

Christ the Firstfruits



7
*devotions on the
resurrection*
&
holy week readings



FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH · Devotions
LINDALE, TX

Christ the Firstfruits: 7 Devotions on the Resurrection & Holy Week Readings

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Published by First Baptist Church Lindale
103 East Van Street
Lindale, Texas 75771

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*Death's reign is done! The grave gives up its dead;
The blessèd sleepers wake, one with their blessèd Head.
Life triumphs over death, the enemy has fled;
The tyrant of the tomb is now a captive led,
Upon his head at last his slaughters visited.*

Horatius Bonar (1808 – 1889)

Contents

CHRIST THE FIRSTFRUITS

1	Hope for Dry Bones	8
2	I Am the Resurrection	10
3	First Fruits of the Harvest	12
4	Raised With Him	14
5	At Home With the Lord	16
6	The Dead Will Rise	18
7	The Last Enemy	20
	<i>Going Deeper: What About Cremation?</i>	22

HOLY WEEK READINGS

1	Palm Sunday - John 12:12-19	36
2	Monday - John 12:1-11	38
3	Tuesday - John 12:20-36	40
4	Wednesday - John 12:36-50	42
5	Thursday - John 13:1-38	44
6	Friday - John 18:1-19:37	46
7	Saturday - John 19:38-42	50
8	Easter Sunday - John 20:1-31	52
	<i>Going Deeper: Is the Resurrection Rational?</i>	54



CHRIST

THE


FIRSTFRUITS



1 | Hope for Dry Bones

The hand of the Lord was upon me, and he brought me out in the Spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones. And he led me around among them, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley, and behold, they were very dry. And he said to me, “Son of man, can these bones live?” And I answered, “O Lord God, you know.”

Ezekiel 37:1-3

HE prophet Ezekiel had been forcefully taken out of the promised land, and soon the people of God will join him. They will be driven out of the land because of God’s wrath, and the temple will soon be destroyed. They will enter the realm of ritual impurity among the Gentiles—out of the land of life, and into the land of the dead.

Ezekiel tried to warn the people (seen in chapters 1-3). But the people would not repent. The Lord therefore dramatizes the departure of His holy presence from the temple (chapters 8-11). God will not live among such a sinful and idolatrous people. Ezekiel predicted exactly what would happen when the armies of Babylon came to the land (chapters 12-24).

And yet the Lord is merciful. He promises one day to gather them again to the land (Ezekiel 11:17). He reveals that this exile is meant to purge the idolatry from His people (11:18). He promises one day to give them a new spirit, to take out their hearts of stone, and give them hearts of flesh (11:19). He will establish an everlasting covenant with them (16:60). He will provide atonement (16:63). Chapter 37 dramatizes the people’s despair while in exile. “Our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off,” they cry (37:11). They are like dead bones, lifeless and unholy. But the Lord is the one who can raise the dead. By His own voice and by His own Spirit the Lord raises the dry bones and gives them life (37:4, 10).

Even in exile, the Hebrew nation’s greatest problem was not that they were dislocated. God had delivered His people out of Egypt and will also take them out of Babylon through a new exodus. But it is a far harder thing to take the idolatrous hearts out of His people. In order to have fellowship with God, for Him to be our God and we to be His people, the Lord must have power over sin and death itself. We need Him to cleanse us from sin and defilement. We need a new heart and a new spirit. Ultimately, what

Israel needed, and what we need, is a new and everlasting covenant with God (37:26).

And just like Israel, the plight we find ourselves in is one of our own making. Sin and death are connected together. When Adam was warned about disobeying the Lord, the consequence for his sin was that “you shall surely die” (Genesis 2:17). We know that “the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23). “The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law” (1 Corinthians 15:56), and we are lawbreakers through-and-through. In death we receive the due penalty for our rebellion against God.

Like Israel, we too are cut off. We have been exiled from the presence of God and are in the land of the dead. Our sins have made a separation between us and our God. Death stands as a king who reigns over us. Paul writes in Romans 5:14 that “death *reigned* from Adam to Moses.” Even without the law, the power of death was seen in every generation that passed away. Not one person has been able to avoid death. Every funeral is a sign that something is not “right” with the world. We need someone to finally and decisively deal with our sin and the consequences of our sin, which is death itself, our enemy.

Who will set us free? Who will raise us up? Who will take us by the hand and lead us back into the promised land? Our only hope is in the God who can raise the dead. And if He can raise the dead, then He must also have power over sin. It is sin that gives death its painful sting. If we can be freed from our sin, then we can be free from death itself. Because if the wages of sin is death, then to be free from sin is to be free from its penalty.

Take a moment

1. In what ways have you felt the sting of death, and how has it harmed you and your family?
2. As a Christian, in what ways has the gospel taken the sting out of death for you?

I can pray...

Thank you, Jesus, for giving us hope in the gospel. You alone have the power to raise us up and to do a work that none of us could accomplish. Just as Eze-kiel saw dry bones with no life, so also we had no life apart from You, Jesus. Your Word and Your Spirit raised us up.

2 | I am the Resurrection

Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?”

John 11:24-26



MARTHA believed the prophets. She knew that at the end of all of her people’s long and tragic history there would be a day when the Lord would appear. God Himself would come to deliver His people and to judge the wicked. All who had read the prophets and believed them knew the great Day of the Lord would bring two things to pass.

First, Martha knew that there would come a day to reveal all the wrongs done on earth and to punish the wicked: “Behold, the Lord is coming out from his place to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity, and the earth will disclose the blood shed on it, and will no more cover its slain” (Isaiah 26:21). Those “who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake...some to shame and everlasting contempt” (Daniel 12:2).

Second, Martha knew that the Lord would come to deliver His people with a glorious salvation: “Your dead shall live; their bodies shall rise. You who dwell in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For your dew is a dew of light, and the earth will give birth to the dead” (Isaiah 26:19). Those who sleep “shall awake, some to everlasting life...and those who turn many to righteousness, [will shine] like the stars forever and ever” (Daniel 12:3). More than merely delivering His people from their national enemies, God would destroy the greatest enemy of all: “He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of His people He will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken” (Isaiah 25:8).

Martha knew these passages and believed them. She had hope that her brother would rise from the dead at the last day, the great Day of the Lord. But what hope could she have today? What comfort could she find as the extended family and the village of Bethany mourned Lazarus’ death? The Rabbi, Jesus, was a friend of the family, and she knew that He could perform

miracles. But what could He do now? If only He had been there earlier—then Jesus could have prevented her brother’s death. But now there was no hope.

What Martha did not know was that Jesus chose not to heal Lazarus. Jesus stayed two more days before traveling to Bethany, so that He could “awaken him” from his sleep (John 11:11). Jesus said He was glad that He was not there, in order that His disciples may believe. And now Jesus turns His question to Martha: “Do you believe?”

Do you believe that I am the power of the Last Day? Do you believe that I am the Lord Himself who will raise His people from their graves? Do you believe that all who trust in me will have the veil of death removed and join me at the feast? Do you believe that I am the Son of Man from Daniel that will be given an everlasting kingdom, whose power is now breaking into this world? Do you believe that I will swallow death forever and make the righteous shine like the brightness of the sky above?

And Martha believes. She knows that He is the Lord’s anointed, the Son of God, and the one who is coming into the world (11:27). Jesus arranged the events of that day so that the crowds might believe: “And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, ‘Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me’” (11:41-42). And when Lazarus was called out of the grave “Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him” (11:45).

That day in Bethany something happened that was more important than reuniting a brother with his two sisters. It was that those who saw and heard Jesus had the opportunity to believe in Him. The Apostle John tells us that this story was recorded and passed down so “that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31).

Take a moment

1. Is it difficult to accept that the Lord sometimes may allow bad things to happen to you so that you might trust in Him more?
2. Were you surprised by how much the Old Testament speaks about resurrection?

I can pray...

Jesus, thank You for being the resurrection and the life. We know that no one can come to the Father except through You. Please, help us to tell the gospel to others so that they can be ready when You come again.

3 | First Fruits of the Harvest

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ.

1 Corinthians 15:20-23



JESUS Christ was the first man to have a glorified, human body, experiencing a resurrection to life, and to never die again. And we will follow in His pattern, receiving the same type of body as our Lord. The Apostle Paul compares Him to the first crop of the season.

The giving of the first fruits of harvest was a special time for Israel. By it they acknowledged the goodness of God to bring them out of Egypt and to place them in a land flowing with milk and honey (Deuteronomy 26:2-11). They consecrated to God a portion, thanking Him for His provision for the past and entrusted themselves to Him for the coming year. The giving of the first fruits was an act of faith. They had to believe that God would continue to provide. So they gave the best, the most ripe, and most valuable crops to the Lord (Exodus 23:19). They trusted that more would come, because the Lord was good.

In Adam we follow the pattern of the first man's sorrow. Just as Adam disobeyed the Lord and died, so we disobey the Lord and die. Just as Adam was ashamed by the consequences of his sin, so we are ashamed by what we have done. Just as Adam accused his wife and experienced a disruption of fellowship with her, so we sin against one another and have conflict in our relationships. Adam worked by the sweat of his brow among the thorns, and we too experience sorrow and futility in our lives and work. But now there has appeared a new man, Jesus Christ, and He has come to set a new pattern for a new humanity. He was raised from the dead to be the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. And, like the Israelites, we trust that more will come, because the Lord is good.

In Christ's example there is a pledge that more fruit will come of the same type. Whereas Adam's rotten fruit produced more rotten fruit, so Christ's resurrection is the pledge that we will follow in the same resurrection. We

will be transformed like Him. If a tree produces its first crop of apples, then we know that it will continue to produce apples, and not pears. So if Christ was given a glorified body in His resurrection, then we know that we will also share in His glorified humanity. “As was the man of dust, so also are those who are of the dust, and as is the man of heaven, so also are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven” (1 Corinthians 15:48-49).

