

Burying God's People Genesis 23

Introduction/Thesis: I don't know how many sermons you've ever heard on the subject of burial, and some of you might walk out of here and say you still haven't heard a good one on the topic. I'm quite sure none of you were really expecting this when you came today, but this is the glorious adventure of working our way through the Bible.

Valentine's Day card

- In a collection belonging to the Museum of London

Story: Eccentric inventor Martin van Butchell and his wife.

- Inventor of a women's girdle that was so good there were counterfeiters.
- "His pony was often painted with purple spots, black stripes, or occasionally completely purple."
- On January 14, 1775, his first wife Maria died at age 36,
- He invented a way to preserve her body and had it displayed in his house.
- "Martin had to post a notice to reduce the number of visitors to his house to view his wife's remains."
- Rumor was, he could only have access to her money 'as long as she was above ground.'

When death happens, something has to be done to the body. And what we do with a body says a lot. It says a lot about what we think of what it means to be human, what we think about the person who died, and what we think about that person's future.

"From the earliest periods of Egyptian history, all Egyptians were buried with at least some goods that they thought were necessary after death. At a minimum, these consisted of everyday objects such as bowls, combs, and other trinkets, along with food. Wealthier Egyptians could afford to be buried with jewelry, furniture, and other valuables, which made them targets of tomb robbers. In the early Dynastic Period, tombs were filled with daily life objects, such as furniture, jewelry and other valuables. They also contained many stone and pottery vessels.^[38] One important factor in the development of Ancient Egyptian tombs was the need of storage space for funerary goods."

The funerary boats were usually made of wood; the Egyptians used a collection of papyrus reeds and tied them together with the wood very tightly.^[42] The most common route for funerary boats was the River Nile to the afterlife. The boat carried the coffin and often had a dog in the boat since they believed a dog would lead the deceased to the afterlife.^[43] The boats usually measured about 20 feet or longer. These however did not match those of the great pharaohs like Pharaoh Khufu (who built the Great Pyramid). His funerary boat was approximately 144 foot long with 12 oars.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ancient_Egyptian_funerary_practices#Tombs

Different cultures have treated bodies in different ways, and how they treat a body says something very important about what they believe.

- What they believe it means to be a human
- What they believe happens after death

For instance:

Several years ago in the British paper *The Independent* an article entitled, "Living with the Dead: The Indonesian village treating relatives' corpses as if they're alive."

In most cultures the dead are buried or cremated within days of passing away, but Indonesia's Torajan people keep the bodies of their relatives to "live" at home with them, sometimes for years after their deaths.

Providing corpses with their own rooms, they are washed and their clothes are regularly changed.

Food and cigarettes are brought to them twice a day and they have a bowl in the corner that acts as their "toilet".

The bodies of the dead are injected with a preservative called Formulin, which stops the bodies from decomposing.

One Torajan woman ... kept the body of her father, Paulo Cirinda, in her home for 12 years.

"If we buried him straight away, we would also feel the pain very suddenly," Mamak Lisa said. "We wouldn't get time to deal with the grief and adjust to the separation."

Ms Lisa added her father is "still sick". Illness is often used to describe the dead.

"He's a very good man and a loving father and there's still a very deep emotional connection between us," told the BBC.

The tradition for the million plus Toraja community dates back centuries. With animist beliefs - the doctrine that every natural thing in the universe has a soul - the line between this world and the next world is blurred.

Even after a funeral ceremony is completed, the physical relationship between the dead and the living still continues through a ritual called ma'nene, or the "cleaning of the corpses," according to the BBC.

The ritual involves digging up the coffins of dead loved ones every couple of years and grooming and cleaning them. Then, family members typically pose with their deceased relatives for fresh family portraits.

Btw... Doctrine matters – the article says these people believe ‘the doctrine that every natural thing in the universe has a soul,’ and that means ‘the line between this world and the next world is blurred.’ And if the line between this world and the next is blurred, you treat dead people as if they’re still here.

If you haven’t yet had to think about what to do with the body of a loved one who has died, you will someday. The Bible has a lot to surprising amount to say about this matter. Genesis 23 is an entire chapter devoted to the story of the burial of Sarah.

Here’s our plan... we’re going to use the opportunity of Sarah’s burial to really survey the Bible’s teaching on this subject.

We’re going to learn what the Bible says about our bodies, and what the Bible says about our burial.

