



Mark 15:38-47; Matthew 27:51-66; Luke 23:45-56; John 19:31-42

Death and Burial of Jesus Christ

Nothing can be clearer in human history than the fact that Jesus Christ died on the cross at Calvary in Jerusalem. There were many eye witnesses to His death by crucifixion.

Jesus Christ was sovereign over His life, His death, and His resurrection. Augustine spoke of Jesus Christ saying, "He gave up His life because He willed it, when He willed it, and as He willed it."

"For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life so that I may take it again. No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This commandment I received from My Father" (John 10:17-18).

Where is the evidence for the death of Jesus Christ?

The Proof that Jesus was dead

Jesus uttered a loud cry just before His death (Matt. 27:50; Mark 15:37). The apostle John testifies to the death of Jesus. "Therefore when Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, 'It is finished!' And He bowed His head and gave up His spirit" (John 19:30). The work of our redemption by the Lamb of God was completed and remains finished. There is nothing to add to His completed work. Luke adds, "And Jesus, crying out with a loud voice, said, 'Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit.' Having said this, He breathed His last" (Luke 23:46). It reminds us of the words of Jesus when He said, "No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself." Jesus was dead.

The crowd of witnesses at the crucifixion (Luke 23:48)

"And all the crowds who came together for this spectacle, when they observed what had happened, began to return, beating their breasts" (Luke 23:48). Those who had been crying, "Crucify Him! Crucify Him!" are now overcome with the proofs of the super-human exaltation of Jesus. They heard Him cry out, "It is finished!" They saw Him give up His spirit saying with a loud voice, "Father, into Your hands I commend My spirit" (Luke 23:46). They saw Him die. The tense of the verb "beating their breasts" is "they continued to beat their breasts." They lament over the crucified One after they have permitted Him to be crucified. They were eyewitnesses of His death. What would you have done that day if you had been present?

There were women witnessing these things (Mark 15:40-41; Matt. 27:55-56; Luke 23:49)

There were many people who were witnesses to the events at Calvary. Mark tells us in addition to his Mother, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the Less and Joses, and Salome, there were "many other women who came up with Him to Jerusalem" (Mark 15:40-41). The mother of James and John were there (Matt. 27:56). These were the last ones to leave that afternoon. They would each give testimony that Jesus was dead.

Roman soldiers testified to the death of Jesus (John 19:31-37)

John tells us I saw what happened. Here is my eyewitness account. "Then the Jews, because it was the day of preparation, so that the bodies would not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), asked Pilate that their legs might be broken, and that they might be taken away. So the soldiers came, and broke the legs of the first man and of the other who was crucified with Him; but coming to Jesus, when they saw that He was already dead, they did not break His legs. But one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately blood and water came out. And he who has seen has testified, and his testimony is true; and he knows that he is telling the truth, so that you also may believe. For these things came to pass to fulfill the Scripture, 'Not a bone of Him shall be broken.' And again another Scripture says, 'They shall look on Him whom they pierced'" (John 19:31-37).

Pilate asked that the legs of the crucified be broken to hasten and insure death of the victims. Breaking of the legs was known as *crurifragum* in Latin and accompanied crucifixion in order to hasten death. This was accomplished by means of heavy blows of a heavy iron hammer or mallet. Such a blow caused death. The only way a crucified man could obtain a full breath of air was to raise himself by means of his legs to ease the tension on his arms and chest muscles. When the legs were broken, he could not possibly lift himself and death would come because of lack of oxygen. The Romans left the bodies of crucified criminals on their crosses as a warning if you break our laws this will happen to you, too. The Jewish religious leaders wanted to hasten death so they could get the victims down from the cross before sunset.

It is amazing how pagan Roman soldiers fulfilled prophecies of the Scriptures to the letter (cf. Exo. 12:46; Num. 9:12; Psa. 34:20). Jesus is the true Passover Lamb slain (1 Cor. 5:7). The fact that Jesus was spared the *crurifragium* was necessary for the fulfillment of the Old Testament Scriptures. "For these things came to pass to fulfill the Scripture, 'Not a bone of Him shall be broken'" (John 19:36).