But until then we wait for the harvest. Things must work themselves out in the right order. Just as there is a distance of time between the first fruits and the final harvest, so we, too, wait for our resurrection. The resurrection of Christ was a pledge for the ingathering. We can read our Bible and see just a foretaste of what will come. And all of this will be accomplished when He returns. For all those who belong to Him, Jesus will keep His promise to raise us up - “For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day” (John 6:40).

Jesus is our great trailblazer, the first to cross the waters and to make it safely to the other shore. He has marked the path and knows the way across that territory that no man has been able to cross. He will lead us out of Adam’s futility and into His new humanity.

Take a moment

1. Joseph was placed in a pit by his brothers, but God raised him up to reign in the palace of Egypt. Jonah was three days in the belly of a fish, but emerged preaching a message of repentance to the Gentiles. What other patterns of death and resurrection in Scripture did Jesus fulfill? (Hint: Samson’s imprisonment, Daniel in the lion’s den, King David’s exile under Absalom and return to Jerusalem, Esther and Mordecai with Haman’s plot, and the three friends of Daniel in the fiery furnace).

I can pray...

Lord, You have laid the seeds of Christ’s resurrection all throughout the Bible. You gave us these patterns and prophecies so that we might believe that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures. Please help these promises to grow in our hearts to produce hope for our resurrection.

4 | Raised with Him

...having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses...

Colossians 2:12-13



OUTSIDE of Christ every person is simultaneously both alive and dead. They are alive physically, but they are dead spiritually. Elsewhere, Paul says we are dead in our trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1). Like dead men, we are destitute of spiritual life, strength, and motion. We are cold and unresponsive to the meaning and glory of divinely revealed truth. Morally, our sin brought death and separation from God. “Your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face” (Isaiah 59:2). We have no true sight of ourselves and are blind (Matthew 13:13). Our will and capacity to obey God’s Law is enslaved to sin. “For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God” (Romans 8:7-8). Our affections are twisted, because we are those who have “loved the darkness rather than the light” (John 3:19). We live in a state of misery, inactive and helpless in spiritual things. “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him” (1 Corinthians 2:14).

But now in Christ we are finally alive. The Lord has provided us with a salvation that fully deals with the extent of our problem. Nothing less than the wholesale renovation of the soul is required for salvation. When we are saved it is a fundamental re-creation of the whole person. “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Corinthians 5:17). The Bible has different word pictures for this event: it is a new birth (John 3:3), a circumcision of our hearts (Colossians 3:11), a cleansing of our hearts (Acts 15:9), and an opening of our eyes to turn from darkness to light (Acts 26:18). Our old hearts of stone are removed and we are given new hearts (Ezekiel 36:26), we are set free from slavery to sin (Romans 8:2), we are grafted into the vine

of Christ (John 15:2), we pass out of death and into life (1 John 3:14), and the law is written on our hearts (Jeremiah 31:33). All of this is “the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5).

Regeneration is the moment when the Lord gives to a Christian spiritual life. All genuine Christians repent of their sins and place saving faith in Christ alone for salvation. This is all achieved by the Holy Spirit who gives us the new birth. Therefore, regeneration is God’s act, not ours. The children of God are described as those “who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:13). In this hidden, spiritual act of God, the Spirit must convict us. “And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment” (John 16:8). We must be cut by God and feel deeply the evil of our sin. The callousness of our heart must be cut away. And this is done without human hands (Colossians 2:11). Our newborn souls see Christ with new eyes, and we embrace Jesus alone by faith for our righteousness and turn away from sin.

As new creations our “life is hidden with Christ in God” (Colossians 3:3), and our old selves were buried with Christ in His grave. “We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin.” (Romans 6:6). When we become Christians the penalty of sin is taken away forever, and over our lifetime the power of sin in our hearts is weakened more and more as we become slaves to righteousness. This union to Christ is pictured in baptism. Spiritually, we were submerged into Him: His death became our death, and His resurrection becomes our resurrection. “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).

Take a moment

1. Sinclair Ferguson wrote, “While the regenerate individual is not yet as holy as he or she might want to be, there is no part of our life which remains uninfluenced by this renewing and cleansing work.” Where has the Lord been changing you?
2. How does the fact that it is the Spirit’s work to make sinners new creations change your approach to evangelism?


I can pray...

Lord, we know that no moral reform or change in character can get us into heaven. You work alone saved us. Help us to plead with sinners to be reconciled to God and to proclaim the necessity of the new birth.

5 | At Home with the Lord

So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord.

2 Corinthians 5:6-8

 PAUL'S heart was not set on worldly comforts and applause, but on the ministry that reconciled God and men. In fact, his ministry was the reason why he felt so few worldly comforts. He described his life like a jar of clay—fragile and unimpressive. He was afflicted in every way, perplexed, persecuted, and struck down (2 Corinthians 4:8-9). He was imprisoned, beaten, and often near death. The dangers he faced included shipwrecks, rivers, robbers, exposure, hunger, sleepless nights, and false brothers (11:23-29). Paul felt his weakness. Nearly every day there was a reason why he might lose heart. But the treasure of the gospel made the pains in his body and the disappointments in his life bearable. He knew his life was bringing God glory. He knew there was purpose in his pain. What Paul saw with his eyes was not the most important thing. He looked to the things that are unseen.

And what did Paul see? He saw “an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison” (4:17). Like the heavy ballast in the bottom of a ship preventing it from capsizing in a storm, the weight of future glory prevented the waves of disappointment in Paul's life from sinking him. Therefore he was able to bear with the troubles of his life. He was always of good courage (5:6). He knew there was a world to come, a home ready to receive him, and a kingdom unseen. Ahead of Paul was something so far better than his pain that he could call his troubles light and momentary.

He knew his weakness was “to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us” (4:7). Despite the pressures bearing down on him, Paul was not crushed, not driven to despair, not forsaken, and not destroyed (4:8-9). He discovered how Jesus' grace was sufficient and His “power is made perfect in weakness” (12:9). Outwardly, he may have been wasting away, but these eternal truths allowed him to be inwardly renewed (4:16).

He knew at the end of it all he would be at home with the Lord.

As Christians, when we die we will immediately be in the presence of Jesus. Jesus told the thief on the cross, “*today* you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43). In one sense, our bodies are like tents for our spirits. As soon as we leave this “tent” we will be in heaven. However, living as disembodied spirits is not our ultimate hope. We do not want to be “found naked” or “unclothed,” as Paul says, but we want to “be further clothed” (1 Corinthians 5:3-4). The hope for the Christian is in the resurrection of the dead—“knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence” (4:14). One day our broken, earthly bodies will be “swallowed up by life” and transformed into something better (5:4). While in this body we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling, a building made by God (5:1-2). And one day our spirits in heaven will be reunited to our resurrected, glorified bodies, never to be separated again.

But the good news is that even before our resurrection, as soon as we pass out of this life, we will finally be at home with the Lord and we will be free from the presence of sin. The first stage of our glorification will be complete. Our souls will be made perfect. We will see Jesus face-to-face and say with David, “I shall behold your face in righteousness; when I awake, I shall be satisfied with your likeness.” (Psalm 17:15). “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.”(1 Corinthians 13:12). Then, the Lord will “present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy” (Jude 24). The weight of these future glories are more than enough to outweigh every disappointment in this life.

Take a moment

1. Describe some of the waves of disappointment that threaten to capsize your boat and tempt you to lose heart.
2. If you knew you were to die tomorrow and be at home with the Lord, would you feel profound sadness for all the things you would “miss out” on? Would you rather be at home in this body and away from the Lord?

I can pray...

Father, thank You for telling us about the weight of future glory that awaits us who have trusted in Christ. We pray that this weight would tip the balance of our lives, changing us to love eternal things and to keep our eyes off of the temptations of this life.

6 | The Dead Will Rise

Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed.

1 Corinthians 15:51-52



JESUS will raise, transform, and glorify the bodies of Christians when He returns. The type of transformation that we will experience is difficult to comprehend, and the Apostle Paul gives three suggestive images for us to consider (1 Corinthians 15:40-49). The bodies we have now can be compared to an earthly body, but one day we will have something like a “heavenly body.” What we have now is a natural body, but one day it will be raised as a “spiritual body.” The bodies we have now are in the image of Adam, the man of dust. But one day we will bear “the image of the man of heaven,” Jesus Christ.

There will be similarities and differences between our current state and our future state. From the perspective of loved ones, the one who dies is merely “asleep,” and one day he or she will awake (15:51). If we will “awake,” then we can assume that who we were before our “sleep” will remain untouched and that we will still have our memories and personhood. But there will be differences, as well. Paul says the transformation can be compared to a grain of wheat that grows into a full grown plant (15:37-38). Daniel records how those who awake to everlasting life “shall shine like the brightness of the sky above” (Daniel 12:3).

The transformation that we will experience is necessary. We will be made fit and ready for a life in the new heavens and the new earth. “Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable” (1 Corinthians 15:50). All will be prepared for us. We will be made suitable for unbroken communion with God. The change that we will experience will happen in an instant. The blinking, or twinkling, of an eye was the fastest movement that Paul could imagine. The power of Christ is so complete and thorough that Christians who are still alive when Christ returns will pass into eternal life before they understand what is happening.

All of this will be accomplished at the coming of Christ. When Jesus returns He “will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body” (Philippians 3:21). “An hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live” (John 5:25). “For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first” (1 Thessalonians 4:16)

The change that Paul describes is the second stage of glorification. In our last devotion we discussed the first stage of our glorification—the perfection of our souls. The second stage is the perfection of our bodies. Paul writes that the dead will be raised imperishable. Everything that is wrong with our bodies will be perfected. Our deaths are like the sowing of seeds: our bodies are sown into the earth weak, dishonored, and perishable. But they will be raised in power and honor, and they will be imperishable. This is Jesus’ final ministry of mercy to our bodies. If Jesus’ earthy ministry included acts of mercy to the weak; if He made lepers clean, the lame to walk, the deaf to hear, and the blind to see, then how much more will He restore us in His final ministry to our weak frames? There remains one concluding and permanent act of mercy to us in our pain. At last we will have full healing.

