

## Study Notes for [John 19:31-42](#)

### THE BURIAL OF THE KING

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#### Setting:

Jesus on his own volition (19:30) gave up his spirit and returned to his Father. However, events must still unfold on earth and although they seem arbitrary (the soldiers happened to pierce Jesus) they occurred just as God had planned in fulfillment of his Word. And so John gives us many details, not just for historical value, but to show the Church that Jesus was truly human, and that he really had died. He states these two things emphatically because already in the Church (and even till this day) there were those who cast doubt on these assertions<sup>1</sup>.

John gives us the details of the burial itself (which is so different from today's customs). Jesus was placed into a new tomb so that there could be no confusion about previous bodies. And then we are asked to wait, to rest. As Tom Wright states, "Wait, John says to us. Watch with me through this Sabbath, this quiet, sad rest. Wait for this, the final day, the seventh day, to pass. God rested on the seventh day. So must Jesus. But this whole book has been about new creation. Wait for the eighth day" (Wright, 139).

#### Notes:

19:31 The need to remove the bodies before the Sabbath was based on the law given in [Deuteronomy 21:22-23](#) and [Joshua 8:29](#) which specifies that the bodies of those who had been hanged on a tree should not remain there overnight since that would pollute the land. By breaking the legs the men would die quickly (cf. v. 32) and the bodies could then be removed before 6 p.m. – the start of Sabbath. Josephus, the first-century Jewish historian, stated that this law was understood to include those who had been crucified. This was however not the normal Roman practice. They would have left the bodies on the crosses as long as possible – many days after death – to serve as a warning to others (NET Bible, 1962-3; Carson, 622).

This particular Sabbath was especially important ("high day," ESV, NASB) since it also was Passover.

"day of preparation" was the day before the Sabbath in which all preparation was done ahead of time, so that no work needed to be done on the Sabbath (cf. v. 14).

The Jewish leaders asked to have Jesus' legs broken so that they could avoid the curse of [Deuteronomy 21:22-23](#) but they may also have wanted this final humiliation as evidence that Jesus was "plainly accursed and abandoned by God" (Carson, 623).

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the history of the Christian Church there have been two great heresies. The first is that Christ was not fully man but just *appeared* to be a man. In this heresy Christ's deity is emphasized. This was primarily the heresy that John had to deal with. The second is that Christ is *not* fully divine and so he at some point was created by God. Both these heresies continue to plague the Church today.

- 19:32 Death by crucifixion usually occurred as a result of suffocation. The legs of the victim were broken so that they would not be able to use their legs to push up and so be able to breath. After the legs were broken, death occurred almost immediately. This practice was commonly done to speed up death when necessary, because death did not usually occur for a very long time, sometimes taking days (Carson, 622). However, it was also Roman practice to prolong the torture as long as possible. Jesus and the two men had only been on the cross a few hours so it was surprising that Jesus had died after such a short time, but this again underlines the fact that it was Jesus who was in control of the events (19:30).
- 19:33-34 When the soldiers came to break Jesus' legs it was obvious to them that he was already dead. A Roman soldiers' own life would be forfeited if the man he was to crucify lived, so they had to make sure. And so they inflicted a side wound that was deep enough to kill Jesus if he was not already dead. The resulting flow of blood and water verified that Jesus had already died since after death the body can produces a mixture of this type. There has been much medical experimentation to recreate this situation but it all seems irrelevant; John wants the reader to understand two things about this event: first, contrary to what people were saying, Jesus definitely died<sup>2</sup>; and second, he wanted his readers to see the symbolic meaning of the "water and blood."
- "water and blood" is also mentioned in [1 John 5:6-8](#). Here the water likely symbolizes cleansing (3:5), life (4:14) and the Holy Spirit (7:38-39). The blood refers to the death of the Passover lamb symbolizing cleansing from sin. (NET Bible, 1963). This was the sense given in Fanny J. Crosby's hymn (Carson, 624):

*Jesus, keep me near the cross;  
There a precious fountain,  
Free to all, a healing stream,  
Flows from Calv'ry's mountain.*

And as well Augustus M. Toplady's hymn:

*Rock of Ages, cleft for me,  
Let me hide myself in Thee;  
Let the water and the blood,  
From Thy riven side which flowed,  
Be of sin the double cure,  
Cleanse me from its guilt and power.*

- 19:35 The "man" and the "he" in this verse has always been identified as John, the author of the gospel. In this verse John refers to himself. John was earlier identified as one disciple who had not run away but had remained with Jesus during the crucifixion ([19:26-27](#)). He now emphatically tells his readers that what he has seen is the truth; Jesus was human and Jesus died. At the time John was writing his gospel there were many who were denying these claims. But John is determined that the reader is not left in any doubt. To John himself, what he had see had produced in him a deep faith and now he is writing to strength the faith of others ([20:30-31](#); [21:24-25](#)) (Bruce, 379).

