

Luke 23:50-56
The Burial

This past week, it was reported that the European Space Agency Mission named Gaia confirmed the precise distance, motion, brightness, and color of some 1.7 billion stars. Perhaps more remarkable, is the acknowledgment that this is only about 1% of all the known stars in the Milky Way galaxy. When one thinks that the Hubble telescope data suggests that there are at least 100 billion galaxies, the numbers of stars, and planets revolving around those stars, is incomprehensible.

One might argue that billions of years ago, there was a cataclysmic explosion and all of this matter was thrust out into the universe and formed the precise location with the precise gravitational forces required to sustain those orbits that currently exist. Or one could argue that a sovereign and omnipotent God created everything exactly as He chose. To my mind, believing the first proposition requires significantly more faith than believing the latter.

Today we look at the burial of Jesus. In doing so, it seems we are moving from the sublime to the practical. The crucifixion had been marked with three hours of darkness and earthquakes. The veil in the Holy of Holies had been ripped asunder. Dead saints of God had been resurrected. The supernatural power of these events was unmistakable and changed the eternity of at least two people who witnessed them. A criminal being executed and a Roman soldier were both benefits of God's grace during the crucifixion.

The resurrection, which we will study next time, was also attended with the supernatural. But in between those two events - the death of Christ and His resurrection - we have the far more earthly task of the burial. It is the simple matter of properly disposing of the body of Jesus. But this, too, was planned sovereignly by God and fulfilled biblical prophecy. Nothing God does is by chance, and that included the burial of His Son.

Since creation, God has moved in two ways. The first is through miracles. This is when God suspends or alters natural processes to suit His ends. These are rare, though remembered because of being so extraordinary. Some Old Testament examples include creation itself, the flood, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the parting of the Red Sea, the manna from heaven that fed the Israelites in the desert, and the many miracles done by the ancient prophets (Elijah raising the Shunammite woman's son and healing Naaman's leprosy, Daniel surviving in the lion's den, and the large fish that swallowed Jonah, etc.).

Miracles continued at the time of Jesus. In fact, perhaps at no other time in history did miracles occur in such a concentrated period of time. The feeding of thousands, the many healings, the raising the dead son of the woman at Nain and Jairus's daughter all were miracles performed to attest to the claim of Jesus to be the Messiah. They were all signs that the kingdom of God had truly come.

With the birth of the Church, the age of miracles continued. To validate the teachings of the apostles, there were the miracles of Pentecost, Peter healing the lame, the story of Ananias and Sapphira, the raising of Tabitha from the dead, Paul's surviving the bite of the venomous snake, and many others. With

the completion of the canon of Scripture, the frequency of miracles has decreased (though miracles still can occur).

The other way God works through history, and this is far more the norm, is through providence. That is, God works through the infinite permutations of individual actions of people to accomplish His perfect will. To my mind, this is a far greater act of sovereignty than the more fantastic action of a flood or raising the dead. That God chooses to work through fallen mankind is the ultimate illustration of His power and wisdom.

God's work through human agents and the natural order is also well evidenced throughout the Bible. Hannah acknowledged that,

“⁶The Lord brings death and makes alive;
he brings down to the grave and raises up.
⁷The Lord sends poverty and wealth;
he humbles and he exalts.
⁸He raises the poor from the dust
and lifts the needy from the ash heap;
He seats them with princes
and has them inherit a throne of honor” (1 Samuel 2:6-8).

A writer of Psalms wrote,

“The Lord foils the plans of the nations;
he thwarts the purposes of the peoples” (Psalm 33:10).

The great king Solomon was very attentive to this fact. He pointed out that,

“In their hearts humans plan their course,
but the Lord establishes their steps” (Proverbs 16:9).

“The lot is cast into the lap,
but its every decision is from the Lord” (Proverbs 16:33).

“Many are the plans in a person's heart,
but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails” (Proverbs 19:21).

“In the Lord's hand the king's heart is a stream of water
that he channels toward all who please him” (Proverbs 21:1).

Clearly God works through His creation. In Luke's description of the burial of Jesus, we see how God used ordinary people to accomplish His eternal purposes, fulfill prophecy, and prepare the scene for the resurrection.

The Man

Jesus was the first of the victims to die. God, in His mercy, allowed death to come quickly. Jesus died after only about six hours on the cross. Certainly glad to be rid of this rebellious rabbi, His enemies must have been somewhat disappointed that the suffering had ended so quickly. Continuing their unbelievable hypocrisy, though, these same religious leaders who had just crucified the Messiah, did not want to defile the Sabbath. Their law stated that,

“²²If someone guilty of a capital offense is put to death and their body is exposed on a pole, ²³you must not leave the body hanging on the pole overnight. Be sure to bury it that same day, because anyone who is hung on a pole is under God’s curse. You must not desecrate the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance” (Deuteronomy 21:22-23).