You may never feel the healing touch of Jesus in this life. You are guaranteed no miracles. Your cancer may return. Old age will take many. But it will not have the final word. Brothers and sisters in Christ, let us wait patiently for the trumpet blast that will reach the deepest parts of the earth.

Take a moment

1. Read this passage from John MacArthur: “When a false Christian goes through a test, it will inevitably reveal his true colors. When a true believer goes through a test, he will be driven to prayer, leaning on the strength of God rather than his own weakness. Trials burn up imitation faith but strengthen true faith. They may cause us pain when we are confronted by our weaknesses, but they have the good result of causing us to turn from ourselves to the infinite strength of God” (from “When the Healing Doesn’t Come”). How does the knowledge of future healing in the resurrection strengthen you in your trials?

I can pray...

Jesus, You are wise. You know when a trial needs to enter my life, and You know when to remove a trial from my life. Help me to “be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain” (1 Cor 15:58).

7 | The Last Enemy

Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death

1 Corinthians 15:24-26



DEATH is an enemy to Jesus. Our Lord hates death and will never make peace with it. It is necessary that He destroy His enemy, and He will destroy it last of all. There are at least five reasons why death must be destroyed:

First, death must be destroyed so that Christ can demonstrate the end of the reign of sin and the full extent of atonement for His people. Death has power over us because we are sinners deserving of death. “Because of one man’s trespass, death *reigned* through that one man” (Romans 5:17). But if sin no longer has power over us, and if the power of the law to condemn us is broken because of Christ’s righteousness counted for us, then death no longer has any sting. If it is true that we are no longer under the power of the law, then we are no longer under the authority of death, because death’s awful power comes from sin. “The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law” (1 Corinthians 15:56).

Therefore, for Christians death cannot harm us. The sting is taken out, and death is no longer deadly to believers. The sword of death is blunted. We may die, but by dying we enter into life. This is the first defeat of death. But if death were to remain in the new heavens and the new earth, then our righteousness in Christ would be in question. There is no place for death in a world where all of God’s children are declared righteous, just like how there would be no need for prisons if all crimes were pardoned. Therefore, death must experience a second and final defeat. Death must finally be destroyed to show how Christ’s blood has covered our sins.

Second, death (& Satan) must be destroyed so that Christ can end the oppression of His people. Jesus’ ears have heard our cries. He is moved with compassion at our plight. The Son of God entered into our world in order to end the reign of death: “Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery”

(Hebrews 2:14-15).

Third, death must be destroyed so that Christ can demonstrate the extent of His triumph. For a short while death had dominion over our Lord. For three days He was in the tomb and was displayed to the rulers and authorities as weak and powerless. But in His resurrection He displayed His power. “We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God” (Romans 6:8-10). In His death He took away the power of Satan to accuse Christians, and He released captives from the Devil’s clutches. “He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him” (Colossians 2:15).

Fourth, death must be destroyed so that Christ can complete His rule and display His full authority. Adam, the first man, was given dominion over all the earth. In a greater way, Jesus, the second Adam, has been given dominion over all things. But currently we do not see all things placed under His feet. “At present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him. But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone” (Hebrews 2:8-9). One day all things will be placed under His feet. Death will be the last battle and it will be conquered as the final stronghold of rebellion against the rule of Christ.

Fifth, and finally, death must be destroyed so that Christ can bring history to its conclusion and intended purpose. One day our Lord will break the seals of the scroll and gather His people home. “Neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come” will separate us from His love (Romans 8:38). “He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” (Revelation 21:3-4).

Take a moment

1. Are you fearful of death? What things make you forget that Jesus delivered “all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery?”


I can pray...

Jesus, You promised that You would not leave us as orphans. You said that You will come again. We know You will keep Your word, and we trust in You to make all things new. Please defeat Your enemies quickly. Help us to be ready for Your return.

Going Deeper: What About Cremation?

But someone will ask, “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?” You foolish person! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And what you sow is not the body that is to be, but a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. . . . So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power.

1 Corinthians 15:35-37; 42-43

 **H**OW should we handle our dead? We need to consider the doctrine of the resurrection and the Christian view of the human body when we approach the topic of funerals. Much of the atmosphere of thought in America regarding death and funerals is sub-Christian at best and sometimes outright pagan at worst. For example, the Christian view of the body is not that we are souls who are trapped inside prisons of flesh. The Christian hope is not to become an angel or some sort of spirit that lives a celestial life, no longer bound by our loathsome, physical bodies, as some consider them. It was Plato who wrote about how the soul is imprisoned like the oyster in its shell, and that death is not something to regret, but something to be welcomed because it would mean being freed from the shackles of a physical life.¹ The Christian view of creation is that the Lord made all things good. When God made us in His image He blessed us and gave us purpose connected to how we use our bodies upon the earth, working and multiply, and this He called *very good* (Gen 1:28-31). In fact, before Adam had a soul he was first given a body, and *then* was given the breath of life (Gen 2:7). God created us as enmeshed spirit-body creations.

As Christians when we die we are in the presence of the Lord. But this is not the end. The Christian hope is to see Christ return to the earth, and He will resurrect us from the dead. Our final hope, ultimately, is not to go *up* to God but that God would come *down* to earth. The central verse of Revelation, when the 7th angel blows his trumpet, declares, “The kingdom of the world has *become* the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever” (Rev 11:15). One day the governments of this earth will be

¹Plato, *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, Vol. 9 (trans. Harold N. Fowler. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd. 1925), 250c.

taken over by Christ's rule. And in Revelation 21:2-4 we read, "And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, *coming down* out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, the dwelling place of God is *with man*. He will dwell *with them*, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.'" We long for the new heavens and the new earth, because not only will our bodies be glorified, but *all of creation* will be renewed. As it says in Romans 8:21-22, all creation has been longing in its birth pains to "be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God." One day the earth shall become Eden as it should have been, and we will continue to live forever as enmeshed spirit-body creations.

I. The History of Cremation

How, then, should Christians evaluate the funeral practices available to us? Does it matter how we treat the bodies of our loved ones? When it comes to the practice of cremation, we have to first acknowledge the non-Christian theology that has historically been connected with the act. Hinduism has practiced cremation for thousands of years. They view the act as a purification process, whereby burning the body cleanses the soul, preparing it for reincarnation. The soul that survives the fire will "fly birdlike to the world of the ancestors or the world of the gods."² Buddhism has practiced cremation since its beginning. The Buddha was cremated in BC 483, and his followers cremate their dead to allow the spirit to escape and await the next reincarnation. The soul is thought to remain inside the body, and the fires of cremation sever the soul and the body.³ Confucianism initially forbade cremation, but in 1875 after a ban on the practice was lifted by the Japanese government, citing superior sanitation and preservation of land use, it was widely adopted. Today, 99.97% of deaths in Japan end in cremation.⁴

The practice of cremation has been quickly adopted in the United States. In 1960 only 3.5% of deaths ended in cremation. But by 2018, the number has grown to 53.1%.⁵ The Cremation Association of North America forecasts a rate of 59.4% by 2023.⁶ Some of the reasons given include less religious affiliation, more affiliation with non-Christian religions, higher average education levels, less home ownership, and a more transient population. Because more people are not rooted in one place they do not desire to bury their loved ones in a local graveyard, since they plan to move eventually.

²Prothero, Stephen. *Purified by Fire: A History of Cremation in America*. (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2001), 6.

³"Buddhist Ceremonies and Funeral Rites for the Dead." Accessed February 2, 2021. http://www.buddhanet.net/d_cermon.htm.

⁴"International Cremation." (Pharos International: Cremation Society of Great Britain, 2015), 37-38.

⁵"Trends and Statistics." National Funeral Directors Association, 2011.

⁶"Industry Statistical Information." Cremation Association of North America. *Annual Report*, 2020.

Other historic arguments in favor of cremation have included hygiene and environmentalism. “Save the Land for the Living” was a slogan adopted by enterprising cremationists in 1974.⁷

II. Christian History

But how should cremation be viewed through the lens of Christian history? Burning on a funeral pyre has traditionally been a pagan act in the western world. Although burial was most commonly practiced in early Rome, by BC 400 until the 1st and 2nd centuries, cremation was the most common practice. In the late 1st century AD, cremation was so commonplace that Tacitus, the Roman historian (c. 56-120 AD) referred to it as *Romanus mos* (“the Roman Way”).⁸ The early Roman Catholic Church forbade cremation because they understood how it was associated with pre-Christian religions. In 789 AD cremation was outlawed by Charlemagne and even punishable by death for this reason.⁹ The Roman Catholic Church, in their attempt to modernize church doctrine and practice, lifted the ban on cremation in 1963, under the Second Vatican Council. The Eastern Orthodox Church to this day forbids cremation, except in the case of an epidemic, where disease is a concern.¹⁰ Protestants began to adopt the practice of cremation after World War 1 in response to the Spanish Flu outbreak. The European death toll was between 2 million and 2.3 million from 1918-1919, and mortuaries had difficulty processing the sheer volume of the dead, in addition to the fear of contagion.¹¹

III. The Bible

How should we evaluate the practice of cremation biblically? There are only three texts that indirectly reference cremation as a burial practice in the Bible: two of them are exceptions in times of war, and one is a passage of judgment against a nation.

1 Samuel 31:8-13

The bodies of Saul and his three sons were captured by the Philistines. Their enemies desecrated them, cutting off their heads and pinning the bodies to the wall of Beth-shan. The valiant men of Jabesh-gilead heard what had been done, and under cover of night took the bodies down. They “took the body of Saul and the bodies of his sons from the wall of Beth-shan, and they

⁷British Cremation Society anniversary slogan, 1974. Kazmier, Lisa Ann. “A Modern Landscape: The British Way of Death in the Age of Cremation” (Ph.D. diss., Rutgers Univ., 2005), 4.

⁸Tacitus, *Annals*, 16.6

⁹Bregman, Lucy. *Religion, Death, and Dying*. (Santa Barbara, Calif. : Praeger Publishers, 2010), 3.