And Lord willing, because it’s a question I’m asked quite often, and one we will all have to wrestle with at some point, I want to take a few moments before we’re done to try to think through cremation with you.

I. **The Bible and our Bodies**

The Bible isn’t just a spiritual, heavenly book. It is that, but it’s also a very earthly book. It cares about things like our body, and teaches us how to think about them.

Three truths about our Body:

A. Our Bodies are Essential to Our Humanity

the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature. Gen 2:7

God didn’t make humans by taking a spirit and sticking it into a body. God made people by putting something of his life into dust, and when God’s life touched the stuff of the earth, man was formed.

Man is only truly human when he’s body and soul.

Wilhelmus a’Brakel cautions when thinking about ourselves as both body and soul:
“Be careful not to deem the soul to be an angel when considering it independently, for such is not the case.

Be careful not to view this union as a matter of indifference, it being immaterial whether or not it is united with the body, or as if it would be better or preferable if it

existed independently.

Also be careful not to view the union between body and soul as a marriage. All such propositions contain within them dangerous consequences and errors.

Be careful not to view the body as an instrument or tool of the soul, for one essential element cannot be the instrument of the other. This union is much more intimate than can be comprehended. – a'Brakel

We can be tempted to think my soul is the real me. That life truly begins when my soul escapes my body. But that's not true.

B. Our Bodies are Sacred

1. For Everyone – they are made in the image of God

We understand instinctively that you treat an image like you treat the thing imaged.

ill: Alice's picture on my wall

God is holy. That doesn't just mean he is free from sin, it means he's different, unique, special. It means he's not part of creation.

It's not like if we put all the stuff in the universe into a giant basket, we'd put God in there. God isn't part of the stuff of the universe. He's *in* the universe, he's *in* our world, but he's not a piece of it.

Humans are God's images. That makes us unique and special creatures. All humans.

2. For Christians in particular

1 Cor 6:18-20

Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body.

*Notice the basis for the Bible's sexual ethic: Sexual sin is actually in a special class of sin, because sexuality is more than just a joining of two bodies, but really, it's a joining of two people. The Bible doesn't see sex as a recreational activity, but as a profoundly spiritual one, because our body and our soul are inseparable. They work together.

And taking something sacred – your body – and engaging in sexual activity that is unsacred, unholy, is a dreadful, defiling sin.

There's forgiveness for this sin, but know this: it's a sin!

Paul goes on...

19 Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God?

So for Christians, our bodies are sacred because:
They're the temple of the Spirit. Our bodies are the house of God.

"Don't lie in church!" – don't do bad things in a sacred place
Don't sin with your body! It's a sacred place.

But more than that...

C. Our Bodies are Purchased

means two things:

1. They don't belong to us anymore 1 Cor 6:20

You are not your own for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body. 1 Cor 6:20

Here's a question: Who owns you?

Bill: Uncle Tom's Cabin and buying and selling people. Something sick about that!

But the Bible doesn't at all mind saying to Christians, "you are not your own, you were bought with a price." And that doesn't mean just your soul.

God didn't just buy your soul. He bought you, that means he bought your body.

Our bodies are sacred because they belong to God. They're his property, he bought them, he owns them.

Every time you talk about another person, you're talking about an image of God.

Every time touch you a Christian, you're touching God's property, something he bought.

2. Jesus bought their perfection Romans 8:23

we... groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

You might look in the mirror and say, "You know, if God owns my body, he might want to think about fixing it up a little bit."

He will!

II. The Bible and our Burial

What does the Bible say about burial? Here's four things to note:

A. Sadness

Dead is a sad event. It's proper to be sad.

But we don't like being sad. It's very unpleasant.

When girls cry, we want to help them stop as soon as possible!

And we might not even like the idea of someone being sad over our death

"Celebration of life." – we're not going to be sad. We're going to have a party and laugh and have a good time, because so-and-so had a good time in life.

But the Bible doesn't talk that way. The Bible talks about the moment of death as a dreadfully sad affair.

Abraham mourned

Sarah lived 127 years; these were the years of the life of Sarah. And Sarah died at Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan, and Abraham went in to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her.

Genesis 23:1-2

Joseph mourned

So Joseph went up to bury his father... When they came to the threshing floor of Atad, which is beyond the Jordan, they lamented there with a very great and grievous lamentation, and he made a mourning for his father seven days. When the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, saw the mourning on the threshing floor of Atad, they said, "This is a grievous mourning by the Egyptians." Therefore the place was named Abel-mizraim (Weeping of Egypt) Genesis 50:7, 10-11

Jesus wept at Lazarus' tomb

And he said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus wept. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" John 11:34-36

Notice here the connection between *weeping* and *loving*. Jesus' tears flowed out of his love for his friend.

