

Message #61

Kurt Hedlund

John

5/19/2019

THE BURIAL OF JESUS AND THE CALL TO COMMITMENT

JOHN 19:31-42

INTRO AND REVIEW

Sami Abbasi was an unlikely disciple in an unlikely part of the world. He was a Palestinian who lived in Gaza. (PROJECTOR ON--- GAZA) Since World War II, Gaza has been a Palestinian stronghold and often a source of trouble for Israel. Sami's family was part of a smaller group within Gaza. They were Orthodox Christians. Sami as a teenager identified more closely with his Muslim friends because he shared their hatred of Jews.

When the first Intifada broke out against Israel in 1987, Sami was thirteen years old. He joined his friends in throwing rocks at the Israeli Defense Force when its members ventured into the Gaza Strip. He developed a reputation for being an especially good marksman for throwing rocks at Israeli vehicles. One day, in escaping the Israelis who started chasing him, he stumbled onto the grounds of Gaza Baptist Church. That was an even more unlikely institution in Muslim Gaza.

The pastor of the church invited Sami to come to his Wednesday night youth group meeting where they offered free pizza. He started going. Something about the Bible studies that were presented resonated with him. He found himself attracted to Jesus.

According to his own testimony, **“When I read the Sermon on the Mount... it changed my perspective. I knew I had to find another path than hatred and violence. I decided the only way to follow Jesus was to be a full-fledged disciple. I could not pick and choose some of the things Jesus called His followers to do. I knew it was ‘all or nothing,’ and I decided all. When I came to Jesus, I laid down my hatred when I embraced the cross and committed to love my enemies. Living in Gaza gives a person many reasons to hate, but at fourteen years of age, I gave them all up. Even though I didn’t leave Gaza at the time, I became part of something much greater than building a Palestinian state. I was a part of a ‘state’ where all people are welcome: the kingdom of God.”** (Tom Doyle, *Standing in the Fire*, p. 175-176)

Sami grew as a Christian and eventually became the pastor of an underground church. He began encountering Muslims who were having dreams about Jesus. A number of them became Jesus followers. Sami had acquired a wife and children. His group of Jesus followers began to attract the attention of Hamas. Several of them were killed by this Muslim terrorist group that eventually took over control of Gaza.

Sami decided that it was time for him and his family and his church members to move out of Gaza. (GAZA BETHLEHEM) Two weeks before Christmas in 2008 they moved to the West Bank to Bethlehem. Two thousand years earlier His Savior and His earthly family moved out of Bethlehem to avoid people who were trying to kill Him. Now Sami and crew were moving into Bethlehem to avoid people who were trying to kill them. Bethlehem was a less hostile environment. There were, and still are, a number of Christians there. I have a seminary friend who is pastor of Jerusalem Baptist Church. He makes frequent visits to Bethlehem. His daughter even attended a Bible college there. It was in Bethlehem that Sami continued his ministry.

One of the hang-ups that Sami found that Muslims have is that they regard Jesus as simply a prophet. They also do not believe that Jesus really died on the cross. (QURAN QUOTATION) According to what Mohammed said in the Quran, **“They did not kill him, neither did they crucify him; it only seemed to be so.”** (Surah 4.156, *Quran*) The passage before us this morning provides solid evidence that this is not true. Jesus experienced a real death. We will learn about the significance of the burial of Jesus and the implications that it has for us. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Last week, we concluded our look at the crucifixion of Jesus. We saw the heroic role that women played in remaining at the cross while Jesus died. We looked at Mary, the mother of Jesus, and saw the example of the godly woman that she was. We also saw how Jesus was the godly example of a son in His care for His earthly mother. Today we will look at the burial of Jesus. We will see how this crucial event and the crucifixion that preceded it led to a commitment from previously quiet disciples of Jesus.

I.