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<sup>2</sup> Already when John wrote his gospel, the *docetists* were denying that Christ was truly a man. Jesus had not died but just appeared to have. Note that Islam continues to take this view (Carson, 623).

19:36-37 The quotation, “Not a bone of his will be broken” is taken from [Exodus 12:46](#), and [Numbers 9:12](#) where the Passover regulations. John is clearly portraying Jesus as the Passover Lamb, sacrificed for the sins of his people.

As John understands Scripture fulfilled by the non-action of the soldiers, he also sees Scripture fulfilled by the action of the soldiers piercing Jesus’ side. The quotation is taken from [Zechariah 12:10](#). In this passage, the Messiah is described as bearing the sorrow and shame of Israel. However as a result there will be a fountain in Jerusalem which will cleanse the people from their sin and impurity ([Zechariah 13:1](#)) (Wright, 135). This passage ([Zechariah 13:1](#)) is combined with [Daniel 7:13](#) and refers to Jesus’ second coming in [Revelation 1:7](#).

### The Burial of Jesus

19:38 Only John’s gospel tells us that Joseph of Arimathaea gave his tomb to Jesus. Yet all four Gospels mention his name. In Matthew we learn that he was a rich man (he must have been since he owned such a tomb) and a disciple of Jesus ([Matthew 27:57-60](#)). In Mark and Luke, we learn that Joseph was also a member of the Sanhedrin – clearly not one who would have voted with them ([Mark 15:1](#); [Luke 23:50-51](#)). Although Joseph is viewed as a disciple and that he was looking for the kingdom of God, only John adds that “secretly because he feared the Jewish leaders.” This last phrase would seem to condemn Joseph, but now Joseph acts very publicly identifying himself with Jesus even at the moment when, for all appearances, Jesus seemed to have been defeated.

Joseph, as a member of the Sanhedrin, would have had easy access to Pilate. Roman law did not however permit the body of a man executed as a traitor to be given to the family or friends. It may be possible, that Pilate who was never convinced of the charges, overlooked that law. In any case, this is how God’s plan was to unfold.

19:39-40 If all four Gospels mention Joseph, only John mentions Nicodemus who was also a member of the Sanhedrin. Nicodemus had already appeared in John’s gospel twice before: when he found Jesus at night – this was the reference to which John makes here ([3:1-21](#)); and when he challenged his fellow Sanhedrin members on judging Jesus without a hearing ([7:50-52](#)) – this last incident had occurred only six months previously.

Both Joseph and Nicodemus are identified as reluctant or fearful followers of Jesus; and in both cases, they now publicly identify with Jesus. It is moving to see that these men, who were not part of Jesus’ disciples, in the end, did come forward to give Jesus a kingly burial. God had reserved this final act of honor and worship for them despite their hesitation while Jesus was alive.

Joseph and Nicodemus bring 75 to 100 pounds worth of myrrh and aloes. The cost would have been enormous which only exceptionally wealthy people could afford. This was an amount fit only for a king! It appears that Joseph and Nicodemus took the mocking inscription on the cross at face value. To them Jesus was indeed the king of the Jews (Bruce, 379).

“Jewish burial customs” – it was their custom to bury the dead in cloths intertwined with spices to reduce odour (not for embalming) since it was likely that another bodies would also occupy the tombs. Wright describes the tomb and customs as follows:

The tomb would be a cave hollowed out in the rock; archaeologists have found lots of them. The cave would be big enough inside for two or more people to walk in, though the doorway would probably be quite small, about four feet high. then there would be ledges on either side.

When you created a tomb like that, it was a lot of work, and you would want to be able to use it several times. the first body you put in would be laid on one of the ledges. It was quite likely that you would want to bury a second body before the first one had finished decomposing; that was one reason for wrapping the body in strips of cloth along with a large amount of spices and perfumes. In between burials, the tomb would be secured against grave-robbers by a large, heavy circular stone that would roll in a groove in front of the door.

When decomposition was complete, the bones would be collected and placed into a bone-box (an ‘ossuary’). The bone-box would then be stored either at the back of the cave or in some other safe location. The burial thus took place in two stages, not one as in most burials today.” (Wright, 138-9). epistemology

19:41-42 That the tomb was “new” was important in order that there could be no mistaking the body. It was also close at hand – John is the only one who mentions the garden and time was important since once Sabbath began at 6 p.m. all work would have to stop (Morris, 730).

### **Biographies**

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