It's proper to weep at the grave. It's good to be sad. It's good that tears flow. Tears of sadness shed at funerals are like jewels adorning the memory of the dead.

In fact, if wet eyes in the moment of death speak to a person's love, dry eyes speak to indifference – I don't care that this person is gone.

Check this out from Jeremiah 22:

Therefore thus says the LORD concerning Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah:

"They shall not lament for him, saying,

Ah, my brother!' or 'Ah, sister!'

They shall not lament for him, saying,

Ah, lord!' or 'Ah, his majesty!'

*With the burial of a donkey he shall be buried,
dragged and dumped beyond the gates of Jerusalem."*

Jeremiah 22:18-19

So when the Bible talks about burial, it talks about sadness.

B. Honor

Because the body of a person is the person, we treat a body as we treat the person.

A burial is a kind of judgment on a person's life. Not perfect or infallible, but still very much real. An honorable burial befits an honorable person.

Dishonorable people often receive a dishonorable burial.

Three contrasting burials:

The first is in 2 Chronicles 24, and it's the burial of Jehoiada.

Jehoiada:

A good, godly priest

An advisor to King Joash (who became king at age 7)

Oversaw major reparations to the temple

As long as he was alive, Joash followed after God, the people followed God, and life was good.

But Jehoiada grew old and full of days, and died. He was 130 years old at his death. And they buried him in the city of David among the kings, because he had done good in Israel, and toward God and his house. 2 Chronicles 24:15-16

Jehoiada was not a king, but he was honored like one.

Joash:

After Jehoiada died, King Joash turned away from God, and actually ordered the murder of Jehoiada's son.

Here's how Joash's story ends:

A little Syrian army came up against Joash
They won a major victory against Joash's very large army – God wasn't happy
Joash was severely wounded
As he lay in bed,

his servants conspired against him because of the blood of the son of Jehoiada the priest, and killed him on his bed. So he died, and they buried him in the city of David, but they did not bury him in the tombs of the kings.

2 Chronicles 24:25

Joash started well, but ended badly.
When he died, he wasn't honored by a noble burial.
They didn't put him with the kings.

Here's another contrasting pair:

Jeroboam's family

Jer. Wicked king, family followed suit

Had a son

Son was sick

Wife went to talk to prophet Abijah to see if he'd live

Disguised herself – really unnecessary since he was blind!

But he knew it was her

Anyone belonging to Jeroboam who dies in the city the dogs shall eat, and anyone who dies in the open country the birds of the heavens shall eat, for the LORD has spoken it.”

Dishonorable – eaten by dogs or vultures. Nobody cares. No respect to the body.
Nobody is sad. Maybe they're happy – people do that when they're happy someone dies. They don't want to bury them. They want to leave them out, exposed.

Ill – Col. Gadhafi's body

Stuck him in a walk-in freezer for a while. But they didn't want to bury him:

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-idUSTRE79F1FK20111024>

Oct. 23, 2011

Few Libyans seem troubled either about how Gaddafi and his entourage were killed or why their corpses were displayed for so long in what seemed a grim parody of the lying-in-state often reserved for national leaders.

“God made the pharaoh as an example to the others,” said Salem Shaka...

“If he had been a good man, we would have buried him. But he chose this destiny for himself.”

Abijah continues speaking to Jeroboam's wife:

12 Arise therefore, go to your house. When your feet enter the city, the child shall die. 13 And all Israel shall mourn for him and bury him, for he only of Jeroboam shall come to the grave, because in him there is found something pleasing to the LORD, the God of Israel, in the house of Jeroboam.

1 Kings 14:11-13

Honorable – this little one. People are going to be sad and bury him! And really, God is behind this.

So interesting! What would this little one have been? What was the ‘good’ that God saw in him? We’ll never know.

One other contrast, this one in the NT

Ananias:

When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard of it. 6 The young men rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him. Acts 5:5-6

Note the pallbearers: ‘the young men’

Sapphira:

Immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. When the young men came in they found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. 11 And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things. Acts 5:10-11

Again it’s the young men. Nothing wrong with young men. We love them. But there’s a certain gravitas and dignity to a man that can really only come with age.