In vv. 31-37 of #19, which is on p. 906 in the black Bibles under many of the chairs, we find that GOD ACCOMPLISHES HIS PERFECT PLAN IN THE BURIAL OF JESUS. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. GOD ACCOMPLISHES HIS...) The events in these verses actually describe the preparations for the burial of Jesus. According to v. 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.”

The normal Roman practice was to leave crucifixion victims on their crosses. Death often took a day or two. But then the bodies were left on the crosses for vultures to feast upon. The purpose was to heighten the awareness of subjugated people in the Roman provinces about what happened to people who rebelled against the Roman government.

The Romans, however, had experienced considerable difficulty in subduing the Jews. So they had made various concessions to their religious sensitivities. One of them was that they allowed the Jews to bury the victims of crucifixion.

The Biblical basis for this Jewish concern was a statement in the Law, in the Book of Deuteronomy. (DEUTERONOMY 21:22) The Lord spoke through Moses, saying, **“And if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, (DEUTERONOMY 21:23) 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.”**

Keep in mind that in Jewish thinking days ended and began at sunset. The first century historian Josephus confirms that the Jews in his day were careful to follow this rule. (JOSEPHUS QUOTATION) He writes, **“...the Jews used to take so much care of the burial of men, that they took down those that were condemned and crucified, and buried them before the going down of the sun.”** (*Wars of the Jews*, 4:317)

There was extra concern in this situation in that it was Friday, and the Sabbath was about to begin at sundown. On top of that, this was a special Sabbath. For this was the Sabbath which happened during Passover week. So it was that “the Jews,” which we have seen is a term used by John for the religious leaders, insisted to Pilate that the death of the three crucifixion victims needed to be hurried so that their law would not be violated. Jesus died around 3 PM. Sunset was sometime around 6 PM. There was urgency to get this done. Probably the Jewish leaders went to Pilate sometime before 3 PM. (PROJECTOR OFF)

There is considerable irony and hypocrisy at work here. The religious leaders have been very concerned about observing the Sabbath law and their interpretation of it. A primary reason for their opposition

toward Jesus was that He kept healing people on the Sabbath. This was a horrible thing in their eyes, because it amounted to work, and work was prohibited on the Sabbath. Meanwhile, we have seen that they have broken many of their own rules in how they conducted the legal proceedings against Jesus. They had a meeting at night. They did not present witnesses in the proper way. They did not give the amount of time required for the Sanhedrin to consider a decision about the guilt of Jesus. And so it went. Most importantly, they were responsible for killing their own Messiah, God in the flesh, who had fulfilled the requirements of the Old Testament law.

Yet God was sovereign over this situation. Jesus had to be buried before sundown to fulfill Biblical prophecies. Jesus Himself had made statements to His own disciples that He was to lie in the grave for three days. (Mark 8:31) He told the Jewish leaders that this was what would happen to Him. (PROJECTOR ON--- MATTHEW 12:40) According to Matthew #12 v. 40, Jesus said, **“For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”** In the Jewish way of reckoning, any part of a day was counted as a whole day. Jesus was buried on Friday. That was day one. Saturday was day two. Sunday, when Jesus rose, was day 3. The Jewish leaders were unwittingly helping to fulfill prophecy. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Back in v. 32 of our text, we are told, **“So the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first, and of the other who had been crucified with him.”** The Romans used an iron mallet to smash the legs of the crucifixion victims. This would cause more shock and more blood loss. It would also make it impossible for the criminals to push up with their legs to keep their lungs open. More stress would be placed upon their arms and shoulders to be able to breathe. In their weakened condition, death would often result from asphyxiation, from their inability to keep breathing.

Verse 33: **“But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs.”** The four Roman soldiers apparently attacked the two criminals on the outside. Jesus was in the middle. They found that He was already dead.

Verse 34: **“But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water.”** Probably the soldiers were making sure that Jesus was indeed dead. (PROJECTOR ON--- PILUM) The standard issue spear for soldiers of this era was the pilum, which was 3 ½ feet long with an iron point mounted on a shaft of light wood.

