

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	The Heidelberg Catechism		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	28		Gary L.W. Johnson
Text:	Matthew 12:40; Romans 6:1-4		
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Jesus Christ... Was... Buried

16. Lord's Day

Question 41. Why was he also "buried"?

Answer: Thereby to prove that he was really dead. (a)

(a) Matt. 27:59 And when Joseph had taken the body, he wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, Matt. 27:60 And laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn out in the rock: and he rolled a great stone to the door of the sepulchre, and departed. Luke 23:52 This man went unto Pilate, and begged the body of Jesus. Luke 23:53 And he took it down, and wrapped it in linen, and laid it in a sepulchre that was hewn in stone, wherein never man before was laid. John 19:38 And after this Joseph of Arimathaea, being a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, besought Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus: and Pilate gave him leave. He came therefore, and took the body of Jesus. John 19:39 And there came also Nicodemus, which at the first came to Jesus by night, and brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about an hundred pound weight. John 19:40 Then took they the body of Jesus, and wound it in linen clothes with the spices, as the manner of the Jews is to bury. John 19:41 Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden; and in the garden a new sepulchre, wherein was never man yet laid. John 19:42 There laid they Jesus therefore because of the Jews' preparation day; for the sepulcher was nigh at hand. Acts 13:29 And when they had fulfilled all that was written of him, they took him down from the tree, and laid him in a sepulchre.

"The grave," wrote Abraham Kuyper, "is the sinner's deepest humiliation."¹ According to Kuyper, Christ would not be a complete Savior for us if He had not descended into the grave. Christ's burial is an important aspect of his vicarious suffering and death. "It is," says Berkouwer, "considered the decisive final phase of his sin-bearing, and as the wages of sin unto death."² Christ became a curse for us (Galatians 3:13). Part of the punishment of the broken Law is physical death, and the Lord Jesus had to fully "taste death" (Hebrews 2:9). This included His being buried. "Therefore, as the resurrection of Christ from the grave is part of his glory, so his burial, and interment among the dead, by which he was placed in the same condition with them, is a part of the humiliation and ignominy which he rendered on our account; for he was not unwilling to become a corpse for our sake."³ Christ's burial was both *predicted* and *prefigured*. It was *predicted* in Psalm 22:15 where the expression "dust of death" is a reference to the grave (cf. also Psalm 16:9, 10). It was *prefigured* in the Old Testament prophet Jonah (cf. Matthew 12:40). Why was Christ buried?

I. IT PROVED HE WAS REALLY DEAD

This is the emphasis of the Heidelberg Catechism (see Lord's Day 16, Q. 41). Now it is true to say that burial is not needed to prove that a person is dead. The meaning, however, is that Christ's burial set the final seal upon His death. The grave really is the place of the dead. It is the

place of corruption. It speaks of finality. Pilate was convinced that Jesus was dead and, therefore, relinquished the body to Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus.

II. IT CONFIRMED HIS DEATH UNDER THE CURSE OF THE LAW

Christ must die to take away the curse of the broken Law. When the first Adam sinned, God pronounced “dust thou art, and to dust thou shalt return” (Genesis 3:19). Christ, the last Adam, willingly entered into death and fulfilled Scripture (Psalm 16:10; Isaiah 53:9). He submitted to the sentence incurred by the first Adam and entered into the grave.

In addition to this, Nicholas Batzig points out that, “There are three significant details about the burial of Jesus that serve to build our faith in Him as the sinless Son of God. The first was that Isaiah had prophesied 700 years before Christ came that ‘they made His grave with the wicked but with the rich in His death, because He had done no wrong neither was there deceit in His mouth’ (Isaiah 53:9). Instead of being thrown in a trash heap, the body of Jesus was placed in the tomb of a rich disciple. He was given a dignified burial. Isaiah tells us that this is because He had done no wrong. Jesus was the holy, harmless, undefiled One who was separate from sinners. His body would not be thrown on the trash heap with the wicked men with whom He had been crucified.