¹⁰“Cremation.” Accessed 2/08/2021. <https://www.oca.org/questions/deathfunerals/cremation>

¹¹Ansart, Séverine. “Mortality burden of the 1918–1919 influenza pandemic in Europe”. *Influenza and Other Respiratory Viruses*. Wiley. 3 (3): (May 2009), 99–106.

came to Jabesh and *burned them* there. And they took their bones and buried them under the tamarisk tree in Jabesh and fasted seven days” (1 Samuel 31:12-13). We can assume that the bodies of Saul and his sons were badly decomposed. The distance from the wall to Jabesh-gilead would have been about 10 miles. The men cremated the bodies rather than carry four corpses. “It was probably considered more honorable to cremate the royal retinue than attempt to haul the mutilated, stinking bodies elsewhere for the usual Jewish burial ceremonies.”¹² In 2 Samuel 2:5, David commended the men for the *kindness* they showed Saul by doing this. It would, however, be inappropriate to consider that this verse be used to normalize the practice of cremation. The narrative simply describes what happened, and this was an exception during a time of war.

Amos 6:8-10

The Lord prophesied judgment by military invasion through the prophet Amos to Israel. The ruin will be so great that one house will have the bodies of ten men. “And if a relative, or his undertaker [literally, “*the one who burns him*”], will lift him up to carry out his bones from the house, and he will say to the one who is in the innermost part of the house, ‘Is anyone else with you?’ And that one will say, ‘No one’” (Amos 6:10, NASB). In the aftermath of the attack, with so few survivors, there would be no possible way to properly bury all the dead in Zion. The imagery is that there will be ten dead people per one survivor. The spread of disease would become a public health crisis. Therefore, the only solution that will be available to the living is to cremate the masses of the dead. “In the carnage of war, normal burial is not always possible, especially when the number of casualties is high.”¹³ Again, this passage is an exception during a time of war, where cremation was seen as the only option to dispose of the large number of the dead.

Amos 2:1-3

Earlier in his book, the prophet Amos delivered words of judgment to God’s enemies. Among the list of wicked nations, Moab is singled out, and their sins are publicly recorded. What is the reason given for why the Lord will not turn back His wrath? “Because he burned to lime the bones of the king of Edom” (Amos 2:1). Most likely Moab desecrated the tomb of the king of Edom, dragging his body out and burning it until his bones fell apart like chalky lime powder. Notice that the judgment is not for tomb raiding, but specifically for burning the body, with the intention to profane the body with fire. Consequently, the Lord will deliver a judgment fitting the crime: “So

¹²Decker, Rodney. “Is It Better to Bury or to Burn? A Biblical Perspective on Cremation and Christianity in Western Culture.” (Rice Lectures, Detroit Baptist Seminary. March 15, 2006), 6.

¹³Ibid, 8.

I will send a fire upon Moab, and it shall devour the strongholds” (Amos 2:2). Although, “one must be careful not to transfer inappropriately what was perhaps a deliberate war atrocity to normal funeral practice. The point of the text is significant in this regard [when considering if it is wise for a Christian to cremate], but it is not legitimate to cite this as a proof text which forbids cremation in all situations.”¹⁴

Fire as Sign of Judgment

Many times the Lord uses fire to bring death and judgment. Nadab and Abihu brought unauthorized incense into the holy place, “And fire came out from before the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord” (Lev 10:2). The Lord did not respect the offering of Korah and his rebellious company, “And fire came out from the Lord and consumed the 250 men offering the incense” (Num 16:35). Achan troubled Israel with his secret sin, “And Joshua said, ‘Why did you bring trouble on us? The Lord brings trouble on you today.’ And all Israel stoned him with stones. They *burned them with fire* and stoned them with stones” (Joshua 7:25). The enemies of Elijah were consumed with a fire from heaven, first a group of 50 men and then another group of 50 men (2 Kings 1:10, 12). Death by fire was to be used in two exceptional cases in the Levitical code. The first: “If a man takes a woman and her mother also, it is depravity; he and they shall be *burned with fire*, that there may be no depravity among you” (Lev 20:14). The second: “And the daughter of any priest, if she profanes herself by whoring, profanes her father; she shall be *burned with fire*” (Lev 21:9). The mode of these two capital punishments is singled out as particularly heinous, even among lists that includes human sacrifice, witchcraft, cursing parents, adultery, homosexuality, incest, and bestiality. Death by fire was supposed to be an exceptional judgment, meant to rid God’s people of this evil. Again, as with the three passages above, we should not read into these passage a normative pattern for funerals. These texts do not explicitly prohibit cremation as a practice. To cremate is not a sin. But we must consider how events such as these would have transformed the moral imagination of God’s people. “Such a history of judgment fire hardly provided a positive incentive for the burial practice of cremation.”¹⁵

Elsewhere in the Bible God’s wrath is symbolized with fire. The arrogant nation of Assyria and its king will be judged: “the Lord God of hosts will send wasting sickness among his stout warriors, and under his glory a burning will be kindled, like the burning of fire” (Isa 10:16). The Lord will consume the nations: “Behold, the name of the Lord comes from afar, burning with his anger, and in thick rising smoke; his lips are full of fury, and his tongue

¹⁴Ibid, 7.

¹⁵Davis, John. *What About Cremation? A Christian Perspective*. (Winona Lake, Ind.: BMH, 1989)., 62.

is like a devouring fire” (Isa 30:27). The place of judgment for Assyria’s king is likened to a crematorium: “For a burning place has long been prepared; indeed, for the king it is made ready, its pyre made deep and wide, with fire and wood in abundance; the breath of the Lord, like a stream of sulfur, kindles it” (Isa 30:33). All throughout the prophets the wrath of God is akin to a fire: “remove the foreskin of your hearts...lest my wrath go forth like fire, and burn with none to quench it” (Jer 4:4). “On the day of the wrath of the Lord, in the fire of his jealousy, all the earth shall be consumed” (Zeph 1:18). “For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze” (Malachi 4:1).

In the New Testament we frequently have fire used to represent God’s judgment. “Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (Matt 3:10). “It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire” (Matt 18:8). “Then he will say to those on his left, Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matt 25:41). Our work as Christians will be judged as though by fire: “each one’s work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done” (1 Cor 3:13). The end-time judgment of Christ is almost always associated with fire: “the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance” (2 Thess 1:7). “...a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries” (Heb 10:27). “...the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly” (2 Pt 3:7). “Sodom and Gomorrah...serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire” (Jude 7). “Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth” (Rev 8:5). “These two were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulfur” (Rev 19:20).

Again, none of these passages forbid cremation. To cremate is not a sin. But we must also weigh the collective force of these passages, and the many others not mentioned, when we consider how to handle the bodies of our deceased loved ones. What association does fire invoke in our imaginations? Ought a Christian to be comfortable subjecting their loved ones’ bodies to fire when considering the conceptual world of the Bible and how it uses fire in its symbolism?

Biblical Uses of Burial

In the Bible burial is the standard for the treatment of one’s body after death. The words “bury” and “grave” in Hebrew are nearly identical, and they occur over 200 times in the Old Testament. These burials are “in a cave

(Gen 23:19), under a tree (Gen 35:8), beside the road (Gen 48:7), in the desert (1 Kgs 2:34), in a garden (2 Kgs 21:18), or on a hill (2 Chron 32:33). This may be either earth burial in a dug grave, or internment in a tomb.¹⁶

Depending on the social status and chronological period, the tomb is better known in the Bible lands since it is an obvious, often a prominent, structure. These might consist of natural caves, but the best known (especially in the vicinity of Jerusalem and Jericho) are hand-hewn in soft rock. There are several styles and customs evident, but typically a tomb would be used for multiple internments, most commonly of family members. In some periods bodies were (permanently) buried individually in coffins placed in hewn niches or laid on rock shelves (without a coffin). In other times the initial burial was individual, but after a corpse had decomposed so as to leave only bones, the bones were transferred to an ossuary (a stone or pottery bone box or pottery jar) so as to make room for additional burials of family members.¹⁷

Our Lord's own burial was in a borrowed tomb, and what He experienced was typical of Jewish custom, aside from the lavish amount of spices and perfume that adorned His body. In fact, the burial of the Messiah was foretold, in addition to His death: "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" (Isa 53:9). In addition, the way Jesus' body was handled with great care and reverence by those who loved him should not escape our notice.

God Himself once buried someone. When Moses died God did not leave his body exposed to the elements and animals on top of Mount Nebo near the plains of Moab. Moses had climbed the mountain because the Lord wanted to show Moses the promised land one final time that He swore to give to Abraham's descendants. "So Moses the servant of the Lord died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the Lord, and *he buried him* in the valley in the land of Moab opposite Beth-peor; but no one knows the place of his burial to this day" (Deut 34:5-6). The only one who could have buried Moses was the Lord. No other person is named. We should note that, when given the option, God chose burial for His servant, Moses, and God chose burial for His Son.

Not To Be Buried Was a Judgment

To refuse burial for someone was a sign of contempt reserved for one's enemy. "The Lord will cause you to be defeated before your enemies...And

¹⁶Decker, "Burn or Bury?", 13.

¹⁷Ibid, 14.

your dead body shall be food for all birds of the air and for the beasts of the earth, and there shall be no one to frighten them away” (Deut 28:25-26). “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....And all Israel shall mourn for him [the child who is to die] 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). Notice how those whom the Lord rejected are not buried, but the one in whom something pleasing was found in the eyes of the Lord is given the honor of a burial.

In another word of judgment Jeremiah says that the bones of the wicked kings of Judah, along with the officials, priests, prophets, and all inhabitants of Jerusalem who worshiped the sun, moon, and stars will be exhumed and given no burial, but their bones will be exposed under the very sun, moon, and stars that they loved to worship. “And they shall not be gathered or buried. They shall be as dung on the surface of the ground” (Jer 8:1-3). Even those who had once been buried will not be given the honor of remaining in their tombs, but they will be judged posthumously for their idolatry. The ancient Israelites understood that burial was the proper and regular way to treat the bodies of their dead. Not to be buried was a dishonor.

