

**On Burial: A Biblical Review**  
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**Preamble**

**Ecclesiastes 3:1-4** *To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: A time to be born, and a time to die;... A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance... 6:3 If a man beget an hundred children, and live many years, so that the days of his years be many, and his soul be not filled with good, and also that he have no burial; I say, that an untimely birth is better than he. 7:1 A good name is better than precious ointment; and the day of death than the day of one's birth. It is better to go to the house of mourning, than to go to the house of feasting: for that is the end of all men; and the living will lay it to his heart.*

**Definition:** Burial means “*the interment of a dead body; the act of entombment and the ritual disposal of human remains.*”

**Introduction:**

It was customary to bury human corpses in Bible times, having no burial was considered bad and dishonorable. Unburied corpses ravaged by birds or animals or burnt in fire was unusual and a mark of punishment –Gen 38:24; 40:19, Lev 20:14; 21:9, Josh 7:23-25, Judges 15:6, 1 Sam 31:11-13. In the Old Testament (OT), it was as a curse for one not to be buried or mourned -Jere 16:6. Such was prophesied to wicked kings (e.g. Jeroboam, Jehoiakim & Lucifer) – **1 Kg 14:10-13**, Isa 14:20, Jere 22:19. One of God’s promises to Abram was, “*And thou shalt go to thy fathers in peace; thou shalt be buried in a good old age*” –Gen 15:15. To underscore the importance of burial, God himself buried Moses who died in His presence -Deut 34:6-7. It was usual to bury in caves, fields, graves or tombs, etc.

**A: Facts About Burial**

1. Burial is commanded in the scriptures, there are numerous examples of it being done, it is expedient health-wise for the living and provides an opportunity for them to reflect on their service (or lack thereof) to God before it is too late –Eccl 12:1, 5c
2. There are different types of wastes or garbage and their collection or disposal varies also. Human corpse is not just “garbage” to be discarded anyhow –it is the remains of one created in God’s image, the evidence that the person is transited from us; the burial provides closure and the grave serves as a monument for living associates. Even Jesus wept as Mary and mourners took him to the grave of his friend Lazarus –Jn 11:33-35. Also in Mk 16:1-3, devoted women went to beautify the body of Jesus just as we would visit the tombstone of a loved one today. His burial was prophesied as well as the fact that he would not decay but resurrect –Isa 53:9, Mt 12:40, Acts 2:22-34, (note vs 29 about David). These scriptures would not have been easily fulfilled (1 Cor 15:4) if the body of Jesus was allowed to be devoured by wild animals or cremated.
3. Burying is scripturally described as planting with the expectation that the body sown being dead, will spring up to a new life -1 Cor 15:20,35-44, and this is typified by water baptism –Rom 6:3-13. Since the death of saints is precious in the Lord’s sight, and the wicked are reserved unto judgment, the day of resurrection is described as the time of harvest –Mt 13:30.
4. Though burial is nice, it is not a determinant of one’s eternal destination, rather it is whether we demonstrated faith in God while living on earth –Heb 11:13-16. The pomp and pageantry of a burial is no indicator of divine acceptance –Lk 16:19-23.

**B: Principles On Burial**

1. Saints should bury one another or properly put; the church ought to be involved in a Christian’s burial. In the early church, members “first gave their own selves to the Lord” (2 Cor 8:5b). They were

totally committed and also did not consider whatever they owned as personal items for each exclusive's use only, rather they shared liberally, "were together and had all things common." –Acts 2:41-45. Given their powerful testimony, godly living and divine discipline; "*fear came upon every soul... and upon all the church... and of the rest durst no man join himself to them: but the people magnified them.*" - Acts 2:43a; 5:11,13 This shows they were a close knit community from the beginning, known apart in the society and this must be more so after the persecution broke out –**Mt 10:17-22**, Acts 8:1; 9:27-28. Consequently, they had little choice than to bury their members which they always did as recorded severally. This practice however could be inferred from the Lord's command concerning burial: "**Let the dead bury their dead.**"

**Luke 9:59-60** "And he said unto another, Follow me. But he said, Lord, suffer me first to go and bury my father. Jesus said unto him, Let the dead bury their dead: but go thou and preach the kingdom of God."

**Matthew 8:21-22** "And another of his disciples said unto him, Lord, suffer me first to go and bury my father. But Jesus said unto him, Follow me; and let the dead bury their dead."

Careful consideration of these accounts show the following:

- a) The man called by the Lord was already a believer or disciple
- b) While proper prioritization of kingdom service such as evangelism is taught in this passage, 'follow me' is specific to that man who was called to become a preacher of the gospel. Just as the instruction 'go sell all that you have and distribute to the poor and come, follow me' is specific to the rich young ruler although it teaches us on materialism.
- c) The primary lesson and import of Christ's statement above is that the spiritually dead should bury THEIR physically dead members. The operative word is '**their**' because the dead are not to bury the dead, rather they should bury their dead. This means to bury not all the dead but the ones pertaining to them only. By implication we therefore infer the corollary to 'let the spiritually living ones (saints) bury their own physically dead members!' This explanation is the most plausible and logical of all possible permutations of 'dead' in that statement.