Medical experts have had slightly different takes as to the meaning of the blood and water coming from Jesus' side. Some have suggested that Jesus suffered from a ruptured heart, which would have obvious

symbolic meaning. Others have said that such a cause of death was exceedingly rare. Some have argued that this fluid could come from a penetration of the pericardial sac surrounding the heart.

There have been debates about the cause of death itself. There was an article in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* years ago (4/1996) by a pathologist from the Mayo Clinic who argued that the primary cause of death for Jesus was probably respiratory failure and shock resulting from blood loss. The primary point is that Jesus was dead. A theory promoted by skeptics down through the centuries is that Jesus was not truly dead. He revived in the coolness of the tomb and somehow escaped the cave. That is difficult to square with the evidence which we find here. How anyone could survive after this terrible physical punishment and wrapping with cloth and a large amount of ointment and then escape a tomb sealed with a large stone and guarded by Roman soldiers is difficult to imagine.

Some have attached spiritual meaning to the blood and water which flowed from the side of Jesus. Water in John's Gospel is associated with spiritual life. Some in the history of the church have argued that the water which came from Jesus was intended to point toward the rite of baptism, and blood was intended to point toward the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Some have taught that the blood and water should be regarded as the source of spiritual cleansing. That is perhaps OK as long as we understand that it is the death of Jesus that is the source of all cleansing. The author John does not seem draw out any particular spiritual meaning to the blood and water themselves. His concern seems to be to show that Jesus was dead.

There are a couple of famous hymns in our church history that relate to this verse. The first stanza of Augustus Toplady's "Rock of Ages" goes **"Rock of Ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee. Let the water and the blood, from thy riven side which flowed, be of sin the double cure. Cleanse me from its guilt and power."** Fanny Crosby wrote, **"Jesus, keep me near the cross. There a precious fountain, free to all, a healing stream, flows from Calv'ry's mountain."** Again, I think that these are fine lyrics, as long as we understand that the cleansing power lies in the death of Jesus and what it accomplished and not in any physical blood and water, not in any wine or bread or water.

In v. 35 the Apostle John writes, **"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."** John appears to be talking about his own witness. He was at the scene of the crucifixion with the four women. He saw the events that he is describing.

At the time that John was writing there were a couple of groups around who denied that Jesus had actually died. The Docetists said that Jesus was not fully human. His human form was only an illusion. Mohammed seemed to be influenced by that thinking in his writing in the Quran about Jesus.

In the last clause of this verse, John echoes the theme of his book which we have noted several times from #20 vv. 30 & 31. There John says that he has recorded these signs that Jesus did so that his audience might believe in Him and have eternal life.

In v. 36 he says, **“For these things took place that the Scripture might be fulfilled: ‘Not one of his bones will be broken.’”** The “these things” refers to Jesus’ bones not broken and His side pierced by a spear. In Exodus #12 v. 46 there is a description about how the Passover is to be observed. (EXODUS 12:46) God says this about the Passover lamb: **“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.”** The Passover lamb was to be unblemished. It was to be killed, but its bones were not to be broken. John recognizes that Jesus was fulfilling the symbolism connected with the Passover lamb. He was the Passover lamb, as John the Baptist had declared, who had come to take away the sin of the world.

In v. 37 John cites a second fulfilled Scripture (ZECHARIAH 12:10). In Zechariah #12 v. 10 God told His people, **“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.”** The reference was to the Second Coming. John sees the piercing of Jesus as a fulfillment of this Scriptural prophecy.

In the aftermath of the crucifixion and the prelude to the burial of Jesus, John recognizes that God is in control. These are not random events without any cosmic purpose. The pagan Roman soldiers may have been going about their job in a way normal for them. But they were carrying out a perfect divine plan originated in eternity past. Now this plan finds a certain fulfillment in the burial of Jesus.

II.