Response: “Great fear.”

They died a dishonorable death, received a dishonorable burial, and nobody seemed terribly sad. More afraid!

Stephen:

Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. Acts 8:2

Devout men: Honorable men. This was a really important, significant event. Stephen died an honorable death, and honorable men buried him

Response: ‘great lamentation.’

As you read through Genesis 23, you’re finding that Abraham, a very noble, honorable, dignified man, is going through a lot of trouble to get a burial place for

Sarah. And that means he's wanting to make sure she has an honorable burial. His troubles in some way make that burial so honorable. He could have not been bothered! But the effort and expense speak well of Sarah and his love for her.

If a man fathers a hundred children and lives many years, so that the days of his years are many, but his soul is not satisfied with life's good things, and he also has no burial, I say that a stillborn child is better off than he. Ecclesiastes 6:3

Burial: Sorrow, Honor.

C. Hope

In the Bible, the burial of God's people is an act of faith and hope. It's done with the firm belief that this isn't the end of their life or the end of their body.

Two ways the Bible expresses this:

1. Significance of the Place

I won't take the time to show you how often the Bible talks about the place where people are buried. Or how odd it is that nobody knows where Moses' grave is.

But place matters:

Abraham burying Sarah in Canaan – the land God promised to give him. This is home. She belongs here. He could have brought her back to his family and hers. But he didn't!

Abraham has resurrection on his mind – with Isaac in ch.22, Sarah here. When she comes back to life, where does she belong?

Jacob's life is coming to an end in Egypt:

29 And when the time drew near that Israel must die, he called his son Joseph and said to him, "If now I have found favor in your sight, put your hand under my thigh and promise to deal kindly and truly with me. Do not bury me in Egypt, 30 but let me lie with my fathers. Carry me out of Egypt and bury me in their burying place." He answered, "I will do as you have said." 31 And he said, "Swear to me"; and he swore to him. Then Israel bowed himself upon the head of his bed.

Genesis 47:29-31

This is really a big deal to Jacob. Here he is at the moment of death:

29 "I am to be gathered to my people; bury me with my fathers in the cave that is in the field of Ephron the Hittite, 30 in the cave that is in the field at Machpelah, to the east of Mamre, in the land of Canaan, which Abraham

bought with the field from Ephron the Hittite to possess as a burying place. 31 There they buried Abraham and Sarah his wife. There they buried Isaac and Rebekah his wife, and there I buried Leah— 32 the field and the cave that is in it were bought from the Hittites.”

Genesis 49:29-32

This isn't just Jacob being difficult. And we have to say, it was a big deal to get Jacob's body up to this cave. This is an act of faith. This is Jacob saying, "I believe God's promises to me. Even though I'm dying in Egypt, God is going to keep his promise to me that I'm going to live *there*. So bring me there. Bring me home.

Joseph is also going to die in Egypt, and here's what he says:

Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, "God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones from here." Genesis 50:25.

And they do... 400 years later.

Here's how the NT interprets Joseph's request:

By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his bones. Heb 11:22

So in the Bible, people would express their faith in God's promises and their belief that one day they would come to life again by their choice of a burial ground.

And it spoke to the permanence of the promises. That this land God promised would still be in the family when God brought them back to life.

You're going to die – where do you want to wake up? Where do you belong? When you wake up, will your people be there?

There's a real significance to a cemetery in a churchyard!

Some people are buried in a churchyard because it's convenient or inexpensive – but I would encourage you to think of it as an act of faith.

Faith in Christ to build his church!

Modern churches – it's easier to start one than deal with an old one, so pastors often will start churches with no real regard for the old one, and no real intention that what they start should endure until Jesus comes. But we should treat the church that way! And treat it that way in our burial.

That brings us to the second way the Bible views burial, and that's as laying someone to rest.

2. Death as Rest

For the Christian, death is 'sleep.'

Jesus:

"Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him." John 11:11

Bodies aren't disposed of, they're 'laid to rest.'

we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. 1 Thess 4:13

This is symbolized in the posture we bury people – lying down, eyes closed, as if asleep.

They didn't view burial as a disposal, getting rid of a rotting piece of meat. They viewed it as an act of faith, laying the body to rest believing it would arise again.

3. Burial as planting

At death, we are not done with our bodies. 1 Cor 15:35-37

35 But someone will ask, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?" 36 You foolish person! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. 37 And what you sow is not the body that is to be, but a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain.