Theological Considerations

When the Lord redeemed us He not only saved our souls but also our bodies. “You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body” (1 Cor 6:19-20). The context of this passage is in regards to sexual immorality, but the broad principles are applicable for how we view the lordship of Christ over the choices we make with our bodies, including funerals. Paul taught that what the Lord purchased through His death and resurrection included our bodies, and therefore our bodies belong to Him. He has the right to tell us how to use them, or how not to use them. “Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?...For, as it is written, ‘The two will become one flesh.’ But he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him” (1 Cor 6:15-17). Our bodies (and souls) are mystically connect to the Son of God, and therefore it matters how we use our bodies in this life. We are not free to think that “every sin a person commits is outside the body,” as Paul learned the Corinthians were being taught by false teachers, and therefore they excused their own sexual sin. But our bodies are connected to Jesus, and therefore while alive we must honor God by not using our bodies to indulge in sin.

In regard to funerals, we must ponder whether the lordship of Christ over our bodies ceases upon death. Does the Lord no longer own our bodies when our life expires? Another question, much harder to answer, needs to

be pondered as well: do our bodies cease to be a part of the body of Christ in death? If our bodies are currently, while alive, a part of Christ, and if our bodies in the resurrection will be part of Christ, then would it be too far afield a thought to not also conclude that even in death our bodies are still somehow mystically united to Christ? Take, for example, how the concept of personhood is still attached to a body after death. When Jesus was buried the text does not refer to His *body* but to His *person*. Joseph “took *him* down, wrapped [*him*] in the linen, and placed *him* in a tomb cut out of rock” (Mark 15:46). John Mark, the author of the Gospel, did not use the neuter third person singular pronoun *it*, referring to the body, but the masculine pronoun *him*, referring to the person. When Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead He did not cry, “Dead body, come out!” He instead referred to the one *who is in the tomb* as Lazarus. Even though his soul was not in the tomb the body was referred to as a person, not as the corpse of a person.¹⁸ “Even in death the body that is laid in the tomb is not simply a body. It is the body of the person. More properly, it is the person as respects the body. It is the person who is buried or laid in the tomb.”¹⁹

In addition, as Christians we are indwelt with the Holy Spirit as His temple (1 Cor 6:19). Granted, our souls leave our bodies when we die, as also the Holy Spirit no longer dwells in the deceased. But it is still a body where the Holy Spirit once dwelt. There are many monuments and tokens of men that commemorate historic events and personages: the field of Gettysburg, the crown of Henry the 8th, or a bed where Napoleon once slept. These locations and objects are carefully treated and preserved by men. We even recognize that there are many who give special attention to the locations where Jesus once ministered while on earth, and many go on pilgrimage to visit what they consider to be holy sites. Should we not, then, as those who fear the Lord, also give special consideration and care to a body where the Holy Spirit once dwelled for a time?

IV. The Hope of the Resurrection

Consider the passage quoted from 1 Corinthians 15:35-37 at the beginning of this article. Paul likens the burial of a Christian to the planting of a seed. It is buried in hope of a harvest. The process of cremation burns the body to ashes and grinds the bones to dust. It is not consistent with the positive, consistent pattern of burial we see in the Bible. Admittedly, every body will eventually break down and decompose. We will all return to dust, preserved in a casket or not. But preservation is not the goal of a funeral. Nor is disposal the goal of a funeral. Christian funerals are not simply ways of disposing

¹⁸Decker, “Burn or Bury?”, 21.

¹⁹Murray, John. “The Nature of Man,” *Collected Writings of John Murray*, 4 vols., ed. Iain Murray, 2:14-22 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1976-82), 16.

of dead bodies, nor are they merely about remembering the departed or expressing grief. They are not less, but they are more. Rather, for believers funerals ought to be Christ-centered events, testifying all throughout to the message and hope of the gospel. And it is a gospel that ends with a resurrection of the dead and the life everlasting. It will be a real, physical life, with grass between our toes in a new heavens and a new earth. The end of the golden chain of redemption is the glorification of our flesh (Rom 8:30). In light of the non-Christian theology historically attached to cremation, its opposition historically in Christian tradition, the use of fire as symbolism in connection to God's wrath, the consistent, positive example of burial in the Bible, and the theological themes of the hope of resurrection attached to burial, we must conclude, at the very least, that to cremate is unwise.

In essence I would argue that cremation has become both accepted and popular in an inverse proportion to a knowledge of the Bible and Christian theology... True, many Christians who choose cremation do not view this choice with the same religious and philosophical connotation as do adherents of non-Christian religions or philosophies. It is often an "innocent" decision reflecting lack of information rather than an activist decision to advocate a particular worldview. This, however, only reflects that the church has failed to teach her people in this area.²⁰

A Question of Wisdom, and Not of Sin

As stated several times above: to cremate is not a sin. What we do with our bodies is a question of wisdom. What do our burial practices communicate to the believing community and to the unbelieving world? Are they able to see from our funerals what we believe about the resurrection of the dead? We have to ask what things might be communicated by cremation. Could it communicate that this body will not be reclaimed? Could it communicate that we will be annihilated? Could it communicate we will never come back to earth when Jesus returns? As stated above: there are exceptions to the rule. There are two times in the Bible where cremation was used, and it was not judged to be wrong. But these are exceptions that prove the rule. The standard practice for the dead in the Bible was burial.

Is Jesus able to resurrect "cremains?" Yes. There is nothing too hard for the Lord. He is able to resurrect Adam, and all those whose bodies have been lost. He is able to resurrect those burned at the stake and those who were torn to pieces and eaten by lions in the Roman Colosseum.

²⁰Decker, "Burn or Bury?", 38.

But what about the cost of funerals? In general, a traditional funeral is more expensive than cremation. But pragmatic considerations should not be our final or ultimate consideration. Financial considerations are not insignificant, but they are not ultimate. There are ways to keep the costs of funerals down, including buying caskets wholesale and not from the funeral home.

The Bones of Joseph

In conclusion, as those who believe in the resurrection, we should be like Joseph, who had faith in the promises of God and gave instructions for how to handle his body upon death. "Then Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, 'God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones from here.' So Joseph died, being 110 years old. They embalmed him, and he was put in a coffin in Egypt" (Gen 50:25-26). Joseph believed that God had given the promised land to Abraham and his sons. He knew that their time in Egypt was temporary. One day the Lord would visit them and Israel would inherit the land. Joseph knew he would not see that day with his eyes, but he wanted to be a part of God's promises and therefore asked that his bones would be carried with them out of Egypt. "Moses took the bones of Joseph with him, for Joseph had made the sons of Israel solemnly swear, saying, 'God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones with you from here.'" (Ex 13:19). Moses carried the bones of Joseph all throughout the 40 years of wandering. Joseph's bones crossed the Jordan River. His bones waited patiently while Jericho's walls fell down and the land was given to the sons of Abraham city-by-city in conquest.

And at last Joseph's bones were laid to rest by Joshua inside the promised land. "As for the bones of Joseph, which the people of Israel brought up from Egypt, they buried them at Shechem, in the piece of land that Jacob bought" (Joshua 24:32). Joseph, while alive, rested by faith in the promises of God. Even though he would never enter the land while alive, he entered God's eternal Sabbath rest. "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). As Christians there awaits for us a better promised land and a better day of rest than what the Israelites had. "For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on. So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God" (Heb 4:8-9). Let us by faith use our bones, like Joseph, to point others to the truth that this world is not our home, and we await a kingdom that cannot be shaken. Let us use our funerals to testify all throughout of our hope in the gospel.



—
**HOLY
WEEK
READINGS**
—

JOHN



1 | Palm Sunday - John 12:12-19

¹²The next day the large crowd that had come to the feast heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. ¹³So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, crying out, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!" ¹⁴And Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, just as it is written,

¹⁵"Fear not, daughter of Zion;
behold, your king is coming,
sitting on a donkey's colt!"

¹⁶His disciples did not understand these things at first, but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written about him and had been done to him. ¹⁷The crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to bear witness. ¹⁸The reason why the crowd went to meet him was that they heard he had done this sign. ¹⁹So the Pharisees said to one another, "You see that you are gaining nothing. Look, the world has gone after him."

Questions:

1. What gained the interests of the crowd to gather and see Jesus?
(See verses 13, 17, and 18).

2. What are the two reactions to Jesus in this passage?
(See verses 13 and 19).

I can pray...

Jesus, You promised to bring a sword and even divide families (Matthew 10:34-36). So also, You divide the world. Some will receive You as king, and others will hate and reject You.

Help us to receive You, because there is an even greater sign that You gave us, better than raising Lazarus from the dead: Your own resurrection. You are worthy to be embraced as our king.

2 | Monday - John 12:1-11

¹ Six days before the Passover, Jesus therefore came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. ² So they gave a dinner for him there. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at table. ³ Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. ⁴ But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was about to betray him), said, ⁵ "Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" ⁶ He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and having charge of the moneybag he used to help himself to what was put into it. ⁷ Jesus said, "Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸ For the poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me."

⁹ When the large crowd of the Jews learned that Jesus was there, they came, not only on account of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ¹⁰ So the chief priests made plans to put Lazarus to death as well, ¹¹ because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus.

Questions:

1. What are the different reactions to Jesus and His ministry in this passage? (See verses 3, 5, 10, and 11).
2. Judas enriched himself and Mary gave lavishly. What is another strong contrast in this passage? (See verses 10 and 11).

I can pray...

Lord, there were those who opposed You, plotting to kill the man whom You raised from the dead. They wanted to hide the evidence of Your glory and might. I pray that You would expose those who use Christianity to selfishly benefit themselves, like Judas. I pray that You would thwart those who oppose preachers and missionaries from telling of Your glory and might.

Give me courage to tell others about You, Jesus, no matter the cost. Help me to be like Mary, who honored Your kindness in grace with her devotion.