In vv. 38-42 we find that GOD PROVIDES OPPORTUNITIES FOR BELIEVERS TO BECOME COMMITTED CHRISTIANS. (II. GOD PROVIDES OPPORTUNITIES...) Verse 38 tells us, **“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.”**

The Romans normally allowed the bodies of the victims of crucifixion to remain on their crosses to be eaten by the vultures. The Jews believed that even criminals should be buried. There was a criminal's graveyard outside of Jerusalem. This was the anticipated destiny for the body of Jesus. His last earthly resources had been taken from Him. His family had no tomb in Jerusalem.

But then an unexpected thing happened. This guy Joseph showed up. He was from Arimathea. We don't know where that town was. Luke calls it a city of Judea.

All four Gospels speak of this man Joseph. We learn a few details from these other accounts. (MATTHEW 27:57) In Matthew 27:57 we are told, **"When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who also was a disciple of Jesus."** The guy was rich.

(MARK 15:43) From Mark #15 v. 43 we learn, **"Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself looking for the kingdom of God, took courage and went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus."** Joseph was one of the seventy members of the Sanhedrin, the high council of Judaism that was based in Jerusalem. It was the Sanhedrin which had condemned Jesus and sent Him to Pontius Pilate to be executed. Joseph was also looking for the kingdom of God. He was a spiritual man who was looking for the Messiah.

(LUKE 23:50) Then in Luke 23: 50 we are told, **"Now there was a man named Joseph, from the Jewish town of Arimathea, He was a member of the council, a good and righteous man..."** The additional detail here is that Joseph is regarded as good and righteous. (LUKE 23:51) The next verse adds, **"who had not consented to their decision and action; and he was looking for the kingdom of God."**

The Sanhedrin was composed of priests and rabbis and leading laymen. Joseph was probably a layman. Because of his wealth and influence and religious nature, he had probably been appointed to this council. He was part of the small minority of this group who had some kind of belief in the claims of Jesus. If the Sanhedrin had a vote to condemn Jesus, he may have voted no, or he may have remained silent, realizing what the dominant view was. (PROJECTOR OFF)

John says that Joseph was a secret disciple. We have seen that the word "disciple" in John's Gospel is used to refer to an interest in Jesus that ranges from a casual interest to a sacrificial commitment. Prior to this incident, it is difficult to know where Joseph fit on that spectrum of commitment.

But now a situation presented itself that prompted Joseph to take action. He was risking a lot. He faced rejection by his fellow religious leaders. He faced possible rejection from other business leaders and clients. He faced possible rejection from the Roman governor. To go into the Gentile leader's office meant religious defilement for him.

Pontius Pilate probably knew of Joseph from his membership in the Sanhedrin and his prominence in the business community. Pilate was still somewhat sympathetic toward Jesus. He probably knew that the Jewish leaders would prefer to put Jesus' body in the criminals' grave. If it made the Jews upset to have him in a rich man's tomb, he was just as happy to do something to stick them in the side. He had not appreciated their successful effort to manipulate him. Pilate gave orders for his soldiers to let Joseph have the body of Jesus.

Verse 39: **“Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight.”** In #3 we saw that Nicodemus developed interest in Jesus when our Lord came to Jerusalem at the beginning of His public ministry. He came to Jesus at night to ask about His claims. Nicodemus was also on the Sanhedrin. Jesus called him “the teacher of Israel.” So he was a rabbi and a man of some prominence. Nicodemus also has kept His interest in Jesus fairly quiet.

At a later time, Jesus was in Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles. The Sanhedrin made an effort to apprehend him. When the temple police came back empty-handed, there was some kind of gathering of members of the Sanhedrin. The majority was in favor of getting rid of Jesus. Nicodemus objected and pointed out that an accused criminal has a right to be heard by the Sanhedrin before any judgment of condemnation is rendered. The leaders of the Sanhedrin put Nicodemus down for what was simply a procedural question.