Pilate was surprised to hear that Jesus had died so quickly. Death by execution by crucifixion, though exceedingly painful was also an unusually slow death that lasted two or three days. No vital organ was affected and the person died when he was finally overcome with exhaustion and could inhale but could no longer exhale. He would finally suffocate. It would not be natural that Christ would be dead after six hours of suffering on the cross. Therefore, we are told "Pilate wondered if He was dead by this time, and summoning the centurion, he questioned him as to whether He was already dead" (Mark 15:44). Pilate "wondered" (*thaumazo*) was "astonished" at the quick death of Christ because it was something extraordinary about how quickly He died. The verb *thaumazō* here does not mean to wonder if in the sense of to conjecture, to be undecided about, but to wonder at, to marvel. Therefore, he investigated by questioning the Roman centurion who was in charge of the execution. Edmond Hiebert says, "In Pilate's question to the centurion, the aorist tensed was used, asking if death as an observable event had occurred sometime previously." Lenski says, "The centurion probably accompanied Joseph, waited outside, and was called by Pilate." Pilate was satisfied that Jesus was indeed dead before he released the body to Joseph of Arimatea. "And ascertaining this from the centurion, he granted the body to Joseph" (Mark 15:45).

When the Roman soldiers came to Jesus "they saw that He was already dead, and they did not break His legs" (John 19:33). There was no point in breaking His legs. Instead "one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear" (John 19:34). The soldier thrust his spear into the side of Jesus. It was a penetrating deep wound that was intended to kill someone. He was going to make doubly sure this one did not survive. He certified Jesus

was dead. As Godet suggests, "If you are not dead already, here is what will finish you." The language of the text suggests that the soldier was determined to make sure that Jesus was dead. The head of the spear was large, the size of a man's hand, and would make a large wound. It penetrated deep into the body of Jesus and "there came out blood and water." Jesus was a real man with a real body and He was certifiably dead.

R. V. G. Tasker quotes Dr. John Lyle Cameron, M.D., "The broad, clean cutting, two-edged spearhead would enter the left side of the upper abdomen, would open the greatly distended stomach, would pierce the diaphragm, would cut, wide open, the heart and great blood vessels, arteries and vein now fully distended with blood, a considerable proportion of all the blood in the body, would lacerate the lung. The wound would be large enough to permit the open hand to be thrust into it. Blood from the greatly engorged veins, pulmonary vessel and dilated right side of the heart, together with water from the acutely dilated stomach, would flow forth in abundance" (*Tyndale N.T. Commentaries, John*, p.212-13).

The Roman centurion who was in charge of the execution of Jesus was watching Jesus die, and all the things that were happening was feared exceedingly and declared "Truly this was the Son of God" (Mark 15:39; Matt. 27:54). Luke says, "Now when the centurion saw what had happened, he began praising God, saying, 'Certainly this man was innocent'" (Luke 23:47).

Professional executioners declared Jesus dead.

Roman Governor Pilate demanded proof of Jesus' death (Mark 15:44-45)

After all that the Jewish leaders had done to Pilate that day he was not about to release the body without absolute proof that Jesus was dead. He demanded proof from the Roman centurion. Pilate marveled if Jesus were already dead. "Joseph of Arimathea came, a prominent member of the Council, who himself was waiting for the kingdom of God; and he gathered up courage and went in before Pilate, and asked for the body of Jesus. Pilate wondered if He was dead by this time, and summoning the centurion, he questioned him as to whether He was already dead. And ascertaining this from the centurion, he granted the body to Joseph" (Mark 15:43-45).

The Burial of the Body of Jesus

The burial of Jesus did not take place in secret (Mark 15:45-46; Matt. 27:59-60; Luke 23:53-54; John 19:38-42).

Jesus was crucified on Friday, the Jewish day of preparation when the Sabbath would begin, but this was also the preparation for the Passover meal that night. Sabbath would begin at 6 p.m. that evening. Therefore, there was need for haste in the burial of Jesus before sundown. The process begun by Joseph and Nicodemus was the preparation for instant burial rather than the final interment because women were preparing to return on Sunday to complete the process (Mark 15:47-16:3; Luke 23:53-24:3; John 20:1).

Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus handled the dead body of Jesus (Mark 15:42-46; Matt. 27:57-60; Luke 23:50-54; John 19:38-42)

Joseph of the city of Arimathea and Nicodemus were responsible rich men who were members of the Sanhedrin. Joseph was a good and righteous man who had not consented to the death of Jesus. He was looking forward to the coming of the Kingdom of God (Luke 23:50). He was the person responsible for the burial of Jesus.

Joseph and Nicodemus were responsible for the burial of Jesus Christ

Joseph and Nicodemus handled the lifeless dead body of Jesus. There was no question in their minds that Jesus was dead. They took the body down from the cross and wound Him in the linen cloth and took Him and laid Him in new expensive tomb which had been carved out of solid rock. The tomb was closed with a heavy stone at the mouth which ran in a groove and finished right over the opening (Matt. 27:60). Alfred Plummer says, "Thus Jesus by being lifted up is already drawing men unto Him. These Jewish aristocrats first confess Him in the hour of His deepest degradation" (John 12:32-33). Godet said, "No doubt, on seeing the Lord suspended on the cross, Nicodemus recalls to mind the type of the brazen serpent which Jesus had set before him at first (John 3:14-15; 19:39). These two secret disciples come boldly out of seclusion and assert their faith in Christ. "Joseph of Arimathea came, a prominent member of the Council, who himself was waiting for the kingdom of God; and he gathered up courage and went in before Pilate, and asked for the body of Jesus" (Mark 15:43).

The disciple John gives us the details. "After these things Joseph of Arimathea, being a disciple of Jesus, but a secret one for 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. Nicodemus, who had first come to Him by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds weight. So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen wrappings 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. Therefore because of the Jewish day of preparation, since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there" (John 19:38-42).

Jewish burial customs in Jesus' day

Joseph and Nicodemus followed the Jewish custom of burying their dead. Hendriksen suggests that Joseph and Nicodemus must have agreed together beforehand and met for the burial of Jesus being thoroughly prepared with the quantity of spices for burial. John emphasizes that no one had ever yet been laid in this new tomb. While Joseph requested the body from Pilate, Nicodemus "came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds weight" (John 19:39). The "hundred pounds" referred to here is the Roman pound, equal to about eleven and a half ounces or seventy pounds in our measurement. They took the body of Jesus down from the cross and brought it to the new tomb. They probably carried the body of Jesus on a stretcher or bier which was common to transport a body to a tomb.

The "myrrh" was a fragrant resin exuded by a tree that grows in Arabia and is prized for its perfume. The "aloes" are a strongly aromatic, quick-drying sap derived from the sap of a tree. The "spices" here are substances used for embalming, and are fragrant and bitter, and when used with myrrh it acts as a drying agent. The fragrance of these spices would counteract the unpleasant odor and slow down the decaying flesh. The lavish amount of spices shows that Nicodemus must have been a man of some wealth since the spices were generally imported and were very expensive. With such an amount Nicodemus wished to cover the body completely with the fragrance. There is evidence that such large quantities were used in royal burials.

At the tomb Joseph and Nicodemus laid the body of Jesus on a slab and "bound it in linen cloths with the spices" in the manner of the Jews of Jesus' day (John 19:40). They probably tore the large linen sheet they had wrapped the body in at the cross into strips or "bandages." As they wound the linen "bandages" round His body, they sprinkled the powdered spices into the folds. A separate cloth was used to wrap around His head as was done in the case of Lazarus (John 11:44). The "linen cloths" (*othonion*) is variously translated "linen

bandages," "linen wrappings," "strips of linen cloths." These were long bandage-like strips rather than a shroud. It is generally agreed that the term denotes thin strips or bandages. The "spices" probably means aromatic oils or salves and was a mixture made by blending the myrrh and aloes into a vegetable oil base, and so creating fragrant oil. This mixture of spices was sprinkled between the wrappings of linen cloth folds. "As the bands of linen were passed around the limbs and around the body again and again, the powdered mixture of myrrh and aloes was strewn in with generous hand," writes Lenski. Nicodemus and Joseph bandaged the body in linen cloths, and covered it with the mixture. Merrill Tenney says, "The spices, being of somewhat gummy character, may have been laid in the folds of the cloth to provide a rigid casing for the body, or they may have been ground and mixed with oils to form an ointment to rub on the body." Raymond Brown suggests "it was customary for the Jews to use oil, so that a third element in burial preparation may be being introduced."

