

SIGNIFICANCE FOR BELIEVERS

Through a survey of the examples in the Old and New Testaments, we have established the evidence for burial. We have learnt that burial is God's way, burial is to be done in faith, and burial is a form of testimony and remembrance. In this next section, we want to investigate some of the theological arguments for burial.

SIGNIFICANCE OF IDENTIFICATION

The Bible describes the baptism of a believer as burial with Christ. While the emphasis in the following passages is on baptism and not burial, nevertheless, we can draw inferences from the illustration that the Apostle Paul uses. The first passage is found in Romans 6:3-5.

“Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection.”

The Apostle Paul was dealing with those who used the grace of God as an excuse to sin. Here, he explains that a person who is dead to sin must not pursue sin any longer. He uses the doctrine of baptism to explain this. At the point of our salvation, we were baptised with the Holy Spirit (John 1:33). The Bible tells us that this baptism was a full identification with Christ, especially with His death. This is outwardly signified by water baptism. Baptism is not only a sign of cleansing, but also a sign of death of the old man with his old way of life. When a person is baptised with the Holy Spirit, he is fully identified with Christ in His life, death, and resurrection. This means that the righteous life Jesus lived is imputed to us. When Jesus died on the cross, our old man died with Him there. When Jesus rose from the dead, our spirit was quickened with Him to a new life in Christ.

In describing the death of the old self, Paul uses the picture of burial. As Christians, we are identified with Christ, even in His burial. While it is true that Paul is merely using an illustration to show how we are identified with Christ's death in our baptism, nevertheless, the illustration will fall apart if burial is not significant. It is exactly because the burial of Christ was significant that the act of baptism points to that act of burial with Him. What is the significance of burial? It is the resurrection. Just as we are buried with Christ, we will be raised with Christ. We shall unpack this point further in the next section.

Paul uses a second illustration here – the illustration of a plant. Paul explains that we are “planted together in the likeness of his death”. The phrase “planted together” is one word in the original, which has the idea of germinating together. Paul explains that our identification with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection is like a seed that is buried in the ground and germinates into a plant. Once again, the illustration falls apart if burial is not significant.

Paul associates our baptism with burial in Colossians 2:11-12 as well.

“In whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ: Buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead.”

Here, Paul describes how the identification with Christ in His burial is significant in light of His resurrection.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESURRECTION

There are two key passages in Scripture that speaks of the resurrection. In this section, we shall consider both passages in light of the doctrine of burial. First, Paul expounds the significance of burial in light of the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15.

First, note how the burial of Christ is a significant element of the gospel. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4,

“For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures:”

Paul could have used ‘died’ instead of ‘buried’, but here he chose to use the word ‘buried’ because it is significant in his discussion of the resurrection.

Next, Paul explains the significance of the death and resurrection of Christ on our future resurrection. 1 Corinthians 15:20-23 states,

“But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept. For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive. But every man in his own order: Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that are Christ's at his coming.”

When Jesus rose again from the dead, He was the firstfruits of all believers who have passed from this life. Because Jesus rose again from the dead, there is a hope for the believers who have passed from this life to be raised from the dead also at His coming. Note here that the picture Paul gives us is that of sleep. Just as a person awakes from his sleep, the believer who has died in Christ will rise from the dead. The illustration of sleep will fall apart without burial.

Paul then explains the nature of the glorified body through the illustration of sowing of seed in 1 Corinthians 15:35-38,42-44.

“But some man will say, How are the dead raised up? and with what body do they come? Thou fool, that which thou sowest is not quickened, except it die: And that which thou sowest, thou sowest not that body that shall be, but bare grain, it may chance of wheat, or of some other grain: But God giveth it a body as it hath pleased him, and to every seed his own body... So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption:

It is sown in dishonour; it is raised in glory: it is sown in weakness; it is raised in power: It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body.”

The picture here is like that of Romans 6. The death of the believer is described as the sowing of a seed. The type of seed sown will determine the type of plant that will grow. With that principle, Paul explains that the nature of our resurrected bodies will be different from our present bodies, in that it will be incorruptible, glorious, powerful, and spiritual. Here the illustration of sowing points to burial, and this illustration falls apart without the practice of burial.

Finally, in 1 Corinthians 15:51-57,¹² Paul describes the nature of the attaining of our glorified bodies when Jesus comes again.

Another passage that describes the resurrection is 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.

“But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep. For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. Wherefore comfort one another with these words.”

Here, Paul describes the believer who has passed from this life has asleep. Just as a person awakes from his sleep, these who have died will rise from the dead at the coming of Christ. This picture of sleep can only make sense in light of burial.

CONCLUSION

In summary, we have seen how burial is significant for the believer because of the resurrection. The Bible uses the illustrations of the baptism, sowing of seed, and sleep, all of which are built upon the premise that the believer is buried. Connecting all the thoughts that have been established, there are three reasons why a believer must bury. First, he must bury because it is God’s way, Jesus Himself being the example. Second, he must bury in faith of the resurrection, trusting that though his body goes into sleep, he will one day arise from his sleep. Thirdly, he must bury because it is a testimony of his faith in the resurrection.

¹² 1 Corinthians 15:51-57 “Behold, I shew 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 trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”