[Note: the phy\_dead cannot bury the phy\_dead, the phy\_dead cannot bury spi\_dead. If the spi\_dead bury the spi\_dead who is physically alive that would amount to murder and burying a sinful person alive and such cannot be Christ's intent.]

**In Gen 23**; the phrase "*bury my dead*" was used by Abraham 3 times while "*bury thy dead*" was used 4 times by those he bought the cave from in which to lay Sarah.

Examples of deduced corollary abound in the NT such as:

- i) John the Baptist whose body was buried by his disciples after he was beheaded and the scalp taken away in a platter.  
Mk 6:29 *And when his disciples heard of it, they came and took up his corpse, and laid it in a tomb.*  
Mt 14:12 *And his disciples came, and took up the body, and buried it, and went and told Jesus.*
- ii) Jesus Christ who was buried not by his biological brothers who did not believe on him but by a secret disciple (Jn 19:38). He had to beg Pilate for the body since the state has the power not to release a criminal's corpse and dispose its own way. Being a rich and prominent man would help in securing the release, Joseph of Arimathaea also laid Jesus in his own pre-prepared sepulcher with the assistance of another public figure –Nicodemus who came unto Jesus by night.
- iii) Ananais and Sapphira as well as Stephen were buried by the Church –Acts 5:6,10; 8:1-2
- iv) Dorcas was in the process of being buried by the Church before the proximity and invitation of Peter led to her being raised –Acts 9:36-41. Also, Paul would have been buried by saints when he was stoned and left for dead had he not resuscitated –Acts 14:19-20. Similarly for Eutychus in Acts 20:7-12

2. Custom or culture arises in burial and should be respected when it does not violate the Bible. E.g.
  - i) In the way the corpse is cleaned, perfumed and wrapped up –Jn 19:40, Acts 5:6b, Jn 11:44.
  - ii) Delayed burials are the exemption amongst God’s people, quick ones were the norm. Joseph had Jacob embalmed because his father gave inspired instructions as to where he should be buried – in the land of Promise where Abraham and Isaac were interred. The corpse needed to be preserved for such long journey from Egypt. As Prime Minister, Joseph had to declare national mourning and get permission from the king to travel, all this took time. Ditto Joseph too who prophesied the departure from Egypt. In Israel, delays could arise because of discovered corpses e.g. murder victims (Deut 21:1ff) for which investigations might be necessary. Executed criminals were to be buried same day -vs 22-23]. Recall the hastily buried corpses recently found on an Anambra river had to be exhumed for proper autopsies.
  - iii) Weeping, mourning and lamentation is natural and permissible –Acts 8:2b, Rm 12:15b
  - iv) Washing the corpse, lying-in-state and testifying about the deceased is permissible –Acts 9:37-39
  - v) Burying family members side by side, having common grave or re-using a sepulcher is permissible as well as using a public graveyard –Acts 5:10 [Gen 50:13, 2 Sam 13:37], Mt 27:7
  - vi) When afflicted with grief, prayer is needed (Jms 5:13) & thanksgiving with songs –Eph 5:19-20

## Conclusion

Whether Christians live or we die, we belong to Christ (and his church) –Rm 14:8-9. They have a specific part in our burial instead of wedding; compare 1 Cor 7:31-33 with Rev 14:13, Phil 1:21-24, Acts 8:2. We should let associates and relations know the primacy of the church’s role in our burial. One may make financial and material provisions if opportuned so that the church will not be burdened. Nevertheless, since one does not generally know with certainty the manner and time of his/her death, such expectation may not necessarily be fulfilled. Given modern logistical issues, corpses should be buried within a few days, at most in a month and in the city where the person lived or died. The church should coordinate Christian burial and comfort the bereaved. It should be done in a modest, respectful and timely fashion. Any expenses borne in this respect is to fulfill the obligation of “burying their dead.” It should not be seen as an optional act of kindness. However, if and where the family of the deceased “monopolize the corpse, spearheads the planning and fixes the details of the burial at variance with our beliefs,” the church should minimize or withdraw her engagement -especially if idolatry, unnecessary delays or extravagance is involved. If due to the loss of their bread-winner, secluded grieving and lack of funds or access thereunto, a member’s family is found to be temporarily needy then benevolence should be extended to them for immediate relief by the church (2 Cor 8:14) and by individuals (Jms 1:27; 2:15-16, Gal 6:10) . It is only the widow indeed who is qualified for perpetual support -1Tim 5:3-16. Not everyone will be properly buried due to the various kinds of deaths men experience. Some would die at sea or in earthquake or similar disasters. The important thing is that Christians should not mourn as those without hope as everyone would be raised up on the Day of Judgment (Rev 20:12-13) and the saints (whose names are written in the book of life) would forever be with the Lord -1 Thess 4:13-18. Physical burial is desirable for the dead but is not as important as the spiritual one for the spiritually dead. Let each believe the gospel and be **buried with Christ in baptism** -Col 2:12, Mk 16:16

**John 5:24-29** *Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life. Verily, verily, I say unto you, The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live. For as the Father hath life in himself; so hath he given to the Son to have life in himself; And hath given him authority to execute judgment also, because he is the Son of man. Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, And shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation.*