Therefore they went to Pilate and requested that the legs of the victims be broken. Called the *crurifragium*, Roman soldiers used an iron mallet to smash the bones. This would prohibit the victim from lifting themselves up to breathe, and suffocation would ensue quickly. As John wrote in his account,

“³²The soldiers therefore came and broke the legs of the first man who had been crucified with Jesus, and then those of the other. ³³But when they came to Jesus and found that he was already dead, they did not break his legs.” (John 19:32-33).

They pierced His side with a spear, and the resulting flow of blood and water confirm their assessment. Jesus was truly dead.

And then on the scene appeared “a man named Joseph, a member of the Council, a good and righteous man” (v. 50). His significance is noted in that while this is his only appearance in Scripture, he is mentioned by all four gospel writers. He was a member of the Sanhedrin, the very group that had unjustly tried, convicted, mocked, and beaten Jesus the night before. And he was not merely a member, as Mark informs us, Joseph was “a prominent member of the Council” (Mark 15:43). His counsel was sought out; His words carried weight in debate.

We know no more about Joseph’s life than what is given in the text. Luke writes that “He came from the Judean town of Arimathea” (v. 51). The exact location of this village is unknown. Some have suggested that it is the town of Ramathaim-zophim, the home of Samuel, others that it was Lydda, which was located on the road from Joppa to Jerusalem. Luke offers no further details than stating that it was “a city of the Jews” (v. 51).

We do not know the backstory of Joseph of Arimathea. Clearly, Joseph had emerged as a religious leader among the Jews in Jerusalem, but he had not seen Jesus in the same light as the others. As Luke noted, Joseph “had not consented to their plan and action” (v. 51). Amidst all the shouting and condemnation, Joseph had either remained silent or spoken on Jesus’ behalf. Most likely, he had absented himself from the crucial trial the evening before since other Mark implies that the voting of the Sanhedrin to condemn Jesus was unanimous.

“⁶³Tearing his clothes, the high priest said, ‘what further need do we have of witnesses? ⁶⁴You have heard the blasphemy; how does it seem to you?’ And they all condemned Him to be deserving of death” (Mark 14:63-64).

“Early in the morning the chief priests with the elders and scribes and the whole Council, immediately held a consultation; and binding Jesus, they led Him away and delivered Him to Pilate” (Mark 15:1).

Luke describes him as a “good and righteous man” and one “who was waiting for the kingdom of God” (v. 51). One is reminded of Luke’s equally admirable description of Barnabas, “he was a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith” (Acts 11:24). This certainly defined him as a good Jew, but we do not know if he originally was suspicious of Jesus, or at what point the Holy Spirit moved him to faith. But clearly he had come to believe that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God. He waited for the kingdom of God; that is he looked forward to the coming of the Messiah Who would reign not on earth but in human hearts.

The word ‘righteous’ is naturally used sparingly in Scripture, and always describes a person of faith. Consider Elizabeth (the mother of John the Baptist), Simeon, Anna, and Zacharias, for example. John adds that “Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jewish leaders” (John 19:38). Remember the fear of the parents of the young man Jesus had healed from blindness. When asked who had healed their son they responded, “²¹how he now sees, we do not know; or who opened his eyes, we do not know. Ask him; he is of age, he will speak for himself.’ ²²His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone confessed Him to be Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue” (John 9:21-22). Later John noted that “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” (John 12:42). Thus Joseph displayed an apprehension that, while not commendable, was certainly understandable considering the situation.

Joseph, however, overcame his fears. He “went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus” (v. 52). This can only be seen as a public acknowledgement of his belief that Jesus was not the criminal and heretic the Jews claimed. Anyone who believed that would have cared little for the deposition of the body. Usually victims of crucifixion were simply thrown into a local pit and left to rot. By Roman law they had forfeited the right to be buried. Frequently, no one came forward to claim the body and it was simply cast into a common pit reserved for such people. But, Joseph would not allow Jesus’ body to undergo that indignity. So, he asked the Roman governor for permission to take down the body and give it a proper burial.

Joseph must have arrived shortly after the Jewish leaders had left. As Mark explained, Joseph “⁴³gathered up courage and went in before Pilate, and asked for the body of Jesus. ⁴⁴Pilate 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). Convinced that Jesus was, in fact, the Messiah, Joseph steadied himself and marched into the praetorium to face the Roman governor. Any thoughts of his own standing in the Jewish community had disappeared. Any thoughts of his own safety were put aside. Is it possible that Joseph even passed the

leaders of the Sanhedrin as they were on their way out of the praetorium? Did they possibly wonder what business this man might have with the Roman governor?