3 | Tuesday - John 12:20-36a

²⁰ Now among those who went up to worship at the feast were some Greeks. ²¹ So these came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and asked him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” ²² Philip went and told Andrew; Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. ²³ And Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴ Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. ²⁵ Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶ If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him.

²⁷ “Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour?’ But for this purpose I have come to this hour. ²⁸ Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven: “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” ²⁹ The crowd that stood there and heard it said that it had thundered. Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.” ³⁰ Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not mine. ³¹ Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out. ³² And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” ³³ He said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die. ³⁴ So the crowd answered him, “We have heard from the Law that the Christ remains forever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?” ³⁵ So Jesus said to them, “The light is among you for a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, lest darkness overtake you. The one who walks in the darkness does not know where he is going. ³⁶ While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light.”

Questions:

1. Why did Greeks seeking Jesus cause our Lord to think on His future death?
(see verses 23 and 32).

2. What is the fruit of the death of Christ?
(see verses 24, 28, and 35-36).

I can pray...

Thank you, Jesus, that by Your death you drew all peoples to yourself.

I praise you, Jesus, because Your cross made me a son of light and it glorified the Father.

Help me to walk in the light as we wait for the ruler of this earth, Satan, to be cast out.

4 | Wednesday - John 12:36b-50

³⁶When Jesus had said these things, he departed and hid himself from them. ³⁷Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him, ³⁸so that the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

“Lord, who has believed what he heard from us,
and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?”

³⁹Therefore they could not believe. For again Isaiah said,

⁴⁰“He has blinded their eyes
and hardened their heart,
lest they see with their eyes,
and understand with their heart, and turn,
and I would heal them.”

⁴¹Isaiah said these things because he saw his glory and spoke of him.

⁴²Nevertheless, many even of the authorities believed in him, but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue; ⁴³for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.

⁴⁴And Jesus cried out and said, “Whoever believes in me, believes not in me but in him who sent me. ⁴⁵And whoever sees me sees him who sent me.

⁴⁶I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness. ⁴⁷If anyone hears my words and does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world. ⁴⁸The one who rejects me and does not receive my words has a judge; the word that I have spoken will judge him on the last day. ⁴⁹For I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment—what to say and what to speak. ⁵⁰And I know that his commandment is eternal life. What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has told me.”

Questions:

1. What is the Father's commandment from verse 49?

(See verses 37, 44, 46, and 48).

2. What was the evidence of their blindness, mentioned in verse 40?

(See verses 37, 42, 43, and 48).

I can pray...

You, Father, commanded Jesus to enter this world and testify to the truth. By His words we know that we are in darkness. But He has come to save the world if we will believe in Him.

Holy Spirit, open the eyes of the spiritually blind so that they may no longer reject Jesus.

5 | Thursday - John 13:1-38

¹ Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. ² During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him, ³ Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, ⁴ rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. ⁵ Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him. ⁶ He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, do you wash my feet?" ⁷ Jesus answered him, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand." ⁸ Peter said to him, "You shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no share with me." ⁹ Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" ¹⁰ Jesus said to him, "The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean. And you are clean, but not every one of you." ¹¹ For he knew who was to betray him; that was why he said, "Not all of you are clean."

¹² When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, "Do you understand what I have done to you? ¹³ You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. ¹⁴ If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵ For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. ¹⁶ Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. ¹⁷ If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them. ¹⁸ I am not speaking of all of you; I know whom I have chosen. But the Scripture will be fulfilled, 'He who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me.' ¹⁹ I am telling you this now, before it takes place, that when it does take place you may believe that I am he. ²⁰ Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever receives the one I send receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me."

²¹ After saying these things, Jesus was troubled in his spirit, and testified, "Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me." ²² The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he spoke. ²³ One of his disciples, whom Jesus loved, was reclining at table at Jesus' side, ²⁴ so Simon Peter motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking. ²⁵ So that disciple, leaning back against Jesus, said to him, "Lord, who is it?" ²⁶ Jesus answered, "It is he to whom I will give this morsel of bread when I have dipped it." So when he

had dipped the morsel, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. ²⁷ Then after he had taken the morsel, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, "What you are going to do, do quickly." ²⁸ Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him. ²⁹ Some thought that, because Judas had the moneybag, Jesus was telling him, "Buy what we need for the feast," or that he should give something to the poor. ³⁰ So, after receiving the morsel of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night.

³¹ When he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him. ³² If God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself, and glorify him at once. ³³ Little children, yet a little while I am with you. You will seek me, and just as I said to the Jews, so now I also say to you, 'Where I am going you cannot come.' ³⁴ A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. ³⁵ By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

³⁶ Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, where are you going?" Jesus answered him, "Where I am going you cannot follow me now, but you will follow afterward." ³⁷ Peter said to him, "Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you." ³⁸ Jesus answered, "Will you lay down your life for me? Truly, truly, I say to you, the rooster will not crow till you have denied me three times.

Questions:

1. What did Jesus' love drive Him to do? (See verse 1).
2. How did this event parallel the cross? (See verse 8).
3. In what ways does the cross now stand as the central ethical imperative for the Christian, that is, the driving force for our good deeds? (See verse 34).

I can pray...

Jesus, as the great humble servant, You loved us and washed us of our sin and guilt. You loved us to the end. You entered into deeper and deeper states of humiliation to love us. You became a servant and died on the cross. And because we have been washed of our sins by Your blood we have our share with You. Help me to lay down my life for others, just as You showed no greater love than this, that You laid down Your life for Your friends. Help me to be a humble servant, because You served me. I am not greater than my Master, and I want to walk in Your steps.

6 | Friday - John 18:1 - 19:37

^{18:1} When Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his disciples across the brook Kidron, where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered. ^{18:2} Now Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place, for Jesus often met there with his disciples. ^{18:3} So Judas, having procured a band of soldiers and some officers from the chief priests and the Pharisees, went there with lanterns and torches and weapons. ^{18:4} Then Jesus, knowing all that would happen to him, came forward and said to them, “Whom do you seek?” ^{18:5} They answered him, “Jesus of Nazareth.” Jesus said to them, “I am he.” Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them. ^{18:6} When Jesus said to them, “I am he,” they drew back and fell to the ground. ^{18:7} So he asked them again, “Whom do you seek?” And they said, “Jesus of Nazareth.” ^{18:8} Jesus answered, “I told you that I am he. So, if you seek me, let these men go.” ^{18:9} This was to fulfill the word that he had spoken: “Of those whom you gave me I have lost not one.” ^{18:10} Then Simon Peter, having a sword, drew it and struck the high priest’s servant and cut off his right ear. (The servant’s name was Malchus.) ^{18:11} So Jesus said to Peter, “Put your sword into its sheath; shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me?”

^{18:12} So the band of soldiers and their captain and the officers of the Jews arrested Jesus and bound him. ^{18:13} First they led him to Annas, for he was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, who was high priest that year. ^{18:14} It was Caiaphas who had advised the Jews that it would be expedient that one man should die for the people.

^{18:15} Simon Peter followed Jesus, and so did another disciple. Since that disciple was known to the high priest, he entered with Jesus into the courtyard of the high priest, ^{18:16} but Peter stood outside at the door. So the other disciple, who was known to the high priest, went out and spoke to the servant girl who kept watch at the door, and brought Peter in. ^{18:17} The servant girl at the door said to Peter, “You also are not one of this man’s disciples, are you?” He said, “I am not.” ^{18:18} Now the servants and officers had made a charcoal fire, because it was cold, and they were standing and warming themselves. Peter also was with them, standing and warming himself.

^{18:19} The high priest then questioned Jesus about his disciples and his teaching. ^{18:20} Jesus answered him, “I have spoken openly to the world. I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret. ^{18:21} Why do you ask me? Ask those who have heard me what I said to them; they know what I said.” ^{18:22} When he had said these things, one of the officers standing by struck Jesus with his hand, saying, “Is that how you answer the high priest?” ^{18:23} Jesus answered

him, “If what I said is wrong, bear witness about the wrong; but if what I said is right, why do you strike me?” ^{18:24} Annas then sent him bound to Caiaphas the high priest.

^{18:25} Now Simon Peter was standing and warming himself. So they said to him, “You also are not one of his disciples, are you?” He denied it and said, “I am not.” ^{18:26} One of the servants of the high priest, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, asked, “Did I not see you in the garden with him?” ^{18:27} Peter again denied it, and at once a rooster crowed.

^{18:28} Then they led Jesus from the house of Caiaphas to the governor’s headquarters. It was early morning. They themselves did not enter the governor’s headquarters, so that they would not be defiled, but could eat the Passover. ^{18:29} So Pilate went outside to them and said, “What accusation do you bring against this man?” ^{18:30} They answered him, “If this man were not doing evil, we would not have delivered him over to you.” ^{18:31} Pilate said to them, “Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law.” The Jews said to him, “It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death.” ^{18:32} This was to fulfill the word that Jesus had spoken to show by what kind of death he was going to die.

^{18:33} So Pilate entered his headquarters again and called Jesus and said to him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” ^{18:34} Jesus answered, “Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?” ^{18:35} Pilate answered, “Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done?” ^{18:36} Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world.” ^{18:37} Then Pilate said to him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.” ^{18:38} Pilate said to him, “What is truth?”

After he had said this, he went back outside to the Jews and told them, “I find no guilt in him.” ^{18:39} But you have a custom that I should release one man for you at the Passover. So do you want me to release to you the King of the Jews?” ^{18:40} They cried out again, “Not this man, but Barabbas!” Now Barabbas was a robber.

^{19:1} Then Pilate took Jesus and flogged him. ^{19:2} And the soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head and arrayed him in a purple robe. ^{19:3} They came up to him, saying, “Hail, King of the Jews!” and struck him with their hands. ^{19:4} Pilate went out again and said to them, “See, I am bringing him out to you that you may know that I find no guilt in him.” ^{19:5} So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, “Behold the man!” ^{19:6} When the chief priests and the officers saw him, they cried out, “Crucify him, crucify him!” Pilate said to them,

“Take him yourselves and crucify him, for I find no guilt in him.”^{19:7} The Jews answered him, “We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has made himself the Son of God.”^{19:8} When Pilate heard this statement, he was even more afraid.^{19:9} He entered his headquarters again and said to Jesus, “Where are you from?” But Jesus gave him no answer.^{19:10} So Pilate said to him, “You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?”^{19:11} Jesus answered him, “You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin.”