In our passage we have the third appearance of Nicodemus in John's Gospel. Now he is showing up with stuff to be used in Jesus' burial. He is also risking his position on the Sanhedrin by taking a public stand for Jesus. Nicodemus has with him a bit less than 75 pounds of myrrh. Myrrh was a fragrant resin that was ground into powder and mixed with aloe to put on bodies that were to be buried. Myrrh was really expensive stuff. One authority says that the myrrh which Nicodemus had could have been worth as much as 30,000 denarii. One denarius was equivalent to the daily wage of a working man in Judea. When Gamaliel, a leading rabbi of the time, was buried, 80 pounds of myrrh were used to treat his body. So the myrrh spent on Jesus was equivalent to that which was put on Judea's leading rabbi. It was as

much as what would have been used in some royal burials. Nicodemus was showing great respect and reverence in making this gift.

According to v. 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.”** Nicodemus and Joseph are clearly working together. They must have talked and done some planning during the crucifixion, if not earlier. There was not much time remaining between the death of Jesus and sunset. They had to work quickly. Perhaps Joseph had gone to see the governor while Nicodemus got the myrrh and aloe. Probably they both had help from servants.

The normal burial custom of the Jews at this time was to lay the deceased on a long linen cloth. The cloth was folded over the top of the head after a face cloth had been placed on the head. Then the long cloth was brought down the front to the feet. Spices were applied to the body and the cloth. The feet were tied together. The arms were tied to the body with strips of cloth.

The spices were not used to preserve the body. They were intended to reduce the smell of the decaying corpse. For families that could support such a burial, the body was placed in a tomb. A year later the tomb would be revisited, and the remaining bones from the corpse would be placed in a stone bone box.

According to v. 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.”** Matthew #27 vv. 59 & 60 (PROJECTOR ON--- MATTHEW 27:59 & 60) add this additional information: **“And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen shroud and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had cut in the rock. And he rolled a great stone to the entrance of the tomb and went away.”** So this was Joseph’s own tomb, probably made for himself and other family members. It was probably made by workers employed by him. It was unoccupied. When the remains of Jesus were placed inside, a large stone was placed in front of it. This was the standard procedure for such tombs in the first century.

(CHURCH OF THE HOLY SEPULCHRE) There is a very ancient tradition that places the location of the tomb in a site now occupied by the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. At the time it was outside of the walls of Jerusalem. Today it is located in the Old City of Jerusalem.

(CHURCH OF THE HOLY SEPULCHRE) Archaeologists have dug around below ground by the site of this church. They have found old tombs that date back to the first century. So there is a high likelihood that

this is where the body of Jesus was placed. The fact that the tomb had not been used before this means that there was no possibility of anyone misplacing His remains or mistaking them for someone else's remains.

Verse 42: **“So because of the Jewish day of Preparation, since the tomb was close at hand, they laid Jesus there.”** John does not draw this out, but there is great prophetic significance to the placement of the body of Jesus. Isaiah 53 in the Old Testament was written 700 years before the time of Jesus. It describes a suffering servant who will bear the sins of His people. It says that He will be pierced through for the transgressions of His people. It says that He will be scourged and will be silent before His accusers.

Then in v. 9 (ISAIAH 53:9) we encounter this statement: **“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.”** Jesus died with criminals. He was scheduled to be put in the grave of criminals. But Joseph of Arimathea showed up and put Him in his own tomb. Thus Jesus was with a rich man in his death. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The main thing to notice here is that Joseph and Nicodemus had a certain interest in Jesus, but they were staying quiet about it. It is difficult to know the extent of their faith in Jesus until this situation came along. Both of them were uniquely equipped to meet the need of the moment. They knew people and they had the financial resources to provide for Jesus. Their reputation in the community was put at risk, but they stepped forward and did the right thing. For that, they left a legacy that we are still talking about today.