It is important to note that while Joseph had not been a vocal advocate of Jesus before His trial and execution, he did in fact seek to serve Jesus after His death. It was Joseph who went before Pilate to ask for the body of the Messiah. Not Peter, not John. None of the professed disciples were anywhere to be found. Perhaps it is worth reflecting that we cannot always judge who are the true disciples of Christ. They may not always be as obvious as we think.

Therefore, Joseph is to be praised for his willingness to assert his faith openly in light of what had just happened. This was, nevertheless, the act of a sovereign God fulfilling His plan. More than seven hundred years before Isaiah had written,

“He was assigned a grave with the wicked,
and with the rich in his death” (Isaiah 53:9).

That Joseph was wealthy is attested by Matthew in his gospel where he described Joseph as “a rich man from Arimathea” (Matthew 27:57). Jesus, as a crucified criminal was to be buried with the others, in a pit. But to fulfill prophecy, Jesus had to be entombed. Only that form of burial would allow Jesus’ own prediction that “as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” to be fulfilled (Matthew 12:40).

Pilate agreed to Joseph’s request. Joseph then returned to the cross. Seeing the body of Jesus hanging lifelessly there, “he took it down and wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid Him in a tomb cut into the rock, where no one had ever lain” (v. 53). But Joseph was not alone. John informs us that “he was accompanied by Nicodemus” (John 19:39). This was the same Nicodemus “who earlier had visited Jesus at night” (John 19:39). He, too, was a secret disciple. Nicodemus provided “a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds” (John 19:39). Together these two men, assisted quite probably by Joseph’s servants, took down the body of Jesus and prepared it for burial.

Jews, unlike the Egyptians, did not embalm their dead. According to Jewish law, only men could prepare the body of a deceased man, though women could assist in the preparations of a dead female. The eyes of the deceased were closed, and the body was wrapped in strips of linen cloth that had been treated with the spices and perfumes. For aesthetic reasons, special attention was paid to keep the chin from lowering onto the chest. No coffin was used and the dead were buried quickly, often the same day they died. This was not only to maintain ceremonial cleanliness, but also to preserve the body from decay in the dry heat of the region. Jesus received the same treatment as did Lazarus and the son of the widow of Nain.

The tomb had been cut from the side of a hill and was protected from wild animals by a large stone that could be removed to allow mourners access to the tomb to continue treating the body. Also, many tombs contained more than one corpse, so continued access was necessary to make good use of all the available space in the enclosure. But this was the first time this tomb had been used. It had never known decay. It was, in fact, to have been Joseph’s own tomb (Matthew 27:60). But the time taken to prepare Jesus’ body was lengthy, and it was getting near sundown. “It was the preparation day, and the Sabbath was about to

begin” (v. 54). Jesus was entombed before sunset on the Friday on which He died. He would be raised again on Sunday morning. Thus, He was in the tomb for part of three days, fulfilling Scripture.

The Women

Along with Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus were “the women who had come with Him out of Galilee” (v. 55). They had accompanied Jesus during His ministry. They had supported Him with provisions and hospitality. Ultimately, they had followed along the road to Calvary, wept at the foot of the cross, and then receded into the background when the pain of Jesus’ death became too much. Now, with the crowds dispersed, they followed the men who carried Jesus’ body and “saw the tomb and how His body was laid” (v. 55).

That the women followed the men to the tomb ought to remove once and for all a frequent challenge to the doctrine of the resurrection. Sometimes unbelievers suggest that the women simply went to the wrong tomb. They claim that Jesus never was raised from the dead, and that He remains entombed to this day in some unknown and unmarked location. They suggest that the women were simply in the wrong place. It is impossible to think that these women were confused. Their grief was too real. The memory of the events two days before was too fresh to be forgotten. There is no doubt that these women went to the tomb on Friday and were easily able to find it again Sunday morning.

For that very purpose “they returned and prepared spices and perfumes” (v. 56). They had every intention of returning after the Sabbath to again anoint Jesus’ body. So “on the Sabbath they rested according to the commandment” (v. 56). When Sunday morning dawned, they left early to get to the tomb before it was light. They hoped to anoint Jesus’ body without being disturbed. They went directly there, but things were not as they had expected. The stone was rolled away, the Roman guards were gone, and Jesus was not there.

Takeaways

God works through both miracles and human agents. There is nothing too insignificant for Him to have sovereignly planned for our good and His glory. May God fill us with His Spirit to find our way in His sovereign will for our lives, and may He give us the grace to be useful to His purposes.