend my spirit." Keep our souls and bodies until the great Resurrection Day, when the last enemy shall be overcome and we shall live and reign with Thee forever, Thou only true and faithful God. Amen.