^{19:12} From then on Pilate sought to release him, but the Jews cried out, “If you release this man, you are not Caesar’s friend. Everyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar.”^{19:13} So when Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judgment seat at a place called The Stone Pavement, and in Aramaic Gabbatha.^{19:14} Now it was the day of Preparation of the Passover. It was about the sixth hour. He said to the Jews, “Behold your King!”^{19:15} They cried out, “Away with him, away with him, crucify him!” Pilate said to them, “Shall I crucify your King?” The chief priests answered, “We have no king but Caesar.”^{19:16} So he delivered him over to them to be crucified.

So they took Jesus,^{19:17} and he went out, bearing his own cross, to the place called The Place of a Skull, which in Aramaic is called Golgotha.^{19:18} There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, and Jesus between them.^{19:19} Pilate also wrote an inscription and put it on the cross. It read, “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.”^{19:20} Many of the Jews read this inscription, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and it was written in Aramaic, in Latin, and in Greek.^{19:21} So the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, “Do not write, ‘The King of the Jews,’ but rather, ‘This man said, I am King of the Jews.’”^{19:22} Pilate answered, “What I have written I have written.”

^{19:23} When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his garments and divided them into four parts, one part for each soldier; also his tunic. But the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom,^{19:24} so they said to one another, “Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see whose it shall be.” This was to fulfill the Scripture which says,

“They divided my garments among them,
and for my clothing they cast lots.”

So the soldiers did these things,^{19:25} but standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.^{19:26} When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he

loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, “Woman, behold, your son!”
^{19:27} Then he said to the disciple, “Behold, your mother!” And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home.

^{19:28} After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the Scripture), “I thirst.” ^{19:29} A jar full of sour wine stood there, so they put a sponge full of the sour wine on a hyssop branch and held it to his mouth.
^{19:30} When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, “It is finished,” and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

^{19:31} 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. ^{19:32} So the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first, and of the other who had been crucified with him. ^{19:33} But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. ^{19:34} But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water. ^{19:35} 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. ^{19:36} For these things took place that the Scripture might be fulfilled: “Not one of his bones will be broken.” ^{19:37} And again another Scripture says, “They will look on him whom they have pierced.”

Questions:

1. In these passages where do you remember the words of Jesus and the words of Scripture being fulfilled? (Review 18:27, 32; 19:24, 28, 36, and 37).
2. What is the significance in emphasizing this fulfillment?
3. In these passages where do you remember words like “truth” and “testimony” being mentioned? (Review 18:19-20, 23, 37, 38; 19:35).
4. What is the significance in emphasizing “truth”?
5. How do we know that Jesus was in control? (Review 18:36; 19:11, 28-30).

I can pray...

Jesus, You completed the task. You left nothing undone. You fulfilled the plan laid out before the foundation of the world, the plan which the prophets knew and foretold. Thank You, Holy Spirit, that the things we read are trustworthy. Help me to live not by lies, but to know Him who is true and to walk in truth.

7 | Saturday - John 19:38-42

³⁸ 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. 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. 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. 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. ⁴² So because of the Jewish day of Preparation, since the tomb was close at hand, they laid Jesus there.

Questions:

1. Do you recall how Mary anointed Jesus' feet with expensive perfume (from Monday's reading, John 12:3)? Why was it important that Nicodemus and Joseph cared for Jesus' body?
2. Mary gave one pound of perfume for Jesus' feet. Nicodemus gave 75 pounds for Jesus' burial. What does the extravagance of the gift tell us?

I can pray...

Lord, even in Your death these men honored You. They acknowledged how worthy of reverence and worship was Your life. But how much greater a wonder was Your death! You fulfilled all righteousness, and Your body was laid to rest in the splendor befitting a king.

May our lives be fragrant with sacrifices that honor the great work You have done.

8 | Easter Sunday - John 12:12-19

¹ Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. ² So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” ³ So Peter went out with the other disciple, and they were going toward the tomb. ⁴ Both of them were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵ And stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶ Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there, ⁷ and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself. ⁸ Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹ for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰ Then the disciples went back to their homes.

¹¹ But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. ¹² And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. ¹³ They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” ¹⁴ Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵ Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” ¹⁶ Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned and said to him in Aramaic, “Rabboni!” (which means Teacher). ¹⁷ Jesus said to her, “Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” ¹⁸ Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”—and that he had said these things to her.

¹⁹ On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” ²⁰ When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.” ²² And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness

from any, it is withheld.”

²⁴Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.”

²⁶Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” ²⁷Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.” ²⁸Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” ²⁹Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

³⁰Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; ³¹but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

Questions:

1. Do you recall all the places in this passage that reference belief? (Review verses 8, 25, 27, 29, and 31).
2. What is the significance of John repeating the word “belief”?
3. What is the result of believing that Jesus is the Christ and was raised from the dead? (See verse 31).
4. Why does belief in the Christ give you life in His name?

I can pray...

You, God, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, have achieved this great work of salvation alone. We confess that we contribute nothing to our salvation. You have freely offered Your grace, and we enter into it by faith alone.

Thank You that by believing in Your gospel we can be saved. The terms of mercy are brought as low as possible to us. The doors of heaven are thrown open to us. You most graciously invite us. For too long, Lord, we confess that we have been fools and slow of heart to believe. Help us to let go of our hold on the world and to lay hold on eternal life.

Going Deeper: Is the Resurrection Rational?

The resurrection of Christ from the dead must be received by faith. But it is not a “leap of faith.” There are good, historic, rational reasons for why we ought to believe that Jesus really did rise from the dead. Printed below is an abridged article from a collection of essays that were published between 1910 and 1915, known as *The Fundamentals*.

The Certainty and Importance of the Physical Resurrection of Jesus Christ From the Dead by Rev. R. A. Torrey

The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is the corner-stone of Christian doctrine. It is mentioned directly one hundred and four or more times in the New Testament. It was the most prominent and cardinal point in the apostolic testimony. When the apostolic company, after the apostasy of Judas Iscariot, felt it necessary to complete their number again by the addition of one to take the place of Judas Iscariot, it was in order that he might “be a witness with us of His resurrection” (Acts 1:21-22). The resurrection of Jesus Christ was the one point that Peter emphasized in his great sermon on the Day of Pentecost. His whole sermon centered in that fact. Its key-note was, “This Jesus hath God raised up, whereof we all are witnesses” (Acts 2:32, cf. Acts 2:24-31). When the Apostles were filled again with the Holy Spirit some days later, the one central result was that “with great power gave the Apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 4:33).

The crucifixion loses its meaning without the resurrection. Without the resurrection, the death of Christ was only the heroic death of a noble martyr. With the resurrection, it is the atoning death of the Son of God. It shows that death to be of sufficient value to cover all our sins, for it was the sacrifice of the Son of God. In it we have an all-sufficient ground for knowing that the blackest sin is atoned for. Disprove the resurrection of Jesus Christ and Christian faith is vain. “If Christ be not risen,” cries Paul, “then is our preaching vain and your faith is also vain” (1 Corinthians 15:14). And later he adds, “If Christ be not risen, your faith is vain. You are yet in your sins” (1 Corinthians 15:17).

If the Scriptural assertions of Christ’s resurrection can be established as historic certainties, the claims and doctrines of Christianity rest upon an impregnable foundation. On the other hand, if the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead cannot be established, Christianity must go.

Are the statements contained in the four Gospels regarding the

resurrection of Jesus Christ statements of fact or are they fiction, fables, myths? There are three separate lines of proof that the statements contained in the four Gospels regarding the resurrection of Jesus Christ are exact statements of historic fact.

I. The external evidence of the authenticity and truthfulness of the Gospel narratives

This is an altogether satisfactory argument. The external proofs of the authenticity and truthfulness of the Gospel narratives are overwhelming, but the argument is long and intricate. The next argument is from—

II. The internal proofs of the truthfulness of the Gospel records

1. The first thing that strikes us as we compare these Gospels one with another is that they are ***four separate and independent accounts***. In four accounts manufactured in collusion, whatever of harmony there might be would appear on the surface. Whatever discrepancy there might be would only come out by minute and careful study. But with the four Gospels the case is just the opposite. Harmony comes out by minute and careful study, and the apparent discrepancy lies upon the surface. Whether true or false, these four accounts are separate and independent from one another. It is absolutely incredible that four persons sitting down to write an account of what never occurred independently of one another should have made their stories agree to the extent that these do. We might rest the argument here and reasonably call the case settled, but we will go on still further:

2. The next thing we notice is that each of these accounts bears striking indications of having been ***derived from eye witnesses***. The account of an eye-witness is readily distinguishable from the account of one who is merely retelling what others have told him. Anyone who is accustomed to weigh evidence in court or in historical study soon learns how to distinguish the report of an eye witness from mere hearsay evidence. Any careful student of the Gospel records of the resurrection will readily detect many marks of the eye witness.

3. The third thing that we notice about these Gospel narratives is their ***naturalness, straightforwardness, artlessness, and simplicity***. The accounts, it is true, have to do with the supernatural, but the accounts themselves are most natural. There is a remarkable absence of all attempt at coloring and effect. There is nothing but the simple, straightforward telling of facts as they actually occurred.

4. The next thing we notice is the *unintentional evidence* of words, phrases, and accidental details. It oftentimes happens that when a witness is on the stand, the unintentional evidence that he bears by words and phrases which he uses, and by accidental details which he introduces, is more convincing than his direct testimony, because it is not the testimony of the witness, but a testimony of the truth to itself.

Take, as the first instance, the fact that in all the Gospel records of the resurrection, we are given to understand that Jesus was not at first recognized by His disciples when He appeared to them after His resurrection, e.g., Luke 24:16; John 21:4. We are not told why this was so. But the Gospel narratives simply record the fact without attempting to explain it. Why, then, is the story told in this way? For the self-evident reason that the evangelists were not making up a story for effect, but simply recording events precisely as they occurred. This is the way in which it occurred, therefore this is the way in which they told it.