You may be a quieter Christian. You may not be especially bold in your witness for Jesus. You may not have an official position in the church. You may not be regarded as a leader in the community. But it could be that there is an opportunity before you which you are uniquely equipped to meet. As with Joseph and Nicodemus, it could involve a financial need. Most other people would not have the resources that you do to provide the kind of help that is necessary. It could involve a family situation where you are in the position to help out in some way. It could involve a service opportunity in the church. We are always looking for volunteers for things like Vacation Bible School, prison ministry, children's ministry and so on. It could involve a service opportunity in the community. It could involve a situation at work. Perhaps there is some injustice going on, but you have inside information and you are in a position to do something about it. There is a risk involved, but God would want you to intervene. God sometimes brings special opportunities and challenges along our path that should motivate us to step out in a commitment of faith in Jesus.

Aaron was a lot like Nicodemus. He was from Jerusalem. His father was a prominent Orthodox rabbi. Aaron wore the clothes and lived the life of an Orthodox Jew. His young life was dedicated to prayer and the study of the Torah. But he knew that something was missing in his life. One day when he was walking in the Old City of Jerusalem, someone stopped him and gave him a piece of literature. He saw that the guy was a Christian, and he began to give it back to him. But the Christian responded and said that it was verses from his own Bible. It was Isaiah 53. Aaron glanced at those verses. He had read and studied Isaiah many times, but he had never thought about how #53 could be describing Jesus. The Christian also gave him a copy of the New Testament.

This is what happened, in Aaron's own words: **"I devoured the New Testament and kept it hidden in my closet in a pair of shoes. My wife knew nothing. She thought I was just studying the Torah late at night and was happy that her husband was so zealous about the Bible. She mentioned it to me at breakfast a few times, but she didn't know I was reading the other Bible!"**

"After several months, I was ready to follow Yeshua, the Jewish Messiah. I planned to give Him my life one night as I sat in the living room after everyone was asleep. I thought about what a joy it had been to read the New Testament; I'd been through it twice."

"I read Paul's words: 'If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.'"

"As I started to say, 'Jesus, I'm ready,' my father walked in the front door unexpectedly and asked what I was reading."

"I told him the truth, and he started yelling at me. He blasted me for a couple of hours. That's when I realized how tough my road would be, but it didn't stop me."

"His verbal assault woke up the whole house, and I started getting questions from my wife, my mother-in-law--- even a next-door neighbor joined in!"

“They finally calmed down, but I didn’t change my mind. When I went to bed that night, I prayed and asked the Jewish Messiah to forgive my sins.”

Aaron continued to live in his Jewish community, and he did not tell others about his decision. He did not even yet know another Christian. Then one day he was in a coffee shop by the Old City, and he saw this guy reading a Christian Bible. Aaron went over to him and had a brief discussion with him. Aaron told him, **“I have many more questions for you. But we cannot meet in public. It’s too dangerous. Everyone knows me here. I’m getting looks just for visiting with you right now. Can I have your number, so we can arrange a place later today? I must visit with you. It’s urgent!”**

Before Aaron left the coffee shop, he learned that this Christian was a Palestinian, originally from Gaza. His name was Sami Abbasi. He was the Christian to whom we were introduced at the beginning of the message. It was unusual for a Palestinian from Gaza to be granted a pass by the Israelis to go into Jerusalem. But Sami had obtained one, as he was seeking to spread his Christian influence.

The two of them met later that day in a park outside of Jerusalem. They had a delightful conversation about Jesus. Toward the end of that conversation, Aaron told Sami, **“I need prayer, and I need encouragement. It’s incredibly difficult to live among Orthodox Jews, and I’m not sure what the future holds. I need help. Would you mentor me like Paul did Timothy?”** (Doyle, *Standing in the Fire*, pp. 189-193) Such it was that a Palestinian and a Jew who were both raised to hate each other began a relationship centered on Jesus. Such is the power of the Gospel. Such it is that God occasionally brings along opportunities where we need to step out in faith in Him.