This how the Jewish people habitually prepared a body in order to put in a tomb during the days of Jesus. They did not embalm like the Egyptians. The Jews simply washed the body, anointed it with oil, and wrapped it with the linen strips filled with spices. Only the head was left free in order to be covered with a special cloth after the body was in the tomb. The face was wrapped in separate cloths.

Jesus' burial in the rich man's tomb was a fulfillment of Isaiah 53:9. "His grave was assigned with wicked men, Yet He was with a rich man in His death, Because He had done no violence, Nor was there any deceit in His mouth" (Isaiah 53:9).

The Women Watching by the Tomb of Jesus

Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph saw where Jesus was buried. They were sitting over against the sepulcher (Mark 15:47; Matt. 27:61-66). These women maintained their watch that afternoon, and then went home to rest on the Sabbath which began around 6 pm. Since the tomb of Josephus was a rich man's tomb it had an elaborate circular disc-shaped flat stone door, about a yard in diameter, like a millstone, which was fitted in a wide slot cut into the rock. The stone was rolled over the rectangular entrance to keep out intruders. Since the stone sloped toward the doorway, it could be easily rolled into place. However to open the tomb by sliding the stone aside would require the strength of several men.

"Now the women who had come with Him out of Galilee followed, and saw the tomb and how His body was laid. Then they returned and prepared spices and perfumes. And on the Sabbath they rested according to the commandment" (Luke 23:55-56). While it was still dark some women leave where they were staying in Jerusalem "bringing the spices they had prepared" (Luke 24:1). They came so that they might anoint the corpse (Mark 16:1). The body of Jesus lay in the stillness of the tomb on Sabbath. The apostle John tells us Mary Magdalene arrived at the tomb early Sunday morning and found the tomb already opened.

Pharisees posted Roman soldiers with the Roman seal on the tomb of Jesus

It is interesting that on the Sabbath the Pharisees and chief priests became preoccupied about what they had done. No doubt they had seen and listened to the events about the cross and how Jesus died.

"Now on the next day, the day after the preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered together with Pilate, and said, 'Sir, we remember that when He was still alive that deceiver said, 'After three days I am

to rise again.' Therefore, give orders for the grave to be made secure until the third day, otherwise His disciples may come and steal Him away and say to the people, 'He has risen from the dead,' and the last deception will be worse than the first.' Pilate said to them, 'You have a guard; go, make it as secure as you know how.' And they went and made the grave secure, and along with the guard they set a seal on the stone" (Matthew 27:62-66).

The Pharisees evidently took the Roman soldiers, sealed the sepulcher and left the soldiers to guard it. A cord with it ends fastened by clay or wax seals to the stone and the rock, served as the "seal." It would be detected if it were tampered with. The unbroken seal would testify to the guards stationed there that no one had entered it.

Alfred Plummer observes that the Pharisees "increased the number of those who could bear witness to the Resurrection." When the bribery of the soldiers became known, "it is more probable that it became known through some of the soldiers than through any of the Sanhedrin. A soldier who would confess that he had been bribed would probably tell what he knew respecting the circumstances of the Resurrection. But some of the priests who were converted after Pentecost (Acts 6:7) may have known and disclosed the truth about this transaction" (*Matthew*, p. 411).

The Jewish leaders were not content for a Temple guard of the high priest. They wanted Roman soldiers guarding the tomb. "You have a guard" implies Pilate provided the guards fulfilling their request.

Abiding Principles and Practical Applications

1. The evidence is clear; Jesus Christ died.

There were many eyewitnesses to His death including Roman professional executioners, the crowd of Jewish people from Jerusalem, the Roman governor Pilate, men who buried Jesus, women at the cross and the tomb, the eyewitness and historian John, etc. .

2. God so loved the world that He sent His own Son to die for our sins.

"For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. . . But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). Everything that God requires for a sinner to have a right relationship with Him has been accomplished in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

3. Believe on Jesus Christ and you shall be saved today.

"If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation. . . . for 'Whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved'" (Romans 10:9- 10, 13).

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