Take a second instance: In all the Gospel records of the appearances of Jesus after His resurrection, there is not a single recorded appearance to an enemy or opponent of Christ. All His appearances were to those who were already believers. If the stories had been fabricated, they certainly would never have been made up in this way. If the Gospels were, as some would have us believe, fabrications constructed one hundred, two hundred, or three hundred years after the alleged events recorded, when all the actors were dead and gone and no one could gainsay any lies told, Jesus would have been represented as appearing to Caiaphas, and Annas, and Pilate, and Herod, and confounding them by His re-appearance from the dead. But there is no suggestion even of anything of this kind in the Gospel stories. Every appearance is to one who is already a believer. Why is this so? For the self-evident reason that this was the way that things occurred, and the Gospel narratives are not concerned with producing a story for effect, but simply with recording events precisely as they occurred and as they were observed.

We find still another instance in the fact that the recorded appearances of Jesus after His resurrection were only occasional. He would appear in the midst of His disciples and disappear, and not be seen again perhaps for several days. Why this was so, we can easily think out for ourselves—He was evidently seeking to wean His disciples from their old-time communion with Him in the body, and to prepare them for the communion with Himself in the Spirit that was to follow in the days that were to come. We are not, however, told this in the Gospel narratives. We are left to discover it for ourselves, and this is all the more significant for that reason. It is doubtful if the disciples themselves realized the meaning of the facts. If they had been making up the story to produce effect, they would have represented Jesus as being with

them constantly, as living with them, eating and drinking with them, day after day. Why then is the story told as recorded in the four Gospels? Because this is the way in which it had all occurred.

We find still another instance in John 20:4-6: "So they ran both together; and the other disciple did outrun Peter, and came first to the sepulcher. And he, stooping down and looking in, saw the linen clothes lying; yet went he not in. Then cometh Simon Peter following him, and went into the sepulcher, and seeth the linen clothes lie." This is all in striking keeping with what we know of the men from other sources. Mary, returning hurriedly from the tomb, bursts in upon the two disciples and cries, "They have taken away the Lord out of the sepulcher, and we know not where they have laid Him" [John 20:2]. John and Peter sprang to their feet and ran at the top of their speed to the tomb. John, the younger of the two disciples, was fleet of foot and outran Peter and reached the tomb first, but being a man of retiring and reverent disposition that he was (we are not told this here but we know it from a study of his personality as revealed elsewhere) he did not enter the tomb, but simply stooped down and looked in. Impetuous but older Peter comes stumbling on behind as fast as he can, but when once he reaches the tomb, he never waits a moment outside but plunges headlong in. Is this made up, or, is it life? He was indeed a literary artist of consummate ability who had the skill to make this up if it did not occur just so. There is incidentally a touch of local coloring in the report. When one visits today the tomb which scholars now accept as the real burial place of Jesus, he will find himself unconsciously obliged to stoop down in order to look in.

One more important illustration: In John 20:7 we read, "And the napkin, that was about His head, not lying with the linen clothes, but wrapped together in a place by itself." How strange that such a little detail as this should be added to the story with absolutely no attempt at explaining. But how deeply significant this little unexplained detail is. Recall the circumstances. Jesus is dead. For three days and two nights his body is lying cold and silent in the sepulcher, as truly dead as any body was ever dead, but at last the appointed hour has come, the breath of God sweeps through the sleeping and silent clay, and in that supreme moment of His own earthly life, that supreme moment of human history, when Jesus rises triumphant over death and grave and Satan, there is no excitement upon His part, but with that same majestic self-composure and serenity that marked His whole career, that same Divine calm that He displayed upon storm-tossed Galilee. He does not excitedly tear the napkin from His face and fling it aside, but absolutely without human haste or flurry, or disorder, He unties it calmly from His head, rolls it up and lays it away in an orderly manner in a place by itself. Was that made up? Never! We read here the simple narrative of a matchless detail in a unique life that was actually lived here upon earth,

a life so beautiful that one cannot read it with an honest and open mind without feeling the tears coming into his eyes.

But someone will say, all these are little things. True, and it is from that very fact that they gain much of their significance. You can make fiction look like truth, but when you come to examine it minutely and microscopically, you will soon detect that it is not reality but fabrication. But the more microscopically we examine the Gospel narratives, the more we become impressed with their truthfulness. There is an artlessness and naturalness and self-evident truthfulness in the narratives, down to the minutest detail, that surpasses all the possibilities of art.

III. The circumstantial evidence for the resurrection of Christ

1. Beyond a question, the foundation truth preached in the early years of the Church's history was the resurrection. Why should the Apostles use this as the very corner-stone of their creed, if not well attested and firmly believed?

But this is not all: ***They laid down their lives*** for this doctrine. Men never lay down their lives for a doctrine which they do not firmly believe. They stated that they had seen Jesus after His resurrection, and rather than give up their statement, they laid down their lives for it. Of course, men may die for error and often have, but it was for error that they firmly believed. In this case they would have known whether they had seen Jesus or not, and they would not merely have been dying for error but dying for a statement which they knew to be false. This is not only incredible but impossible.

Still further, if Jesus had not arisen, ***there would have been evidence*** that He had not. His enemies would have sought and found this evidence, but the Apostles went up and down the very city where He had been crucified and proclaimed right to the faces of His slayers that He had been raised and no one could produce evidence to the contrary. The very best they could do was to say the guards went to sleep and the disciples stole the body while the guards slept. Men who bear evidence of what happens while they are asleep are not usually regarded as credible witnesses. Further still, if the Apostles had stolen the body, they would have known it themselves and would not have been ready to die for what they knew to be a fraud.

2. Another known fact is ***the change in the day of rest***. The early church came from among the Jews. From time immemorial the Jews had celebrated the seventh day of the week as their day of rest and worship, but we find the early Christians in the Acts of the Apostles, and also in early Christian writings, assembling on the first day of the week. Nothing is more difficult of accomplishment than the change in a holy day that has been celebrated for centuries and is one of the most cherished customs of the people. What is

especially significant about the change is that it was changed by no express decree but by general consent. Something tremendous must have occurred that led to this change. The Apostles asserted that what had occurred on that day was the resurrection of Christ from the dead, and that is the most rational explanation.

3. But the most significant fact of all is *the change in the disciples themselves*, the moral transformation. At the time of the crucifixion of Christ, we find the whole apostolic company filled with blank and utter despair. We see Peter, the leader of the apostolic company, denying his Lord three times with oaths and cursings, but a few days later we see this same man, filled with a courage that nothing could shake. We see him standing before the council that had condemned Jesus to death and saying to them, “Be it known unto you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom ye crucified, whom God raised from the dead, even by Him doth this man stand before you whole” (Acts 4:10). A little further on when commanded by the council not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus, we hear Peter and John answering, “Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye. For we cannot but speak the things which we have *seen and heard*” (Acts 4:19-20).

A little later still after arrest and imprisonment, in peril of death, when sternly arraigned by the council, we hear Peter and the Apostles answering their demand that they should be silent regarding Jesus, with the words, “We ought to obey God rather than man. The God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom ye slew and hanged on a tree. Him hath God exalted with His right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins. And we are His witnesses of these things” (Acts 5:29-32). Something tremendous must have occurred to account for such a radical and astounding moral transformation as this. Nothing short of the fact of the resurrection and of their having seen the risen Lord will explain it.

Some attempt an explanation that Jesus was not really dead when they took Him from the cross, that His friends worked over Him and brought Him back to life, and what was supposed to be the appearance of the raised Lord was the appearance of one who never had been really dead and was now merely resuscitated. To sustain this view, appeal has been made to the short time Jesus hung upon the cross. But to this we answer:

- (1). Remember the events preceding the crucifixion; the agony in the garden of Gethsemane; the awful ordeal of the four trials; the scourging and the consequent physical condition in which all this left Jesus. Remember too the water and the blood that poured from His pierced side.

(2). His enemies would have taken, and did take, all necessary precautions against such a thing as this happening. (John 19:34).

(3). If Jesus had been merely resuscitated, He would have been so weak, such an utter physical wreck, that His reappearance would have been measured at its real value, and the moral transformation in the disciples, for which we are trying to account, would still remain unaccounted for.

(4). The moral difficulty is the greatest of all. For if it was really a case of resuscitation, then Jesus tried to palm Himself off as one risen from the dead, when in reality He was nothing of the sort. In that case, He would be an arch-impostor, and the whole Christian system rests on a fraud as its ultimate foundation.

A leader of the rationalistic forces in England has recently tried to prove the theory that Jesus was only apparently dead by appealing to the fact that when the side of Jesus was pierced blood came forth and asks, "Can a dead man bleed?" To this the sufficient reply is that when a man dies of what is called in popular language, a broken heart, the blood escapes into the pericardium, and after standing there for a short time it separates into serum (the water) and clot (the red corpuscles, blood), and thus if a man were dead, if his side were pierced by a spear, and the point of the spear entered the pericardium, "blood and water" would flow out just as the record states it did, and what is brought forth as a proof that Jesus was not really dead, is in reality a proof that He was, and an illustration of the minute accuracy of the story. It could not have been made up in this way, if it were not actual fact.

We have eliminated all other possible suppositions. We have but one left, namely, Jesus really was raised from the dead the third day as recorded in the four Gospels. The desperate straits to which those who attempt to deny it are driven are themselves proof of the fact.

We have then several independent lines of argument pointing decisively and conclusively to the resurrection of Christ from the dead. Some of them taken separately prove the fact, but taken together they constitute an argument that makes doubt of the resurrection of Christ impossible to the candid mind. Of course, if one is determined not to believe, no amount of proof will convince him. Such a man must be left to his own deliberate choice of error and falsehood; but any man who really desires to know the truth and is willing to obey it at any cost must accept the resurrection of Christ as an historically proven fact.