“Secondly, the Scriptures tell us that He was placed in ‘a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid’ (John 19:41). When we consider the fact that someone was pronounced ceremonially unclean if they touched a dead body and couple it was the fact that after the resurrection we find two Angels sitting over the place where Jesus’ body had lain (just like the cherubim overarching the mercy seat where the Shekinah glory appeared after the blood of the sacrifice was sprinkled in the Most Holy place), we can safely conclude that the tomb was a sort of holy place for the body of Jesus.

“Finally, the Spirit of Christ had born witness, a 1000 years before Christ entered the world, that His body would not see corruption (Psalm 16:10-11; Acts 2:22-31). John’s details about Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus embalming Jesus with the 100 pounds of spices and the linen cloths are linked to this prophetic utterance about the holiness of Jesus (John 19:39-40). God did not allow Jesus’ body to decay because He is the sinless Son of God.”⁴

III. IT PROVED THAT THE POWER OF DEATH WAS BROKEN

Christ died for His people and, even though we must likewise undergo physical death, the grave has been sanctified. The sting of death is sin and the power of sin is the law. In the death of Christ, death has been swallowed up in victory (I Corinthians 15:54-56). By His burial, the Lord Jesus Christ has secured for His own a sanctified resting place. The curse is abolished, the grave is no longer a dread place for the people of God.

IV. IT IS A REMINDER TO BELIEVERS THAT OUR SINS HAVE BEEN FOREVER PUT AWAY

“Whenever the Apostle Paul spoke of our union with Christ he did so under the figure of His death, burial and resurrection (Colossians 2:12; Romans 6:4). When Jesus died, we our old man (our sin nature) died with Him. When Jesus was buried, our old man was buried with Him. When Jesus rose, we rose with Him to newness of life (having new nature). This means that when we think about the body of Jesus being buried in that garden tomb, we should think of our old man being buried in that tomb with Him – that our sins have been put away from the presence of God. The body of Jesus being put in the tomb symbolized the same thing that the scapegoat who was sent into the wilderness with the sins of God’s people being symbolically imputed to it. Our sins were imputed to Christ. After He had satisfied the justice of God and made a full atonement for our sins, He was buried. When Paul speaks of definitive sanctification he throws it under the figure of our dying, being buried and risen with Christ. This has enormous implications for our growth in grace. We must remember that Jesus as He was

dead and buried, so too we are spiritually dead and buried with the Christ to whom we are united by faith.”⁵

V. IT PROVIDED THE STAGE FOR HIS RESURRECTION

In order for Christ to rise from the dead, He had to first descend into the heart of the earth.⁶ Note the New Testament emphasis on the centrality of the resurrection. “More space,” wrote Wilbur Smith, “is devoted in the Gospels to an account of Christ’s Resurrection than to any other aspect of our Lord’s entire life, except His trial and crucifixion.”⁷

CONCLUSION: We may gather from the New Testament, *information* that assures us that Christ really died and was buried. But as Christians we must also find deep *consolation* in Christ’s burial. Our sins were buried with Him, not only to bring about our justification, but also in regard to our sanctification. We were buried with Him in baptism so that we might not live unto sin, but unto Him who died for us (Romans 6:4). Finally, the burial of Christ should serve for *admonition*. Christ died and was buried for us. When we apprehend by faith this great truth, it should move us to live for Him. As Calvin has said, Christ’s death and burial has a twofold blessing for us to enjoy: liberation from the death to which we had been bound, and mortification of our flesh.⁸

ENDNOTES

¹ As cited in G.C. Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics: The Work of Christ* (Eerdmans, 1973), p. 169.

² *Ibid.*, p. 171.

³ Zacharias Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism* (rpt. Presbyterian & Reformed, 1985), p. 225.

⁴ N. Batzig, “The Most Neglected Part of Christ’s Saving Work,” feedingonchrist.com (April 4, 2015).

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ This expression, “the heart of the earth,” is a reference to the grave. Jonah is said to have been “in the belly of hell” when he was swallowed by the sea monster, who in turn was in “the heart of the sea.” Absalom was alive “in the heart of the oak,” that is, within its branches (II Samuel 18:14). The grave is “the heart of the earth.”

⁷ W. Smith, *The Supernaturalness of Christ* (Baker, 1974), p. 191.

⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (The Westminster Press, 1975), Bk. II, Ch. XVI, Sec. 7.