Finally, Biblical burial speaks of identity

D. Identity

Let me illustrate this from the book of Ruth:

"Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. 17 Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. Ruth 1:16-17

Ruth was a Moabite. But she was leaving her people to identify with Yahweh and his people. And she was going to express that identification in her burial.

In Genesis 23, Abraham insists on a new tomb for Sarah – not with the Hittites!

They make a generous offer:

Hear us, my lord; you are a prince of God among us. Bury your dead in the choicest of our tombs. None of us will withhold from you his tomb to hinder you from burying your dead.” Genesis 23:6

Abraham turns them down! I want a new place.

Why? Abraham and Sarah are the start of a new people, the covenant people of God. And this is another reason it’s really important for Isaac and Rebekah and Jacob and Joseph to be buried in this cave. They’re identifying with Abraham and Sarah.

Interesting (no slide):

The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried, 23 and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side.

Abraham’s side, bosom, where Abraham is: paradise. He identified with Abraham.

Jesus’ burial is so fascinating, and in many ways like Sarah’s. Jesus was buried in a new tomb, in part because he was the start of a new people, the new covenant people of God.

But here’s what the OT prophesies about Jesus’ burial:

*9 And they made his grave with the wicked
and with a rich man in his death,
Isaiah 53:9a*

Jesus should have been buried where all crucified victims were buried – in a mass grave where they pitched the bodies of criminals.

But instead, he was buried in the new tomb of a rich man – God wouldn’t let him be identified with the wicked, but with the noble and dignified.

Part of the imagery of salvation and particularly baptism is the picture of being buried with Jesus:

We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. Romans 6:4

The idea here is that Jesus’ death was temporary – he died, was buried, and raised again. And by faith, pictured so powerfully in baptism, we identify with Jesus’ death, his death is our death, and his resurrection to new life is our resurrection to new life.

Who we are buried ‘with’ says something about who ‘our people’ are.

In death, many people really want to identify with Jesus – whether they really wanted to in life or not!

III. A word about cremation: Should I cremate my loved one, or be cremated myself?

A. Why people choose cremation

1. It's cheaper.

The primary motivation for cremation is usually financial – it's cheaper.

2. It's cultural

a. *Fortune Magazine*, October 30, 2015, "Here's why more Americans are getting cremated"

"Several factors are driving this shift:

One is religion, and a growing lack thereof. The states with the highest cremation rates also have large populations unaffiliated with organized religions. In 2014, the top five states for cremations by percentage were: Nevada and Washington, where more than three quarters of bodies are cremated, followed closely by Oregon, Hawaii, and Maine. At the lower end of the cremation rate scale are states where organized religion is more ingrained: Mississippi, where less than a fifth of bodies are cremated, was followed by Alabama, Kentucky, Louisiana, and Utah.

Another factor is cost.

factor number three: personalization. The National Funeral Directors Association [attributes](#) the movement to aging baby boomers who want to make their memorials (and those of their loved ones) more meaningful.

When a body is cremated, families have more flexibility for the memorial: The remains can be easily transported, there's no time constraint, and the ashes can either be scattered at a meaningful site, or incorporated into keepsakes such as jewelry."

b. Timothy George, "Cremation Confusion," *Christianity Today*, May 21, 2002.

"The first cremation in America took place in 1876, accompanied by readings from Charles Darwin and the Hindu scriptures. For many years, relatively few persons (mostly liberals and freethinkers) chose cremation. But that has changed dramatically. Only 5 percent of Americans were cremated in 1962; by 2000 it was 25.5 percent." *note*: Today in the US it's approaching 60%, and in some states, particularly more liberal states, it's over 75%.

B. Why Christians historically haven't cremated

Christians historically have had distinct burial practices

1. The Bible does have examples of people being burnt, but it's not positive

a. Achan, Josh 7:25 – God's judgment

b. False Prophets 2 Kings 23:16-18

c. King of Moab burnt the King of Edom Amos 2:1 – grievous offense – disrespecting his body. Amos warns that for this, God's judgment is coming.

2. Cremation can lose faith's symbols of place, rest, planting,

What do we do with these sacred remains of a person who belongs to Jesus?

The Bible doesn't strictly say – in part because there's no guarantee that what we want to do with a body we'll be able to do. Christians have been suddenly and unexpectedly burned, lost at sea, eaten by animals, vaporized by bombs, and maybe someday lost in space.